"*The Oasis is ours*": What did the 2011 Tunisian Revolution mean at the Margins? Dates, Land, and the State in Jemna.

By

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Abstract

This thesis revisits the 2011 Tunisian Revolution to understand the event from the view point of the marginalized. Through an ethnographic research conducted in Jemna, a remote village in southern Tunisia, I analyze an act of reclaiming an oasis during the 2011 revolution and the meaningfulness of the act to the locals. The thesis situates the act of the villagers in a broader historical context and engages with questions of the history of land relations, marginalization, subalternity, and center-margin relations. Analyzing the Tunisian revolution at the margins reveals that through the act of reclaiming an oasis during revolutionary times, cultivating it collectively, and managing its revenues locally, the marginalized restore historical, social, and political agency

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Introduction

In the winter of 2011 a group of protesters in Jemna; a remote village in southern Tunisia, marched towards a date palm oasis. On January 12th villagers claimed the land and asked the investors who were managing it to collect their material and leave. At the same time a popular revolution was unfolding at the national level and while people in Jemna occupied the land and kicked out the investor, thousands of Tunisians occupied public spaces all over the country, set police stations on fire, and by January 14th ousted the president. The two events occurred in the context of what became known as the Arab Spring or Arab Uprisings.

Since 2011 the event of the Arab Uprisings have been associated with images of protesters occupying squares and avenues in capital cities. The images of Tunisians in the Bourguiba Avenue or Egyptians in Tahrir Square became the hallmark of the event. The attention paid to how people voiced demands in capital cities (Tunis, Cairo) made other sites of protest less visible and consequently less attention has been paid to how, for example, in 2011 a Tunisian farmer in Jemna, a rural and marginalized village, imagined a revolution and participated in it. Understanding the villagers' point of view, agency, and what motivated them to act contributes to the construction of a nuanced understanding of the event of a popular uprising.

This research explores a site of protest that remained invisible both in media and academia in the context of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. Put differently, this research does not overlook the events that culminated in the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. Rather, it puts an event, namely an oasis occupation by villagers in Jemna, at the centre of analysis and examines the meaning of a revolution from the view point of actors at the margins.

The main question animating this research is as follows: how does the act of oasis occupation by villagers in the context of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution constitute a moment during which the marginalized restore agency? A set of interrelated questions are also examined; what forms of agency did the villagers of Jemna restore by occupying, cultivating, and managing an oasis? Was their act intended to restore *social* and *political* agency against the state's history of social and political repression in Tunisia? Was their act intended to restore a *historical* agency vis-à-vis land ownership which dates back to both French colonialism and post-independence state's agricultural policies which deprived the villagers from self managing the oasis? Or, does the experience of Jemna reveal the intersection of all the aforementioned forms of agency restoration? If so, how can we sociologically and anthropologically study and understand the singularity of the event and the complexity of its meanings and signification to the villagers in Jemna?

In this research I argue that the act of occupying an oasis during the 2011 Tunisian Revolution in was an act informed by a past marked by relations of domination, subalternity, and marginalization. By occupying the oasis, villagers restore not only their right to land, but also the agency to act, speak, and challenge state structures.

During the social upheaval that led to the removal of the president Ben Ali in January 2011, residents of Jemna, a remote village in Southern Tunisia, occupied an oasis to protest state policies which marginalized the region and misused its natural resource. Since 2011 the villagers started to cultivate the land and use the revenues to implement project in the village (constructing sports centre, adding classrooms in schools, constructing a market...). Historically, it was the French colonists who first cultivated the Jemna oasis when Tunisia was a French protectorate (1881-1956). In the aftermath of the independence the land ownership was subject to top-down economic policies by the state. And lastly during Ben Ali's era (1987-2011), Jemna oasis was privatized and

rented to businessmen close to the president. Since 1881, residents of Jemna did not succeed in restoring their right to protest, mobilize, and voice demands only when the Tunisian revolution was unfolding in the winter of 2011. The Jemni struggle for land is marked by a longue durée. It did not start with the revolution and it did not end with it. In Jemna, palm dates are constitutive of the identity of the villagers, for instance, they tell stories about how their ancestors planted palm trees and settled in the village during the 8th century and how the trees can live for a century. Palm date tree is called; the "tree of seven blessings" in Jemna to denote the many usages of the tree and its fruit by villagers in the past and now. Villagers in Jemna tried to claim their ancestors' land during three periods; colonialism (1881-1956), post-independence state formation (1956-1987), and during the years of Ben Ali regime (1987-2011). The research analyzes how the act of land occupation was followed by the formation of an association; the Association for the Protection of Jemna's Oases (APJO). The association's role was to keep a common ownership of the claimed oasis and use the revenues to implement projects in the village. Many villagers in Jemna told me that what the APJO did in eight years, the state could not do since independence. For the Jemnis, the act of collectively managing the revenues of harvest to construct a market, classrooms, or to buy an ambulance meant replacing the state, which has been, for them, "absent" in Jemna. People in the village talk about laws, landownership status, and how regionalism, marginalization, and past political repression by the Ben Ali regime made them at times fear even "walking near the oasis". However, during and after the revolution the self-management of the oasis meant that they can implement projects, create jobs for the unemployed youth, and "make state officials come to Jemna" to negotiate with villagers.

Literature Review

Since the 2011 Arab Uprisings a voluminous literature on the Middle East and North Africa has been produced by scholars who have sought to analyze the political and social changes in the region. The dominance of political science approaches to the event has generated hasty hypotheses and failed at times to study the complexity of how the Arab Spring, or the Tunisian revolution, was lived and experienced by different actors and in different geographies. This however can be explained by the rush to frame the event within a liberal framework of democratization theories (Stepan, 2012) (Mrad, 2017). Actors thus were studied as agents who sought a shift from authoritarianism to democracy. Consequently, in the case of Tunisia, the 14th January revolution was approached mainly with a focus on party politics, identity politics, Islam and democracy (Cavatorta & Merone, 2015) (Dell'Aguzzo & Sigillò, 2017), and security studies. I agree with (Hafez & Slyomovics, 2013) who argued that new approaches of studying the Middle East and North Africa are needed especially after the Arab Spring to move beyond the static and reductionist ways of interpreting the events. For the authors, political science lacks the ethnographic approaches which help to analyze and interpret political and social dynamics. Nevertheless, some works of political scientists on Tunisia's social movements in marginalized parts of the country (Allal, 2010) (Allal & Bennafla, 2011) before the uprising still offer insights on the power structures and state society relations in sites other than then the capital city as a center of protest and claim making. Similarly, political science can help understanding forms domination and control exercised by the Ben Ali regime (Hibou, 2006) and the effects of these policies on regional disparities. Thus, this research does not overlook the importance of political science in examining the case of Jemna especially that the villagers-state negotiation takes place in the context of a democratic transition that requires an understanding of decision making processes and how the

phase of the consolidation of the democratic transition affects the social and political demands of the villagers.

Despite the few works dedicated to the anthropological and sociological examination of the unfolding of the Arab Spring events in Tunisia, a number of sociologists studied the experiences of rural villagers during the revolution (Gana & Taleb, 2019) (Turki & Gana, 2015) (Gana, 2013). Works of Alia Gana on Tunisian rural revolt and the participation of marginalized people in the revolutionary processes centers mainly on the role of institutions such as agricultural labor unions in the aftermath of the revolution while minimizing the importance of the participation of those actors in the protests as they started in the 2011. Yet, the scope of her insights is limited to the examination of how bureaucrats and technocrats' role negatively affects the implementation of local governance and control over resources sought by the rural in Tunisia. Gana sheds light on the regional disparities question and the failed developmental dynamics in Tunisia. Such insights are critical in understanding the case of Jemna and how state policies resulted in a model of unsustainable development. However, the analysis Gana advances in relation to state policies and rural populations' demands does only describe the differences between rural people's aim of collective management of land and the state's neoliberal models of agricultural development. The case of Jemna however, reflects how negotiations between state officials and the committee of the Association of the Protection of Jemna's Oasis APJO results in compromise and agreements which altered the state envisioned model of development and agriculture production. Gana's work thus, though singular in its engagement with rural populations and their relation to the state and the revolution, remains mainly theoretical and does not focus on particular examples or cases and study them over time. This shortcoming is one of the departure point of this research as it aims to examine the developments of events in Jemna since the uprising (2011) to the present time (2019).

Other attempts of analyzing the relationship between marginalized people and their experiences of the Arab Spring was made by Habib Ayeb who studied in both Tunisia and Egypt the question of farmers and their relation to the land (Ayeb, 2010,2011). Though Ayeb's insights are critical in understanding how the political changes in the region affect the rural populations, his work centers mainly on food security and thus does not engage with the question of how people in remote regions negotiate with the state, rather he engages with how state imposed policies affect the rural's lives. Bayat, (2017) stands among the few sociologists who paid attention in his sociological analysis of the Tunisian revolution to the marginalized and their demands in a post-revolutionary context. Nevertheless, he only succeeds in tracing how urban poor and subaltern urban in the capital Tunis participate in the uprising. Thus, Bayat leaves behind the experience marginalized people in remote regions and focuses on the center even though he stresses in his *Revolutions without Revolutionaries: Making sense of the Arab Spring* that the Tunisian uprising started initially in rural and less developed regions.

Theory and Methods

To understand how the event of occupying a land in Jemna reveals a restoration of the agency of the villagers in the context of Tunisia's 2011 revolution, I relied on ethnographic field work, semi-structured, and informal interviews to conduct my research. Among the chief reasons for choosing ethnographic research method is the peculiarity of the event once understood in its political and historical contexts. In other words, as I show in the literature review there is almost no study produced about the Jemna experience since the revolution with an in-depth focus on the relations between villagers, the land, the state, and the revolution.

The lack of research about Jemna's experience means also the absence of a theory that can adequately help understanding and analyzing the event. As we do not *know* much about Jemna, I

follow the insights of Ingold (2008)in trying to "ground knowing in being" which means that "any study *of* human beings must also be a study *with* them" (Ingold, 2008, p.83). And as Bernard (1995) put it "getting a general understanding of how any social institution or organization works — the local justice system, a hospital, a ship, or an entire village — is best achieved through participant observations" (Bernard, 1995, p. 143). Additionally, the study of the interplay of units and concepts in the examined case requires what Barnard (2004) calls "observing the society as a whole" which "entails trying to understand how things are related, for example, how politics fit together with kinship or economics, or how specific economic institutions fit together with others" (Barnard, 2004, p.6). The ethnography conducted in Jemna helped me to make sense of the locals' "systems of meaning" (Steinmetz, 2004, p. 378) while being aware of "concepts dependency" and how to use concepts as explanatory tools without imposing meanings on the lived reality of my informants. The sites I visited in Jemna were mainly schools, state institutions, cafés, Youth Cultural Houses, the claimed oasis, mosques, a pharmacy, a market, sport field, and houses of some of my informants. Nevertheless, I stimulated interview situations in multiple places and with different actors as well.

Along with the ethnographic fieldwork, I relied on semi-structured and informal interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted mainly and not exclusively with residents of Jemna who have participated in the events of the revolution in 2011, yet moved to other cities in its aftermath. The informal interviews were conducted while being in the village and the goal from such interviews was to maximize the perspectives on the event of the revolution in Jemna by listening to as many villagers as possible through conversations. This includes workers in the oasis, members of the Association for the Protection of Jemna's Oases APJO, and other residents of Jemna. Both the participant observation and informal interviews were intended to produce

interview situations and in some cases semi-structured interviews. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the qualitative analysis of the material helped me in mapping the different perspectives on the event as perceived by the villagers and understand them against the theoretical and conceptual tools of analysis. In this I followed the insight of Barnard (2004): "in social anthropology, we go to places where we expect to find things we are interested in; and once there we ask small questions designed to produce evidence for the larger questions posed by our respective theoretical orientations" (Barnard, 2004, p, 6).

This research draws on theoretical insights of Comaroff (1982) in understanding historical anthropology and the relation between the local "internal forms" of communities and their interaction with external forces or structures. Jemna in this context is studied by shedding light on its early history, the formation of identity at a local level through myths and oral history and the moral and economic systems of the village (chapter1). The analysis of Jemna's historical internal forms is also informed by the differentiation Sahlins (1976) makes between practical and cultural reason. Central to the analysis is also the conceptualization of colonial/imperial states advanced by Steinmetz (2017) and how France's colonial past in Jemna politicized land and resulted in the birth of a local resistance (chapter2). The colonial encounter in the context of Jemna altered the social use of land and produced relations of domination (Scott, 1998). Following the colonial period, I draw on insights of Chatterjee (1993) to analyze Tunisian nationalism and how it produced relations of subalternity and reproduced colonial dynamics through the vehicle of a promised modernization. Lastly, (chapter3) I contextualize the occurrence of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution in Jemna by drawing upon the conceptualization of "event" as advanced by (Sewell, 2005), and the insights of Ferguson and Gupta (2002), Mathur (2016) to show how the act of

claiming an oasis in 2011 was an act through which Jemnis restore political, social and historical agency.

Chapter 1: Jemna's Early History: Two Stories Narrated by a Local Historian

In my own view, there ought to be no 'relationship' between history and anthropology, since there should be no division to begin with. A theory of society which is not a theory of history, or vice versa, is hardly a theory at all.

John L. Comaroff

The event of claiming an oasis during the 2011 Tunisian revolution is a story of a near past narrated by the villagers I talked with in Jemna. Yet, it was not only the near past that informed the villagers' narratives about the event. Many informants situated their act of claiming land in a broader historical context. For them their success is rooted in their history of solidarity, resistance, and belonging to land. I was surprised by how often my informants talk about the origin of the naming of the village, the myth of a Sufi saint how made water run through springs, how people settled in the village in the 8th century, and how Jemnis have been resisting domination and political structures whether during the post-independence era, the colonial period, or the during times of the Ottoman Beys in Tunisia in the 18th century. The encounters with the villagers and their narratives and stories about the history of Jemna suggest that understanding what happened in 2011 from the point of view of the villagers can best be achieved through studying the event in a broader historical context and making sense of; first, the early history of Jemna's "internal forms" (Comaroff, 1982, p.160) that is villagers' imaginations of their collective identity, bonds, past, and their social and economic relations with land, and second, the early history of "external forces" (Comaroff,1982, p.160), that is the village's historical relation with the center as a political structure. By diving into the different temporalities evoked in the stories told by villagers I pay

attention to a local early history narrated by locals. It is not, as Comaroff (1982) once said, "the history of ideas" that I am concerned about here, rather, what I engage with is a historical anthropology "with reference to the concrete instance of a particular" (Comaroff, 1982, p. 144) ethnography in Jemna. An ethnography that unexpectedly led me to hear stories about an early history as much as I heard stories about an event that unfolded in the near past.

"O Spring, May Water Flow Therein": Jemna as a Myth and a Story about Sufi Men in the Village.

The village was founded around water sources, wherever there is water, there is life…the relationship between the date palms and people in the village was a relationship of existence, of livelihood, dates used to be stored in containers and people either eat or sell the dates…at times they have only dates for dinner…people's relationship with dates is a relationship of continuity and belonging

Sheikh Letaif Moussa Jemni

When villagers referred to the history of Jemna they usually talked about "Sheikh Letafi Moussa Jemni". Everyone in Jemna knew him. "You have to meet Sheikh Letaif…Sheikh Letaif can tell you more, he has documents and a huge library" were comments I often heard whenever I asked about the history of Jemna. I met Sheikh Letaif at night in his house. He had a white thick beard, dark green 'jebba' (a traditional male garment), and a red 'chéchia' (headdress) decorated with a white cloth wrapped around it. When he was leading me to the library located on the right side of the house's main entrance, I remembered how the villagers talked about him with much respect and admiration.

Sheikh Letaif told me that his family is from "the descendants of one of the Sahaba (companions) of the prophet Muhammad". He then cited eighteen names of his great grandfathers that he knew

by heart and continued to trace his family lineage to al-miqdad Ibn al-aswad al-Kindi who was one of the companions of Muhammad in the 7th century. One of Sheikh Letaif's ancestors; Sidi Abdullah al-Haj, a descendant of Al-miqdad Ibn al-aswad al-Kindi is unarguably one of the most known names in Jemna. He was a pious man who came to the village in the 8th century when the few people who lived there suffered because of the scarcity in water. When Sidi Abdullah al-Haj arrived to the village he needed running water to prepare himself for praying and when he could not find water he prayed that the water runs through the springs. Sheikh Letaif told me that Sidi Abdullah al-Haj said "جِمّي يا عين" (jemmi ya'eyn) (O spring, may water flow therein), and water started to flow through a spring. The word جِمّي(jemmi) that Sidi Abdullah al-Haj used in his prayer is derived from the Arabic verb جَمَّ(jamma) which means accumulating water somewhere. Sheikh Letaif, and many others that I talked with, told me that the name of the village; Jemna, comes from the same word; Jemmi which Sidi Abdullah al-Haj used to pray and "ask Allah for water". Sheikh Letaif's surname; "Jemni" dates back to the story of his ancestor Sidi Abdullah al-Haj whose prayer brought water and made people settle in Jemna. When Sidi Abdullah al-Haj died his home became a shrine[1] and people still visit his place to pray. The keys of the shrine are kept until today by Sheikh Letaif, one of the great sons of Sidi Abdullah al-Haj and the historian of the village.

For Sheikh Letaif the story about how his ancestor Sidi Abdullah al-Haj made the water run through the spring is the foundational myth of the village. He told me that probably the arrival of Sidi Abdullah al-Haj to the village coincided with the flow of water and when people learnt that

[1] During my stay in Jemna I learnt that there were four other shrines (Sidi Abdelkader, Sidi Wlad Bel-ahmed, Sidi Hamed, and Sidi Mayah) yet little was known about these saints and their places were not much visited by villagers. The common thing in all sites of shrines however is that near each shrine there is or there was a water spring or a well that people used in the past.

he was a pious man who knew the teachings of religion and helped the poor, they believed that what happened was a miracle of a saint.

Nevertheless, Sheikh Letaif stressed that what is important about the myth is that it refers to two realities; first the importance of water and consequently the cultivation of palm trees as they were people's means of subsistence, and second the presence of a pious man in the village, Sidi Abdullah al-Haj, who was known for establishing a tradition of "helping the needy and feeding the poor", a tradition kept by Jemnis to the present time.

Akin to many communities, people in Jemna share a representation of the appearance of their village, a "tradition of Origin and Genesis" (Vansina, 1985, p21). The collective identity of villagers is constructed through a shared historical consciousness informed by a story of origin, a myth narrated by the community. It is through narration, stories and tales that villagers construct a selfhood. In this context "narrative activity provides tellers with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected events, and to create continuity between past, present, and imagined worlds" (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 19). When I was with Sheikh Letaif or when I talked with my informants at large, they all knew that I was interested in the 2011 event of claiming an oasis, nevertheless, they referred to their past frequently. They drew lines between themselves and other neighboring villagers where people tried to occupy lands yet failed to keep a common ownership of oases during the 2011 revolution. The process of "narrating the self" (Ochs & Capps 1996, p.19) allowed villagers to trace an early history marked by the presence of saints and descendants of Mohammad. Thus for Jemnis their difference stems partly from the tales and stories about the holiness around Sidi Abdullah al-Haj who is considered to be the founder of Jemna in the 8th century and a Sufi saint with a shrine that people still visit today. All this formed a shared sense

of a particular moral imagination about Jemna, a village whose saint established a tradition of "helping the needy and feeding the poor".

Sheikh Letaif started his conversation with me by referring to his *nisba*[2] (family lineage) as the naming of the village, Jemna, derives from an 8th century story about his ancestor Sidi Abdullah al-Haj. Sheikh Letaif's family is also known for its Sufis and religious judges and teachers such as sidi Ibrahim Jemni. By referring to this *nisba*, Sheikh Letaif was affirming the distinctiveness of Jemnis and constructing the borders of a selfhood, of a Jemni *us* against the different other, a *them*, (such as the neighboring villages). Thus, in the village, the myth of Sidi Abdullah al-Haj, and the imagined moral system established by its Sufi saints are part of the early "internal forms" (Comaroff, 1982, p. 160) of a local rural system. This system is combined with an economic organization based on a relationship with land and palm trees.

Ayedi, a farmer from Jemna, told me a story about his childhood and palm dates:

When I was young my father started teaching me how to climb the palm tree during the harvest season… he helped me to climb at first…the tree was of more than 15 meters height… I was scared and my father started to whack my back with a stick and said 'you have to climb! your bread is up there', back then I did not understand how will I find bread on top of a palm tree, but of course when I grew I understood…our life depended on dates...

Ayedi's story sheds light on the centrality of palm trees in the life of Jemnis. Similarly, Sheikh Letaif told me that historically without palm trees and water springs and wells people would not have settled and survived in Jemna. He added that in the past palm oases were the centre of the economy of the village. "There were religious teachers in traditional schools, traders, and people

[2] In his study of Morocco, Geertz (1983), considers *nisba* as one of the " symbolic means by which to sort people out from one another and form an idea of what it is to be a person" (Geertz, 1983, p. 56).

who worked only in the land… these three groups were integrated and they complemented each other". All of them had lands, small or big, teachers and traders hire farmers to help them work the land and farmers' children are taught by the teachers of the villagers while traders bring goods villagers need. The narrated stories about the importance of land and how all Jemnis share a know-how in relation to the cultivation of date palms is combined with a reference to their tradition of "helping the needy and feeding the poor" inherited from Sidi Abdullah al-Haj. Thus, in a sense, the early local economic system strengthened solidarity among villagers as it was not utilitarian, rather, informed by a moral and symbolic order (Sahlins, 1976) rooted in a history of the teachings of Jemna's Sufi saints.

Figure1: Sheikh Letaif Moussa Jemni in his library in Jemna

Figure 2: Water canal near Jemna's old oases.

April, 25, 1879: The Year of "the Destruction of Jemna": Center, periphery and resistance.

The second story that Sheikh Letaif narrated reveals an instance of Jemna's history vis-à-vis the central authority in Tunisia during the 19th century. The story is widely known in the village as "the year of the destruction of Jemna". Narration, as abovementioned, offered my informants, including Sheikh Letaif, an opportunity of connecting past to present and creating a particular continuity between sequences of events from an early history to a near past. The story of the destruction of Jemna is thus narrated by the informants to showcase that what happened in 2011 in Jemna is rooted, at least in their imagination, in the past of Jemna, a past marked by resistance and rebels against the center.

Sheikh Letaif told me that the reputation of his Sufi ancestors spread across Tunisia starting by Sidi Abdullah al-Haj who lived in the 8th century to Sidi Ibrahim Jemni (1628-1721) and Sidi Moussa Jemni (1708-1771). The former established a Koranic school in the island of Djerba in southern Tunisia and the latter continued the legacy of his grandfather by establishing another religious school in the mountainous region of Matmata. The Jemni family's establishment of schools coupled with their choice of rural and remote areas to do so gained them the respect of the Beys during the Ottoman rule in Tunisia (1547-1881). As a result, Jemna, hometown of the Sufi scholars (Sidi Ibrahim Jemni and Sidi Moussa Jemni) enjoyed a tax exemption[3] following a decree issued by the Bey Ali Ben Hussein[4] (in 1781). Nevertheless, such exemption did not last and with the foreign debt crisis during the reign of Mohammas as-Sadiq Bey (from 1859 to 1882) Jemna was forced by Ahmed Ben Belgecem, a local governor of the region of Kébili to which Jemna belonged administratively to pay taxes akin to other villages.

[3] The processes of tax exemption was also extended to other neighboring villages such as Zawyet lemrazig where Sufi shrines and Koranic schools also existed.

[4] Ali Ben Hussein Bey (1712-1782) was the ruler of Ottoman Tunisia from 1759 to 1782.

In his library, Sheikh Letaif keeps letters, telegrams, and decrees which date to the 19th century and the event of the destruction of Jemna. One of the letters was sent in 1814 by Hussein Bey affirming the earlier decrees of Jemna's tax exemption issued by the Bey and villagers kept the decree to prove to local governors back then that they don't have to pay taxes. The letter was directed to the local governors informing them that Jemna's tax exemption issued before 1814 was valid and thus "no one can tax Jemnis because they are Sufis" (see figure 3).

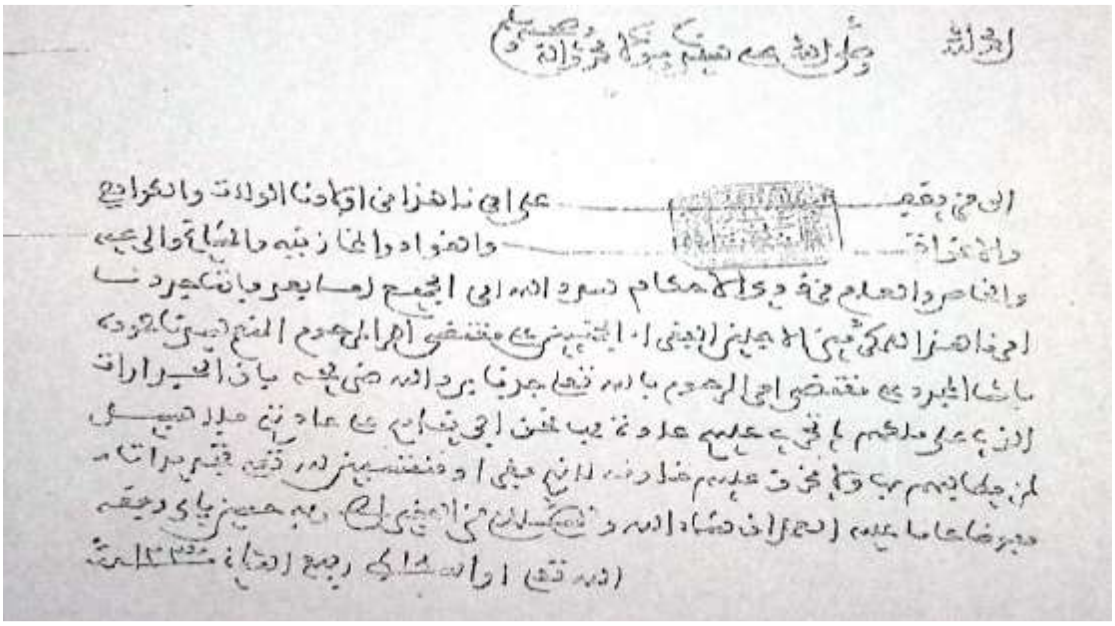

Figure 3: Letter sent by Hussein Bey to the mayors and governors affirming that Jemnis are exempted from taxes.

Sheikh Moussa said that despite the villagers' efforts to prove that they were exempted from taxes through sending letters to the Bey in Tunis, the local governor of Kébili allied with one of the mayors; Mohammad Ben Mrabet, and the latter sent a telegram (see figure 4) to the central authority in Tunis informing them that "Jemnis are rebelling and refusing to obey orders", and that he "sent them troops and forces to arrest their leaders and others with the hope that the rest of them return to obedience".

On Appril, 25, 1879 Jemna was attacked following the orders of the governor of Kebili and the Mayor of the Jerid region. According to Sheikh Letaif, Jemnis were mobilized and they fought "a historical battle" yet the lack of arms lead to a severe defeat[5] . The troops "destroyed the village and terrorized the people" and the event became known as "the year of the destruction of Jemna".

[5] According to (Dhifallah, 2008) 39 Jemnis were killed, 59 arrested, and the official troops lost 21 soldiers in the battle.

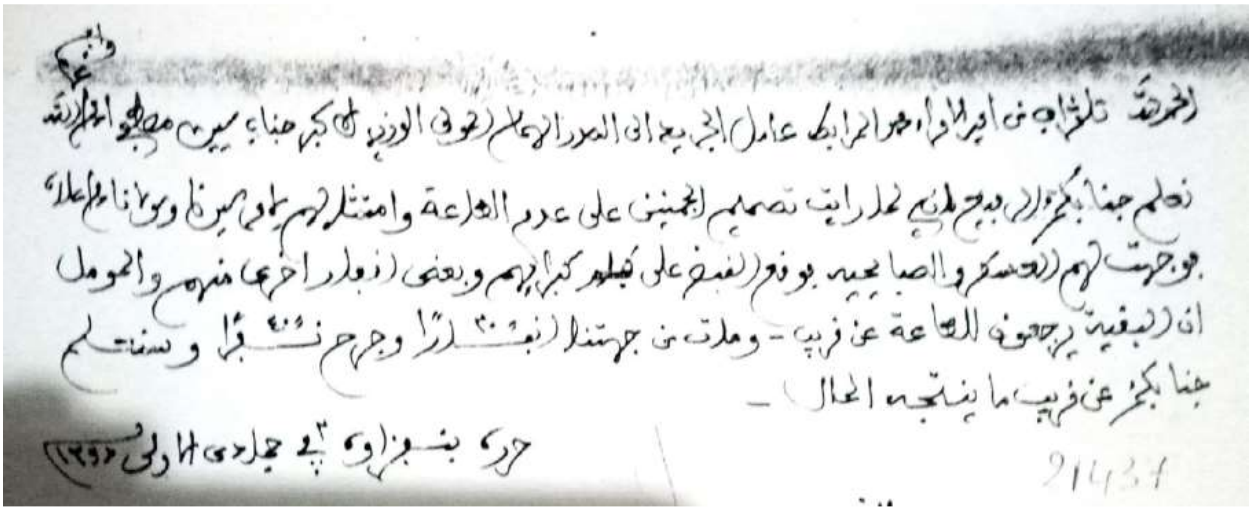

Figure 4: Telegram sent by the Mayor Mohammad Ben Mrabet to the central authority in Tunis informing them about the confrontation with villagers in Jemna.

The two stories narrated by Sheikh Letaif and others in Jemna about the history of their village set the tenets of this first section. Of course, there were other stories too, yet, they all fall within the two theoretical categories; the "internal forms" of a local system and the "external forces" (Comaroff, 1982, p. 160) which shape how the rural local in at the margins view and interact with the authority of the center. At times, though I don't ask an informant about the early history of Jemna, rather I ask about the near past, that is the 2011 act of claiming an oasis and the success of the villagers in maintaining a common ownership of the claimed land, I usually get answers loaded with references to the history of the village. Thus I find the task of engaging with historical anthropology imperative as it enables the understanding of how villagers imagine their identity and past and how they relate events which happened in an early past to an a recent event of reclaiming an oasis during the 2011 Tunisian revolution.

In his study of the transformation of the Barolong, Comaroff, (1980, 1982) , argues for a historical anthropology that pays attention to what he calls the "dialectic of articulation" (1982, p. 146). By analyzing the (i) internal structures of a local peripheral system (Barolong) and its relation to its context, that is the (i) external structures (the centre), the author stresses the importance of studying local communities in the third world as actors with active role in their history and not merely as "passive recipients of innovation or engineering from the centre" (Comaroff, 1980, p. 111).

The local systems of both Barolong and Jemna had their "internal logic" (Comaroff, 1980, p. 103) or internal forms (moral, economic, and social) and they were both in a dialectical relationship with other communities and the centre (external forces). I want to note here that though I make use

of Comaroff's theoretical tools and vocabulary, my analysis of Jemna differs from his analysis of the Barolong. In the latter the author's concern was to show that state level legislations (change in land tenure) does not necessarily result in a change in land relations at a local level. Thus Comaroff argued against a simplified causality and called for a more serious examination of the history of local communities and how they play a role in it rather than attributing any change to the external forces.

In the case of Jemna, however, I expand the dialectic of articulation towards another direction. By describing, through two stories narrated by villagers, the (i) early internal forms of Jemna (the myth and the legacy of the Sufi saints, the solidarity between the villagers, the shared know-how in relation to the cultivation of palm trees) and (ii) the 19th century encounter with external forces (a historical incident showcasing how Jemnis interacted with the center), I tried to (i) make visible the villagers' point of view in relation to their history (as these two stories were the most narrated about Jemna's history by the locals) and (ii) understand, at the conjuncture of the two narrated stories the Jemnis' imagined identity. Put differently, the dialectic articulation of the internal forms and external forces shape the Jemni selfhood; when my informants talked about the act of claiming an oasis in 2011 they told me that for them land is their identity and "honor" and that they did not fear to confront the state as they have been historically in confrontation with the centre. The imagined singularity of a Jemni in the village stems from his or her history of a particular moral organization, land relations, and resistance to the external forces.

Comaroff rightly pointed out in his theoretical endeavor that for local communities it is not only the external forces that shape the local reality. In Jemna my informants do not simply attribute their success of managing the oasis and claiming it to the instance of the 2011 revolution which, supposedly, changed the political structure at the centre. For Jemnis, regardless to the effect of the

2011 revolution on the political structure outside the village, their success is rooted in the internal logic of the village, in their history of resistance and in their shared sense of solidarity. There were two temporalities informing their act of claiming the oasis in 2011. First, and on the surface, the national revolutionary moment of resistance in Tunisia occurring outside the village, and second, the inside historically-informed moment of resistance reoccurring in the village from the view points of the Jemnis. In 2011 by being in the streets of Jemna, claiming an oasis, and resisting the orders from Tunis, Jemnis were acting in the present while re-living an imagined past of resistance and belonging to the land.

Chapter 2: "Mr. Merillon" A Colonist in the Oasis: Colonialism and its Aftermath in Jemna.

"For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and above all, dignity".

Frantz Fanon

The Wretched of the Earth

When people in Jemna talk about the oasis they claimed during the event of the 2011 Tunisian revolution, they refer to it in two names; Elmoamer and STIL. During conversations with Jemnis I noticed that they use the two names interchangeably. Elmoamer (المُعمر) means the colonist. In the colonial period in Tunisia (1881-1956) the rural referred to lands or properties managed by the French authorities as Elmoamer properties. The second name; STILL, refers to the Société Tunisienne de l'industrie Latière (the Tunisian Company of Dairy Industry), a state-owned company that managed the oasis from 1972 to 2002. The decision of handing the oasis to STIL came after years of Jemni struggle (and negotiations) with the nascent independent state to restore the oasis after the Agriculture Independence[6] in 1964. Once STIL took control of the oasis, Jemnis realized that both the colonists and the leader of the independence and Tunisian nationalism, Habib Bourguiba, deprived them from their historical right to land. The colonial encounter politicized the oasis and brought about the genesis of a local resistance. Jemnis experienced colonialism and post-independence nationalism's material and symbolic violence, they experienced them not as distinct

[6] Though Tunisia gained its political independence in 1956, French domination over agricultural lands remained until May 12, 1964, the date of Agricultural Independence which is also referred to as the Agricultural Evacuation. Similarly, the last French military troops left Tunisia on October 15, 1963 (Military Evacuation) one year before the Agricultural Independence.

historical trajectories but rather as two political structures that produced, reproduced, and fixed a set of relations of dominations, marginalization and subalternity.

"Bordj Merillon": A French Tower in the Village.

The oasis claimed by the villagers during the 2011 Revolution is almost 3 km far from the center of the village, (see figure 5) with a total area of 400 hectares. Only 196 hectares are cultivated with 10.000 date palms. At the heart of the oasis stands Bordj Merillon (the tower of Merillon) (see figure 6 and 7) once inhabited by Elmoamer. Two of my informants referred to a book; *Pistes du Sud tunisien à travers l'histoire* and told me that its author mentions Merillon and the colonial history of Southern Tunisia and recommended that I read the book as they did to know more the history of their village.

In the book, Gandini (2004) states that Merillon, a French lawyer, arrived to the south of Tunisia (exactly the region of Nefzaoua to which Jemna belonged) with a group of friends during a touristic trip in 1922. Merillon decided with his friends to start an agricultural company; Société Commericale et Agricole du Sud Tunisien SCAST. Merillon introduced new technologies of cultivating date palms in the oasis of Jemna, made local farmers work in their own land, and started exporting dates to Europe. Parallel to the company, Merillon ordered the construction of a fortified guesthouse (the tower of Merillon) and a series of depots for to storage dates. All the buildings are still standing in the oasis to the present time.

In 1942 a Belgian, Maus de Rolley, became in charge of the oasis in Jemna and replaced Merillon. Maus came to Jemna with his French wife and daughter and lived in Merillon's guesthouse until 1957 (Gandini, 2004). In 1943 Maus de Rolley left Tunisia to participate in the French and Belgian mobilization that preceded the operation of Normandy Landings in 1944. During his absence, his

wife, Madame de Rolley, was the only woman authorized by the French authorities to be in charge of an oasis in Southern Tunisia.

Figure 5: Municipality of Jemna. Taken from Google Maps.

Figure 6: Merillon's fortified guesthouse (called the Tower of Merillon) taken in Jemna, April 2019.

Figure 7: Merillon's fortified guesthouse. A photo by Maus de Rolley in 1948. Taken from Pistes du Sud tunisien à travers l'histoire.

Abdelmajid, a farmer from the village whose father worked for STIL told me that villagers' struggle for land started during the colonial era:

we first opposed the colonialists, this is our land they cannot take it from us but the power of the colonizer…he took it with power…he put some people in jail and then forced them to sign a document…a pledge that they don't talk about land anymore or they will be jailed again…from the things the colonizer did was that he forced our people to work under a corvée law… they imposed a reality with the force of arms.

The arrival of Merillon and Maus to Jemna, the establishment of SCAST, and Madame de Rolley's act of hoisting the French flag on top of the Merillon tower (see figure 8) marked the moment of colonial land dispossession in Jemna. Besides the lived material violence of this moment, land dispossession brought about a symbolic violence as it disrupted the internal logic of the village. As I showed earlier (chapter 1), land, water springs, and date palms are tightly connected to the origin of the village, to its organization, and to its foundational myth that constructed the Jemni collective selfhood. Thus the colonizer' land dispossession disrupted the moral, social and economic organization of the village. At this historical moment, the phrase used by Abdelmajid to describe his ancestors' encounter with the colonialists in the village; "this is our land", assumed two meanings, first, a reaffirmation of a shared identity constructed around land, and second, a declaration of local resistance. Thus, it is the colonial encounter that first politicized the oasis, the uttered phrase "this is our land", and set the ground for the long durée land struggle that would endure to the 2011 Tunisian Revolution.

Figure8: 1943-1944. Madame de Rolley hoisting French flag on top of the Merillon tower during the absence of her husband. Taken from Pistes du Sud tunisien à travers l'histoire.

Politicizing land and the birth of local resistance

Merillon's visit to Jemna (Gandini, 2004) is not different from visits of French geographers and 'explorers' to North Africa during the 19th century. For instance, reports of some French colonialists such as Robert Wastelier, Charles Géniaux, and Henri Duveyrier offer an ecological description of the Southern Mediterranean lands (Mejdi, 2017). In these reports Tunisia is portrayed as the old "granary of Rome" and colonial France was to restore its legacy and benefit from its fertility and climate. The region of Nefzaoua where Jemna is located was described by Baraban (1887) who was charged with a mission by France's Ministry of Agriculture: "Every village has an oasis, where, except for some vegetables intended for local consumption, people cultivate only date palms in big numbers" (Baraban, 1887, p. 64).

The French colonial expeditions, reports, and monographs about Southern Tunisia's oases were at times accompanied by conferences organized at the metropole to discuss the findings and the possible efficient and modern usages of land at the colonies (see Desfontaines, 1889). In addition to the efforts of colonialists to know the land and rationalize its use, unlike the villagers whose "education and civilization are still in their infancy" ("sont encore dans l'enfance") (Duveyrier, 1881, p.139), metropolitan France established schools such as L'École nationale supérieur d'agriculture colonial in 1902.

In Jemna, the farmers who only encountered Merillon, Maus, and the French army that jailed the locals were not initially aware that their village became part of a larger colonial project. The logic of this project rendered Jemna, and Tunisia at large, part of the "hekatonkheires's arm", that is an extension of France not only as a colonial state but as one of the "modern colonial empires" (Steinmetz, 2017, p.377). With the colonial-imperial encounter the local agency villagers had vis-à-vis the oasis became subject to colonial administration and the dynamics of colonial capital.

These dynamics redefined land along the lines of profit and interest and the Jemni oasis became integrated within a capital system of a colonial space (Steinmtez, 2017). Consequently dates production in Jemna joined the chain of dates production in France's other colonial spaces such as Algeria where, by 1896, France imported from its North African colony 1684 tons of dates and started developing storage, preservation, and canning techniques[7] what boosted France's dates exports to England, Germany, and Switzerland (Kassah, 1991).

The colonial encounter in the Jemna, the presence of Merillon and Maus, and the creation of SCAST reflected the macro logic of the imperial-colonial moment. Merillon thus came to rationalize Jemna's date economy. His strategies were informed by a recent knowledge about the land, the climate, and the natives. There were monographs, reports, studies, and statistics about Jemna and other villages and the whole colony. There were also friends in neighboring Algeria and the metropole who can transfer their colonial know-how to boost production. For Merillon and Maus there was nothing sophisticated about land, date palms, and Jemnis. Everything was simple, legible, and measurable yet "every act of measurement was an act marked by the play of power relations" (Scott, 1998), every act of imprisoning villagers, silencing them, forcing them to sign pledges and work the land, was an act of domination and subordination. For Jemnis the oasis and its date palms had a social use and a significance beyond the utilitarian and "practical reason" (Sahlins, 1976). And it is through the social, economic, and moral meaningfulness of oases that they could make sense of their identity. This vision and imagination of land was faced by the narrowness of colonial vision. For Merillon "the [oasis] as a habitat disappears and is replaced by the [oasis] as an economic resource to be managed efficiently" (Scott, 1998, p.13).

[7] With the increase in dates production in the North African colonies France's dates exports and canning flourished in Marseille by the 19th century with its trademark; Caisses Marseillaise. See (Kassah, 1991, p.46).

Similar to "colonized people [,] the most essential value [for Jemnis] is…the land" (Fanon, 2002, p.44). And it is the history of the land that constructs the shared values in Jemna. With the colonial encounter, the imaginaries about land and its past are disrupted by a new logic of profitability and domination and it is during the colonial encounter that the Jemni oasis became first politicized. The colonial violence resulted in the birth of a Jemni resistance and struggle for land. In the aftermath of colonialism, nationalism would promise Jemnis the restoration of their agency vis-à-vis the oasis before it turns to reproducing the very dynamics that alienated people from their land at the first place.

"The Deceitful State": Independence, Modernization, and Land.

Rahal, a retired sport education teacher from Jemna, told me that after the independence (1956) his father was among hundreds of Jemnis who sold some of their properties to get back the Elmoamer oasis:

After the French left the state acknowledged that the oasis was a collective property of the Jemni but they asked the people to buy the palm trees of the oasis and not the oasis itself…and only when Jemnis pay for the palm trees they could start managing Elmoamer oasis…

The story of how villagers collected a sum of 40.000 Tunisian Dinars to buy the palm trees of the oasis following the independence was often narrated by villagers. Some of my informants told me that their grandfathers sold their sheep, camels, gold, and used their savings to collect the money in order to get back the land. Nevertheless, the collected sum was invested by the mayor of the governorate of Gabes[8] to implement project in the city including a new transportation company (Nefzaoua Transportation Company), a commercial company (Progress Company), and a hotel

[8] Jemna belonged administratively to the governorate of Gabes until 1981 after that it became part of the governorate of Kébili upon its creation in 1981.

(The Oasis Hotel). Taher Tahri one of leading figures in the Jemni struggle for land during the 2011 Revolution told me that Jemnis were informed by the mayor that the projects were to be managed under cooperatives and that the villagers were considered shareholders in all commercial activities(see figure 9). Similar to Sheikh Moussa, Taher keeps several letters and documents in his library and he told me that what he says is "documented" and that all what Jemnis got from the investments made in Kébili was "papers" Tahri also showed me letters sent by Jemnis to the Ministry of Agriculture on October, 27 1964 and on February, 14 1965. Signatories from Jemna said that they would form cooperatives and demand their right to manage the oasis, a right they have been waiting for since de Rolley left Jemna.

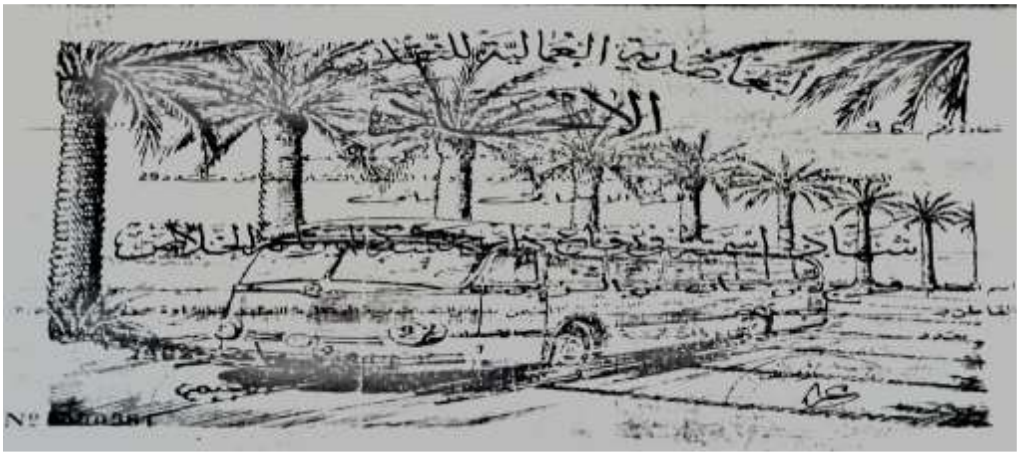

Figure 9: A certificate given to "Fraj Ben Ali alzin" (resides in Jemna) proving that he is a shareholder in the Workers Transportation Cooperative under a law issued in 1959.

At the state level, and after the Agricultural Independence (1964), Habib Bourguiba, leader of Tunisia's independence and its president from 1957 to 1987, decided to nationalize the 450.000 hectares of agricultural lands left by the French (Elloumi, 2013). The process of nationalization was accompanied by the initiation of a socialist planning programme of cooperatives from 1961 to 1969. Such structural economic change strengthened Bourguiba's one party rule and made opposition to the new national strategy impossible for Jemnis especially that agriculture and trade sectors became part of national plan of development envisaged by the "supreme leader". However, the implementation of the programme failed by 1969 as Tunisia's foreign aid partners, namely the World Bank, refused to offer aid to prolong the cooperative plan (Radwān, Jamal, & Ghose, 1991). This led the state to privatize the state-owned and cooperative lands.

In this context, Jemna's oasis was handed by the state to the STIL company which managed the oasis between 1972 and 2002 (Rhili, 2018). From 2002 until the 2011 Revolution the oasis was rented by the state to two businessmen close to the Ben Ali[9] regime. Abdelmajid whose father worked for STIL described the post-independence developments as follows:

The cooperative experience nationalized the lands…the money our people paid was used for investments since then we knew that the state deceived us…they took our land and money and gave us certificates to prove that we are shareholders…cooperatives failed and the state gave some lands to its owners but our land was not given back to us…they rented it to STIL…on paper it is a state-owned company but people knew that it was run by Wasila Bourguiba, the wife of the president and her friends…

In 1966 Habib Bourguiba said that his post-independence goal was "to create a better society". Such task required "reason", and "realism" that the government could build "a modern, progressive nation" (Bourguiba, 1966, p. 485). From the view point of Bourguiba, with his reforms the

[9] Zin Eabidin Ben Ali was Tunisia's president from 1987 to 2011. He was ousted during the 2011 Tunisian Revolution.

agricultural sector was "modernized" and "collective lands [were] improved and exploited more rationally". All this while maintaining a "national cohesion" and fighting against "the centrifugal forces of regionalism and tribalism and all leftovers of the traditional structures of yesterday" (Micaud, 1969, p.471). However the echo of Bourguiba's progress discourse did not seem to reach Jemna. Neither during the 1960's nor after that did the villagers feel that they were part of a national modernization project. Besides the sense the "deceitfulness" the villagers felt after being deprived from their right to land and the changes in land tenure, many people I talked with in Jemna said that the post-independence era marginalized the village.

Many of my informants did not talk only about how the land was taken but also how the village did not have schools or even a hospital. Walid, an agricultural engineer from Jemna told me that the villagers built classrooms with their own money in 1980 and only then the state intervened and continued the construction of the school. For agriculture, people did not receive any aids to work the land and when they make wells the state considers their activity as illegal yet when they export dates the state taxes them:

Bourguiba marginalized the South of Tunisia and no only Jemna …all the investments were in the north and in the coastal cities…he invested in tourism and industry and gave up on land and agriculture…look at Jemna now we are more than 8000 people and we have a basic medical centre…in serious cases people have to go with a car to Kébili to receive treatment…there is a municipality building…a post office…a police station and the medical centre…even the two schools…one of them was built by the villagers to educate their children…Bourguiba and Ben Ali did not do any developmental projects in Jemna…people here have lands and date palms and that is how they have been surviving for centuries… we have people who work in public sector but they all have lands they inherited from their fathers…there is a good joke about Bourguiba and development in Southern Tunisia...in one of his visits to an oasis a farmer told him that people want a tuna factory in the village…Bourguiba laughed and told him that there is no sea here how can I bring you tuna? the farmer told him that the trucks that come to take dates from the village to the factories in Northern Tunisia can bring tuna in their way back to the south instead of coming empty...

From the viewpoint of the villagers I talked with marginalization marked both colonialism and its aftermath in Jemna. Bourguiba, the leader of Tunisian nationalism does not seem to be much celebrated in the village. I encountered many who talked about Bourguiba and the post-independence state with a sense of bitterness, they felt that they were left behind by the state and when they opposed or talked about their land they faced repression.

Bourguiba was both "imitative" and "hostile" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 2) to colonial France. He was Imitative in his endeavor to "rationalize" the locals' use of land and alter the traditional structures. His utilitarian vision of the Jemni land resembled that of Merillon and Mauss. For him, too, there was nothing sophisticated about land. All what was needed was to produce cadres with "technical training…they had to have some knowledge of agricultural problems, of finances and budgeting, of problems of equipment and investment, of cooperatives…cadres had to be well informed" (Micaud, 1969, p.480). Post-independence elites in Tunisia viewed the ancestral and traditional ways of social and economic organization "as obstacles to progress" (Chatterjee, 1993). And their strategies of modernization produced an enduring subalternity in Jemna that people still feel and talk about to the present time. Thus Jemnis, who were subject to both a colonial capital and then a statist capital, were made voiceless twice and during two seemingly distinct historical periods.

Chapter 3: A Revolution in Jemna

I don't know how we decided to go to the oasis…someone shouted STIL and then we all started to shout STIL…STIL… we walked towards the oasis…we did not plan to go there it just happened…

Sami

By January 12th, 2011 people in Jemna were in the main street of the village protesting against Ben Ali, Tunisia's ousted president during the 14th January 2011 Revolution. Demonstrations were in all regions of Tunisia and led to what is called today the Arab Uprisings of 2011. Jemnis participated in the popular protests akin to thousands of Tunisians yet they did not only set police stations in fire like their counterparts in other parts of the country but walked towards "their ancestors' oasis to claim it.

Ali Hamza, told me that in 2011 people were protesting the Ben Ali regime and no one thought that the protesters will end up going to the oasis. Ali said that even though nothing was organized ahead, everyone in Jemna knew the history of the oasis and knew that it was taken from their ancestors and that is why they all walked towards it "spontaneously":

Injustice…there was injustice…our history was taken by France then by Bourguiba and after them by the corrupt businessmen of Ben Ali and we have been watching…there is a challenge…we want the land back…the oasis is ours …no one is thinking about his own benefit and there lies our strength…everyone is thinking about the common good of Jemna

Ali Hamza

When hundreds of protesters reached the oasis they told the managers that they have to collect their materials and leave and the youth decided to organize a 99 days sit-in in the oasis until the state gives them back their land:

There was a sit-in for 99 days…almost 3 months and 10 days…this sit-in was singular-I've never seen anything like it…the whole town set up tents, there was one for the organization committee, one for the radio, one for food and coffee, activities were organized to distract people from their frustration. After a time, we decided to collect contributions. We raised money, 34 thousand dinars. Each citizen contributed up to 30 dinars

Tarek Rahmouni, a participant in the January 2011 sit-in[10]

The Revolution as a historical event

By January 14th Ben Ali fled Tunisia. TV channels reported that he fled to Saudi Arabia with his wife and children. For the villagers in Jemna though such news meant that the revolution succeeded, they nevertheless continued their sit in. Following the act of occupying the oasis, military forces came from Kébili after being informed by the two investors about the developments of the events. The participants in the sit-in informed the officers that they will stay in the oasis because it is their "ancestor's land" and that they have "historical and revolutionary legitimacy". The military, busy with the state of unrest in the country and the absence of police (after the acts of burning their stations throughout the country), decided to keep a force near the oasis without dispersing the sit-in and without any confrontation with the villagers. Some of the participant in

[10] See: جمنة الكرامة في عراجينها. [Jemna: Dignity in its Fruit Bunches]. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRRsdpl5WqA

the sit-in told me that the military was on their side and that they knew that the two investors who managed the oasis were close to Ben Ali and that is why they were handed the land. The sit-in continued under the supervision of the military and, similar to other parts of Tunisia, people in Jemna organized themselves in what was called the Committees for the Protection of the Revolution. The committee was later on dissolved (following the first election after the revolution) and villagers decided to form an association; The Association for the Protection of Jemna's Oases APJO to manage the oasis. Taher Tahri, a retired teacher who was a leftist militant, syndicalist, and member of the Tunisian League for Human Rights was elected by the villagers as head of the association.

When the youth of Jemna occupied the oasis, we started to think of what we should do next…the two investors were renting the land from the state and they were benefiting from state support and aids however they have not implemented a single project in the village…they did not even employ the youth of Jemna…people suggested to form an association and we held the election democratically and I was elected as head of the association along with 10 others who held different positions…we collected money and everyone in Jemna participated…we wanted to start managing the oasis but before that we wanted to clean it…the investors did not care about the surrounding of the palm trees… for them it was only about the fruit bunch…they wanted to get the harvest and sell it that's all…when we claimed the oasis it was in a bad situation and maintenance was a priority for us…everyone volunteered to work in the oasis we cleaned it and bought some material …the most important decision we agreed on was to keep a common ownership of the oasis and to manage it collectively through the association…and then implement projects in the village..

Taher Tahri

When protesters in Jemna decided to walk towards the oasis during the 2011 Tunisian Revolution their act was "spontaneous". Nevertheless, the act was also informed by the fact that thousands of Tunisians were also demonstrating in different parts of the country. For a protester in Jemna, the walk towards the oasis entailed two possibilities; toppling Ben Ali's regime and claiming the ancestors' land. In reality thus what mattered for Jemnis was to capitalize on the national revolutionary moment to disrupt the political structure, the centre, and to restore a local agency vis-à-vis the oasis. It is difficult to separate the two imagined possibilities; disrupting the state structure through a revolution and restoring the agency vis-à-vis land. Historically, the oasis had been subject to the political structure of a colonial-imperial state and then to the political structure of the nation-state upon independence. These structures produced relations of domination, subalternity, and resulted in a durable marginalization of Jemna that persisted until the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. From the view point of a Jemni protester, French colonialism, Bourguiba's modernization project, and Ben Ali's dictatorship were all manifestations of a particular centre, a political structure that produced his or her marginalization.

In this context, the act of challenging the authority of the state during the 2011 Revolution by setting the police station on fire, demonstrating, and occupying the oasis is a historical event in Jemna, an event that cannot be understood without making sense of the different temporalities of the struggle for land as imagined by Jemnis. Here, I follow Swell (2005) in his conceptualization of events defined "as the relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transform structures" (Sewell, 2005, p. 100). For Jemnis, the meaningfulness of their act of protesting lies in the possibility of changing the political structure, which had been, since colonialism producing and reproducing relations of domination.

Thus the villagers' knowledge about a national wide sequence of protests against the political structure meant that their protest and march towards the oasis, a "spontaneous" and local "happening", could be articulated within a larger national context what can lead to a "sudden break" in a once "durable trends of history" (Sewell, 2005, p. 102). These trends of history in Jemna are tightly connected to the villagers' past experiences with colonialism and its aftermath as I show in the second chapter. In this context, the 2011 Tunisian Revolution was perceived by Jemnis as an opportunity to challenge history's "stubborn durabilites" (Sewell, 2005, p. 102) in order to restore agency vis-à-vis land. The act of claiming an oasis, managing it, and using its revenues to implement projects locally meant restoring a historical, political and social agency in Jemna.

Claiming the oasis and restoring agency

From 2011 to 2016 the Association for the Protection of Jemna's Oases APJO managed the oasis and sold the harvest through in public tenders. In the period between 2011 and 2016 Taher Tahri met several state officials (from the ministry of agriculture and the ministry of state affairs) and politicians and discussed with them the situation of the association and the oasis. Tahri told me that all officials he met acknowledged the right of Jemnis to their land but because they were all in interim positions during a period of democratic transition, none of them could help the association to have a legal framework for managing the oasis which was still considered as state-owned.

Nevertheless, and despite the lack of a legal framework, the members of the APJO decided to start implementing projects in Jemna by using the dates revenue. Interestingly, implementing any project in Jemna required the approval of the local authorities (Jemna's Municipality) and the latter

approved the projects even though for the Ministry of State Affairs and the Ministry of Agriculture, the oasis was state-owned thus using its revenues by the APJO was illegal.

A member of the APJO told me that from 2011 to 2014 the association focused on the maintenance of the land and by 2014 the revenues reached 1.800.000 DT (approx. 500.000 €). In the years 2011, 2012, and 2013 the revenues were around 900.000 DT (approx. 250.000 €). In 2011 the members of the association organized public gatherings in the centre of the village and discussed for days the projects that Jemna needed the most. Following these public meetings the APJO started to implement different projects as follows:

Maintenance of sanitary facilities and building new classrooms in Jemna's two primary schools; construction of a sport centre in Jemna's High School; construction of a covered market; donating materials including computers and air conditioners to Jemna's Basic Medical Centre; construction of small football field; maintenance of Jemna's cemetery; offering aid scholarships to 30 students from Jemna; financing cultural activities of youth clubs in Jemna; maintenance of Children Autism Centre; donations to centers for people with special needs in neighboring villages.

Between 2016 and 2017 Mabrouk Korchid, minister of state affairs tried to pressurize the APJO and told them that the land is considered as state property and that they cannot continue to manage it. Meetings between Korchid and the members of APJO did not settle the legal framework and the former decided to freeze the bank account of the association. However the success of the APJO in mobilizing civil society activists and some politicians around the issue of Jemna's oasis forced the Ministry of Agriculture to continue the negotiations with the APJO instead of the Ministry of State Affairs. In 2017 the former issued a statement to allow the APJO to manage the oasis temporarily. Now, the APJO is still managing the oasis under the law issued by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Before the revolution, the image of state as a center of power had been produced in Jemna through verticality and encompassment (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002). In other words, the state was perceived as above the village as a locality and it contained it (or encompassed it) at the same time (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002). The state bureaucratic practices were also critical in producing the state image in Jemna. For instance, during the post-independence period villagers could only send letters to the regional and central authorities to prove, through documents, that the oasis belonged to them. Historically, Jemnis interacted with the central authority of Beys during the times of Ottoman-Tunisia through letters to also prove that they enjoy a tax exemption (chapter1). In 2011 the historical image of a 'distant' centralized political structure that Jemnis could only interact with through bureaucratic processes changed into an image of a state whose officials visit Jemna and negotiate with the locals their right to land. This altered the verticality of the image the state produces at local level. Similarly, the bureaucratic practices of the center(s) that Jemnis experienced historically overlooked the values the locals attributed to their "ancestors' land", such form of indifference (Herzfeld, 1992) resulted in a shared awareness by the villagers about the necessity for resistance and the refusal of being "ruled by records" (Hull, 2008).

Restoring political agency in Jemna can be also perceived in the success of the APJO to negotiate the land tenure laws with the post-revolution state. Even though the members of the APJO accepted a temporarily decree by the Ministry of Agriculture to continue their activities of managing the oasis, they are still negotiating the implementation of a law that will institutionalize the social solidarity economy as they believe that their experience have brought a model of such economy on the ground, a model that preceded the state laws and regulation and made visible the gap, or the "clash between the technocratic and lived time" (Mathur, 2016).

The head of Jemna Municipality told me that he was with the Jemni youth during the events of the 2011 Revolution and it is because of the revolution that he was elected at the local level:

Before the revolution governors were appointed by the central government…today local governors are chosen by the people directly…I won the election within a political party list it is true…but people voted for the party because they knew that I represent it in Jemna…they voted for me…when APJO asked for approval to implement projects I didn't think twice about it…I was myself member of the APJO…I participated in the sit-ins and I believe in the philosophy of the association…

The positionality of Nizar Najeh, who is currently the head of Jemna municipality, echoes the transformation of state structures at the local level. Before the revolution his position could not be held by anyone, the governor had to be member of the ruling party and his or her role was to produce the state verticality at a local level. Nizar however represents both the state and his locality while taking decisions that might contradict with other state institutions (such as the Ministry of Agriculture's initial position towards the APJO). Nizar's decision of approving the projects APJO implemented in Jemna is yet a manifestation of how political agency, that is the ability of Jemnis to decide on what projects they need in the village and then implement them, was restored after claiming the oasis and managing its revenues.

When I visited the Alnajah primary school in Jemna the director showed me the classrooms built by the APJO in 2017 and while there I noticed that there are still classrooms under construction. Tawfik, the director of the school told me that only when the association started to add classrooms that the Ministry of Education realized that the school needs maintenance:

The Ministry is always late…when they started to construct classrooms I showed them the ones done by the APJO and I told them that they should follow the same style…you know when they

build something it is usually done with zero creativity…all state buildings are the same…but this time they had an example to follow and they did…

Sofian, an instructor at the Youth House in Jemna, took me in a tour around some of the buildings and youth cultural clubs to show me the maintenance done by the association:

The association contributed to the budget of the Youth House from the revenues of the oasis…they basically gave money to the state just to help decorating the place…before the aids of the association all these walls were white and blue…like any state institution in the country…so it is easy to know what the association did…anything that is not blue and white on the walls is their work…

Ali Hamza from the APJO told me that the activities of the APJO are rooted in the moral history of the village and the philosophy of the social solidarity economy reflects how the Jemnis lived for centuries. Thus by claiming the oasis in 2011 Jemnis restored a historical relationship with land. Many I talked with in Jemna express strong attachment to land. Land is one's "honor", "history", "identity" and "roots" in Jemna. Restoring the historical land relations in Jemna disrupted the logic of Bourguiba's post-independence 'progressive' reforms. Against the 'modern' and 'progressive' image of citizenship that reflects the modern state he envisaged, in Jemna the act of reclaiming the oasis meant that traditional societal organization informed by the sense of belonging to land is not a matter of the past; both traditional sense of belonging and citizenship are embedded (Thelen & Alber, 2018).

The restoration of historical agency in Jemna meant not only to speak about land and negotiate with the state one's historical right to his or her ancestor's land. The relevance of the shared sense of belonging to land and its history was visible, for instance, in a conference organized by Sheikh

Moussa at the Youth House in Jemna. The theme was about the Jemni family and its Sufi sheikhs, their schools and their teachings. During the conference professors and historians talked about Sidi Ibrahim Jemni and Sidi Moussa Jemni, the ancestors of Sheikh Moussa. At the end of the conference, the latter talked about Bourguiba and Ben Ali and how they marginalized the importance of his ancestors in Tunisian history. After the conference, Sheikh Moussa told me that villagers now can know their ancestors more and that he will organize annual conferences to discuss the works of his ancestors and make sure people in Jemna never forget their past and their "roots".

Conclusion

The act of claiming an oasis in Jemna reveals how actors at the margins live and make sense of a revolution. Their revolutionary acts were informed by a history of domination and marginalization experienced by different generations. The intersection of temporalities becomes visible when the informants talk about the early history of Jemna, about the myths, the narrated stories and the historical relations of domination they or their ancestors experienced. Some, while acting in the present are mindful of their fathers or grandfathers and how they were subject to political structures of colonialism and state nationalism. Through narrating a history, Jemnis make sense of their present and legitimize their act of oasis occupation. At the margins of the Tunisian Revolution, the experience of Jemna shows that the marginalized's act of restoring agency entails challenging not only the present state structure, but also how the state is imagined and produced locally. The moment of occupying the oasis was an agentic moment through which the locals managed to implement projects in the village and at times to offer models to the state to follow. "Jemna's experience" as the locals refer to it reveals also that the Arab Uprisings or the Tunisian Revolution more specifically did not only center on political and symbolic demands of representation. At the margins, the revolution meant history, land, and revisiting a past marked by domination and subalternity.

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