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# Cultural Constructions of Demographic Inquiry: Experiences of an Expatriate Researcher in Tunisia

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### Article abstract

The average number of children per woman in Tunisia has declined from about seven in the mid 1960's to about five in the early 1980's, but the change has been slower over the last part of this period. In attempting to understand Tunisian society and its childbearing situation, we address questions of (1) sex roles, (2) conflicts over models of development and (3) tribal loyalties. The state has attempted to change sex roles, but there remain powerful traditional forces, especially from men, giving priority to women's family roles. The conflict between Western and Islamic models of development implies that there is a wide element of ambivalence as people try to seek the advantages of both the small (Western) family and the large family corresponding to cultural traditions. For many, four children represent a type of compromise: "not too many, not too few". Given the ways in which tribal loyalties become part of institutional dynamics, certain groups have come to perceive that Family Planning is acting not for them but for its own benefit. In the course of reconstructing these fertility dynamics, the author also stresses the experiences through which he learnt to situate the relevant issues.

# Cultural Constructions of Demographic Inquiry: Experiences of an Expatriate Researcher in Tunisia\*

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The average number of children per woman in Tunisia has declined from about seven in the mid 1960's to about five in the early 1980's, but the change has been slower over the last part of this period. In attempting to understand Tunisian society and its childbearing situation, we address questions of (1) sex roles, (2) conflicts over models of development and (3) tribal loyalties. The state has attempted to change sex roles, but there remain powerful traditional forces, especially from men, giving priority to women's family roles. The conflict between Western and Islamic models of development implies that there is a wide element of ambivalence as people try to seek the advantages of both the small (Western) family and the large family corresponding to cultural traditions. For many, four children represent a type of compromise: "not too many, not too few". Given the ways in which tribal loyalties become part of institutional dynamics, certain groups have come to perceive that Family Planning is acting not for them but for its own benefit. In the course of reconstructing these fertility dynamics, the author also stresses the experiences through which he learnt to situate the relevant issues.

*De sept au milieu des années 1960, le nombre moyen d'enfants par femme en Tunisie s'est abaissé à environ cinq au début des années 1980, mais le changement a été plus lent durant la dernière partie de la période. En essayant de comprendre ce changement du taux de fécondité de la société tunisienne, nous abordons les thèmes suivants : rôle des sexes, conflits sur les modèles de développement, et*

*loyautés de clan. Quoique l'État ait tenté de changer les rôles des sexes, des forces traditionnelles puissantes, surtout de la part des hommes, continuent à donner priorité aux rôles familiaux des femmes. Le conflit entre modèles de développement occidentaux et islamiques conduit à des comportements ambivalents, beaucoup recherchent à la fois les avantages de la famille nucléaire occidentale et de la grande famille traditionnelle. Avoir quatre enfants constitue un compromis: «Ce n'est pas beaucoup, ce n'est pas peu.»* *Vus les modes selon lesquels les loyautés de clan entrent en jeu avec les dynamiques institutionnelles, certains groupes en sont venus à penser que le planning familial agit non pas pour eux mais pour son propre intérêt. En reconstituant ces dynamiques de fécondité, nous insistons sur les expériences qui nous ont amenés à situer les axes de l'analyse.*

The ultimate purpose of the research project to which this paper is attached was to interpret fertility trends in Tunisia. In particular we wished to understand the reasons for the recent slowdown in the fertility decline. However, in order to understand fertility patterns, it is necessary to become aware of much of a society's culture. Thus,

\* The author wishes to acknowledge the funding of the International Development Research Centre.

my purpose here is to suggest interpretations of aspects of Tunisian culture which are relevant to its childbearing situation. In addition, an underlying issue of the paper concerns broad methodological questions about a fieldworker's process of learning to situate and analyze relevant ethnographic issues. In this light, I will first provide some details about my getting into the field, and some introductory remarks about Tunisia.

### *Getting into the Field*

In approaching my sabbatical year, I indicated to various people and organizations my interest in joining some ongoing research activity in a French-speaking Third World country. One of these letters went to the Canadian Embassy in Tunis which, surprisingly enough, pursued the matter. I was told at the end of my stay that they were rather perplexed at the Embassy by my proposal. They had no previous case of a Canadian sabbaticant in the country and they were somewhat doubtful that it would work out for me. On the other hand, the Ambassador was an academic himself and they thought that this might be an interesting experiment. They pursued the idea, through a contact that a diplomat's wife had with the Office National du Planning Familial et de la Population.

After several letters, there came an invitation to take part in a study at this Office with Mongi Bchir, their senior researcher. The project was eventually defined as an analysis of fertility trends with a focus on elaborating a typology of childbearing behaviours and interpreting the recent relative plateau in the fertility decline. Our study was to make use of available data, including the World Fertility Survey, and it also included a proposal for a "qualitative" complementary survey, using open ended questions to reconstruct the rationale of people's childbearing behaviour. We obtained funding for the project from the Cooperative Programs of the International Development Research Centre, the funds being administered by the sponsoring institutions, namely the University of Western Ontario and the Office National du Planning Familial et de la Population.

I had frequent occasions to remember one of my last interactions with the university bureaucracy, as I was obtaining an advance on the project budget. The money had not yet arrived at the university, yet I was allowed to take an advance out of an empty account. Even more amazing was that, in my chairman's absence, a secretary signed a requisition to allow me an \$8000 advance, which was ready the next day. We often do not sufficiently

appreciate the supportive nature of our institutions, and understanding the variation in efficiency of institutions within and across societies is also an important sociological problem to which I will return. At the Office, after the funding had arrived and after our survey teams had been in the field for a month, we were still having to lend them money out of our own pockets so that they could keep going, while we spent long hours trying to get them paid for work that they had done and for per diem expenses that had been incurred. We had to make personal interventions at each of numerous steps of the administrative ladder to make sure that the file would move on. All the while we had to keep ensuring our workers that we would eventually solve the problems and that they would in fact be paid. The reasons given for the tightly controlled administration of funds was to make sure that everything would be "in order". Throughout the fieldwork, in order to be able to pay our surveyors what we and they considered a minimum decent amount, we created a deception to the effect that they worked over twice the length of the real period of the survey. We even created a "fictitious person" so that we could pay someone to use his car for the fieldwork. This indicates that tight administrative procedures often have a *raison d'être* which is far from ensuring that things be "in order".

Another point to make by way of describing my situation in Tunisia is that I was there under circumstances rather different from that of other foreigners. Most of these are associated with embassies, aid organizations or multinational corporations. They are thus supported by large organizations that cushion their lives in a less developed society. In my case, the funding was to pay research expenses, but I had to manage out of my salary to find such essentials as housing, education and transportation. Let me use a small example of the practical differences that that can entail. In the household of one of the USAID personnel, a leg was broken on the dining room table when the maid was careless in moving it. A craftsman from the US Embassy staff came out some 20 kilometers to fix her table. In comparison, when our faucet developed a leak we had to engage the services of a local plumber. He sent someone with three tools, but I had to supply the materials, supposedly a piece of string would do. Each time he came the problem got worse. At first all it would have needed was the appropriate washer, but eventually the whole faucet had to be replaced. The point is that most expatriates are cushioned from many of these problems. For instance, a geologist working with an oil company not only has a six digit

salary, but a house furnished with everything from a maid to a video tape recorder. While we could afford to spend a weekend at a luxury hotel, other expatriates would be there for months on end, waiting for their houses to be furnished. At first I considered that these expatriates were abusing the system and thus part of the under-development problem. I eventually came to see that these fringe benefits were necessary to keep them there. Even at that, people were often envious of those of us who could leave after a year. This does indicate that many expatriates, living in their foreigners' ghetto and supported by powerful international organizations, are somewhat removed from the society in which they live. While they had their harsh side, our experiences with finding housing, negotiating with landlords, purchasing a car, using local education facilities, fixing faucets, etc., did throw us into the society to a greater extent and allowed us to observe its operation.

### *Introduction to Tunisia*

Tunisia is a small country, 164,000 km<sup>2</sup> (twice the size of New Brunswick) with a population of 6.8 million. Though it is located between Algeria and Libya, no particularly large oil reserves have been found. Among its major sources of foreign currency are petroleum, phosphates, olive oil and tourism. It is not the poorest of countries; the per capita income of \$1,400 US puts it at almost twice the African average. After a long period as part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, it was a French colony from 1881 to 1956. The colonial demographic presence was rather strong, at about 10 percent from the 1920's to the early 1950's. Except in Palestine, South Africa and Algeria this demographic colonial presence was heavier than that experienced in other countries.

A leader who emerged during the independence struggles, and after whom every main street in the country is named, Habib Bourguiba, has been President ever since independence. The economy has been a mixture of state socialism and free enterprise capitalism. Actually, that mixture has fluctuated, with less socialism since the ousting of Ben Salah as Minister of Finance in 1969.

Because of the colonial presence and the subsequent developmental course, the French influence is clearly visible. In fact, of the 53 percent of the population aged ten and over that is literate, 71 percent are literate in both Arabic and French. At first, one can get the impression that things are very French and there follows certain expectations about how people will act and organizations will

work. Later, one realizes that this French element is more of a veneer, and that underneath things are fundamentally different. An important source of this difference is Islam. With the departure of Europeans and Jews, 99.2 percent of the population is Muslim. There is such a gulf between Islam and Christianity that it is difficult to have the common ground necessary for understanding. This was brought home to me early in my stay when a priest, who after 25 years in the country had become "the" expert on historical Tunisian literature, said that the longer he stays the more he realizes that he does not understand Islam. One thing very confusing for me was the mentality of both a generous desert hospitality and the spirit of the early followers of the Prophet who made their living by robbing foreign caravans. There is such a fundamental difference between Jesus, a mystic with so little political astuteness that he managed to get himself hung on a cross, and Mohammed, an immensely political person whose genius involved increasing the survival chances of groups living in a harsh geographic environment. That survival involves making alliances, but also dominating and exploiting other groups. Another area where Islam and Christianity are far apart is with regard to sexuality. For instance, the Christian view of heaven involves an eternal banquet with soft background music and much "brotherly" love. The Muslim view includes each man having 70 eternally beautiful virgins and each erection lasting 80 years. Muslims do not need anyone like Sigmund Freud or Hugh Hefner to remove the repression of the sexual part of their being. A final indication that I would use of the gulf is that there were no conversions to Christianity during the long colonial period. When one considers that many of the schools were run by religious congregations and that the French regime would have looked with favour on individuals who would have converted, the fact that there were no conversions is very difficult to understand.

### *Reconstituting the Childbearing Situation*

Tunisia's fertility situation has involved a decline from roughly seven to about five children per woman in the past 20 years, but the more recent change is slower (see Beaujot and Bchir, 1984). The proportion of women within childbearing ages using contraception is about 30 percent. These are remarkable changes that Tunisian sociologists did not expect 20 years ago (Seklani, 1967).

In what follows we will be making use of our own survey which involved open-ended questions, designed to encourage respondents to reveal the

reasoning behind their fertility attitudes and behaviour. It was conducted in rural and urban areas in March-April 1983 with a stratified cluster sample of 532 respondents — married, widowed and divorced, plus single people aged 25 and over. There were 222 men and 310 women, which included 182 couples where both husband and wife were interviewed. Our survey teams were composed of two women and two men, which allowed for separate interviews of female and male respondents.

An important observation, confirmed in several surveys, is that the ideal family size is around four children (see Table 1). When asked why they thought four was such a popular ideal, many of our respondents said that “it was not too many and not too few.” It was justified as a kind of optimum from an economic point of view, that way one can better raise them and take care of them. Others referred to

the social security system that provides family allowance to persons receiving regular salaries, but to a maximum of four children. Bourguiba has used the number of four children in speeches (Sahli, 1980: 86). Some even said that four was the “law of the government”. Most would want two of each sex, “so that the girl has a sister and the boy a brother”. For some, four means at least two boys, to ensure that at least one be available when he is needed to support the parents.

It is clear that support in old age is an important motivation for childbearing, as shown in Table 1, 47 percent gave this among three reasons for having children. Cain’s (1983) “safety-first model” of childbearing is relevant since the experience of child mortality remains real. Women aged 40 to 44 had 6.7 births and 5.5 surviving children (ONPFP, 1983: 88). Thus, having a fifth

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of Response to selected Questions on Childbearing, Tunisia, 1983**

	Men	Women	Both Sexes
	(all figures are percentages)		
<b>What is the ideal family size:</b>			
Two children	14.0	8.7	10.9
Three children	25.2	22.3	23.5
Four children	50.5	54.8	53.0
Five children	5.4	6.8	6.2
Six or more children	5.1	7.4	6.4
<b>Why are four children such a popular ideal:</b>			
It is an economic optimum	33.3	44.8	40.0
Family allowance stops at four	14.4	9.0	11.3
It is government policy	11.3	11.9	11.7
To have two of each sex	6.8	8.4	7.7
It is a popular ideal	12.2	9.0	10.3
It is not a popular ideal	14.9	6.5	10.0
Other	7.2	10.3	9.1
<b>Why do people have children (up to three reasons):</b>			
Children are the charm of life	17.1	15.2	16.0
Support in old age	42.3	51.0	47.4
To continue the name	25.7	11.0	17.1
Divine will	8.6	10.6	9.8
It is natural	12.6	13.2	13.0
To start a family	16.2	16.1	16.2
Children are a labour force	23.0	21.0	21.8
To avoid loneliness	7.7	21.3	15.6
For the community	12.2	5.5	8.3
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>532</b>

child is often an insurance against death. In fact, a number of people put it to us that way.

Three central themes (to be expanded later), sex roles, models of development and tribal loyalty, are important in understanding fertility. Sex roles is a fundamental concern in childbearing; in fact, about half of the change in the total fertility rate can be attributed to the changed marital status distribution resulting from an increased age at marriage for women. The delay of marriage, in turn, is associated with the laws on minimum age at marriage, but also with the greater levels of education and female labour force participation in the modern sector. In addition, the changed marital status distribution of women is partly due to an imbalance of the sexes at prime ages for marriage. With a five to seven year age difference at marriage and with a steep age pyramid, it follows that not everyone can be monogamously married. Statistics bear out that men have a strong advantage on the marriage market and some women may be staying single against their will. This is a serious matter when one considers the importance of marriage in Islam. There are popular sayings to the effect that "getting married accomplishes half of one's religious duty", or "no institution in Islam finds more favour with God than marriage", or "the evildoers in my nation are the bachelors in it" (IPPF, 1974: 539, 549). Thus, the marriage squeeze is working against women's equality in the marriage market.

For the women who are getting married, there is actually an increase in the fertility of the first five years of marriage (ONPFP, 1983: 79). In most cases, wives have little choice but to have children as soon as possible in order to insure the continuity of the marital bond. Clearly, the role of mother is a woman's central role, and other roles are legitimate only to the extent that they do not interfere with this role.

Issues of institutional tribal loyalty are relevant to understand some of the problems of Family Planning in Tunisia. While we found very few people who were against the very idea of family planning, some 30 percent were critical of services or methods available (Table 2). These criticisms took a variety of forms, some said that there were excessive distances to walk for services, others that the methods were poor, or that the personnel was inattentive, and others went as far as to say that Family Planning kills women. It is interesting that the perception of the problems with methods was not seen as an intrinsic difficulty with contraception at this stage of scientific development, but it was the very institution of Family Planning that

was seen as having poor methods. Some said that the positive side of methods had been stressed, and now the population has found out that they cause physical and psychological problems. When family planning field workers present an overly positive picture of methods, they are doing just like their directors in Tunis, who want to portray a positive picture of the institution of Family Planning in Tunisia. The unwillingness to accept criticism because it might undermine the whole institution, is itself a serious problem because it implies that one insufficiently admits to the negative side effects of contraceptive techniques. In my view, these issues of family planning and its institutionalization are also relevant to understanding why the total fertility rate is five while the ideal family size is four.

Another way in which the tribal spirit issue is relevant regards the place of family planning in the interplay between the elite and the masses. Family planning has been strongly pushed in Tunisia since 1964 when it was adopted as a national policy. As often happens, however the optimum family size is higher for couples than for the state. Boukraa (1976: 198) notes that the elite in power considers itself sufficiently powerful to impose its Malthusian and modern values on the society, and to create the structures necessary for their diffusion. In so doing, the elite can be accused of using family planning as a means of controlling the masses rather than being willing to make the more difficult development choices, especially those involving redistribution of income. Recall that in his summary of reasons for fertility decline, Freedman (1982: 266) makes the point that "social systems that involve the masses of the population are essential to provide the actual minimum changes in life conditions, to change aspirations and perceptions of the future, and to distribute the means of fertility limitation in acceptable ways." For many people, especially of rural Tunisia, these social systems for change are perceived as being for groups other than themselves. That is, many perceive that certain groups have attained power and used this to their own advantage to the point that modernizing Tunisia has ignored other groups. The groups that have attained higher standards of living can act as a clan that needs to protect itself from the demands and the population growth of the masses. Stated differently, the modern life style has penetrated into certain groups but not others. It would appear, in fact, that there is a restricted group that has rather quickly made a transition to a "modern" fertility behaviour of two to four children. At the same time, "tribal barriers" may be preventing



**TABLE 2**  
**Summary of Responses to Questions on Attitudes Toward Women Working,  
 Kinship in Spouse Selection and Criticisms of Family Planning, Tunisia, 1983**

	Men	Women	Both Sexes
	(all figures are percentages)		
<b>Attitude toward women working:</b>			
Simple agreement	5.9	10.3	8.5
Simple disagreement	10.8	5.2	7.5
Not appropriate to a woman's role	45.0	17.7	29.1
Acceptable if economic need	25.2	36.1	31.6
Acceptable if no problems with children	7.2	23.5	16.7
Good for woman's personal fulfillment	3.2	4.5	3.9
Other	2.7	2.6	2.6
<b>Kinship with spouse before marriage:</b>			
Child of respondent's uncle	20.0	24.1	22.4
Other paternal relation	2.3	5.6	4.2
Maternal relation	14.4	10.9	12.4
Unspecified cousins	9.3	9.2	9.3
From native village	2.8	2.3	2.5
Other non-relation	51.2	47.9	49.2
<b>Criticisms raised on family planning:</b>			
Related to health consequences	9.5	16.5	13.5
Related to quality of services	12.6	6.8	9.2
Related to both health and services	8.6	7.1	7.7
Total	30.6	30.3	30.5
<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>532</b>

such behaviour from diffusing to other segments of the population.

Turning to the conflict between Western and Islamic models of development, one can think of Tunisia, with its change and resistance to change, at somewhat of an unstable point in a transition between traditional and modern worlds. Many people see advantages in both worlds. They would like the higher consumption patterns of the modern world. On the other hand, there is a desire not to lose track of the true Islamic identity, and men in particular find advantages to traditional sex roles that put them in a dominant position. In a sense, four children can be seen as a compromise between these two worlds. A compromise is obviously unstable since it is not based in any particular value system and thus, when contraception poses problems, people can easily have more children. As has often been said, the costs of an additional child have to be weighed against the costs of contraception. In many cases where the mother is at home anyway, the cost of an additional child is not that

excessive, especially if the couple was not firmly convinced of the advantage of a smaller family in the first place. This helps to explain the observation that though almost half of fecund married women want no more children, there are only 43 percent who are using contraception (ONPFP, 1983: 94, 106).

One area where we observed considerable change was in the relative importance of the nuclear and extended family. The overwhelming majority (72 percent) thought living in nuclear families was better, to avoid problems and to allow more individual liberty. People were insistent that this did not involve abandoning one's parents. However, if we follow Lesthaeghe (1983), the rising importance of the nuclear family unit does mean a weakening of kinship and lineage authority over couples. The rationale for family size is thus more likely to relate to a given couple's actual economic possibilities and the welfare of their existing children in the nuclear family. We found that people justified limiting family size in exactly these

terms. The type of family organization is inter-linked with the extent of arranged marriages, lineage control and the husband-wife relation itself (Fox, 1975). Though we saw less evidence of change in the desire of fathers to control the marriage of their daughters, and in the desire of husbands to have the upper hand in the marital relationship, the fact that these institutional patterns are linked would imply that the cycle of change started with nucleation will continue.

For many, however, the change in family patterns is minimal and the Davis (1984) explanation for a slowdown in the fertility decline of several countries would appear to be relevant. While there are no great advantages in having more than four or five children, as long as the traditional institutional patterns favouring children persist, people do not want to have really small families.

### *Discussion*

In order to achieve a fuller explanation of these Tunisian fertility dynamics, it is necessary to discuss them in the context of aspects of the Tunisian value profile. It is through my daily field experiences and through more general features of Tunisian society, that I came to appreciate some of the wider issues that seemed to be needed to interpret the fertility situation. As already indicated, these wider themes to be discussed now involve sex roles, models of development and tribal loyalties.

### *Sex Roles*

Sex roles is a central dimension through which to view a society, intersecting as it does between biology and social structure. It was Tunisia's reputation for policies on gender equality that particularly excited me about going there; Tunisia is often cited as a country where there have been many changes in these roles.

First let me make a few statements relating to the place of women in traditional Islam. In *Sexualité en Islam*, Bouhdiba (1979: 20) says that the primacy of man over woman is in effect total and absolute. The woman comes from the man in the sense that God created man from whom he then took his spouse. The woman is chronologically second. It is in man that she finds her final meaning. She is made for his satisfaction, for his rest and for his fulfillment. According to the Koran, men are superior to women and have authority over them... "the women from whom you fear rebelliousness, you can reprimand, you can leave them

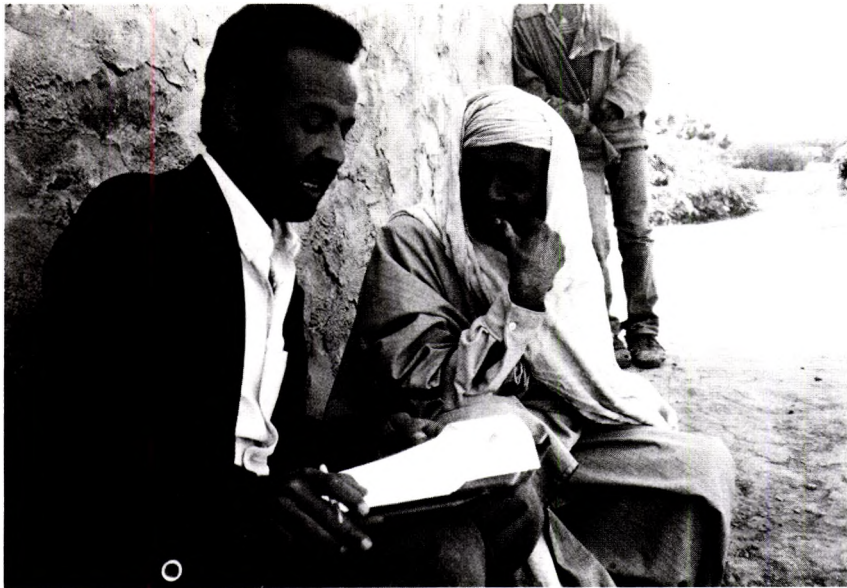
alone in bed or you can even beat them" (ibid). In *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi (1975: xv) argues that there is a fundamental contradiction between Islam as interpreted in official policy and equality of the sexes. She goes on: "Islam fears the power of female sexual attraction over men. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties." Society can only survive by creating the institutions which foster male dominance through sexual segregation, arranged marriage, and a marital bond that is in the man's power to create or destroy (ibid pp. 4, 14).

It is in this context that Tunisia's Personal Status Code, adopted within a year of independence, is frequently cited as a very liberating document. This code abolished polygamy and the man's unilateral right to repudiate his wife, introduced women's right for divorce, set minimum age limits on marriage, and required that the prospective bride give her consent for marriage. In *La femme tunisienne*, Chater (1978) speaks of this period as a time of changes that were accepted by the society as part of the independence movement. She goes on to suggest that the emancipation of women is one of the more tangible aspects of the renaissance in Tunisian society (ibid p. 12).

Much has been written about this Personal Status Code. It is cited as an indication of Tunisia's willingness to adopt changes that are oriented toward progress and modernity (Zghal, 1981: 59). It was, in effect, a sweeping effort to modernize traditional family patterns and provide equal rights to women. On the other hand, the relevance of this legislative effort should not be exaggerated. While laws are important, they are often rather removed from the day-to-day factors that influence people's lives. It is still women who do what appears to be the most onerous regular physical task in rural areas, that of carrying firewood on their backs. In poor families, boys are more likely to be wearing shoes than girls. In the towns it is the men who are in the cafes. At first, one finds it surprising to see only men in these places of leisure. You realize that you have internalized the local norm when you react with shock to see a woman walking in the street as if she belonged there. The fact is that the public domain is man's domain. A woman being harassed on the street or in a crowded bus has no recourse, because, in effect, she does not belong there. This is not to say that there are no women on the streets, but they must have a definite purpose to justify their intrusion into a domain that is not really theirs.

The Personal Status Code can be viewed as an attempt by the state to limit the family domain by





Interviewing in the southern Gouvernorat of Gafsa. Once a randomly selected cluster had been identified in the field, the local people were questioned in order to obtain a complete list of households in the cluster. Four households were then selected at random for interviewing, with the men in the team interviewing the male respondents and the women interviewing the female respondents. Since the men were typically interviewed outside and the women inside, the interference of spouses in each other's responses was minimal.



making rules relating to marrying and divorcing. However, it can also be viewed as an affront to men who previously ruled supreme by having complete control over the marriage bond. As one man put it, "the woman should not have the right to divorce because it is the man who marries the woman thus it is his right to divorce her." From a survey of attitudes to change, Tessler *et al.* (1978b) conclude that while Tunisia remains one of the Arab countries where women have made the greatest advances, the future of women's liberation is not encouraging because men in particular are opposed to women's emancipation. In the man's ideology, there are two roles for a woman, either a mother, who is sacred and untouchable, or a seducer, who is both feared and pursued (Zamiti, 1981: 242). It is only through marriage, childbearing and the onset of age that a woman attains purity (Boucebci, 1979). In poor sectors, the woman's salary is conceptually close to the proceeds of prostitution (Mernissi, 1981: 20). In our survey, 56 percent of men were opposed to women working, the main reason given was that it was contrary to a woman's role (see also Table 2 presented earlier). Among those who were in favour of women working, the majority reason given was that it was acceptable if there was an economic need for her to work.

Thus, there are a number of conflicts in Tunisian society over the question of sex roles. There are conflicts between the state's interest in limiting the family domain in order to exercise more control over the society, and men's interest in retaining an institutional arrangement that works to their benefit. It is especially women who feel these conflicts in their daily lives. Girls are expected to go to school and are supposedly free to participate in a broad range of activities. Yet, they are also expected to stay away from the street and to avoid being visible to (non-family) men. Young men want to interact with women who are free and open, but require a virgin when it comes time for marriage. As one woman put it, "the modern work-world brings me to a social barrier that I cannot cross." The easiest way to deal with this conflict is to give priority to family roles that have defined women's place in society for generations. Of course, Tunisia is not unique in this regard. The traditional patriarchal Western family also stops most women from equal participation in the world beyond the household.

### *Conflict Regarding Models of Development*

Let me turn from conflicts felt in Tunisian society over sex roles to conflicts over models of development. Being a man, the issues of sex roles

were not felt very directly; my wife could talk much more eloquently about the problems posed for women. Conflict over models of development were more immediate to me in my professional work.

Before going to Tunisia I had been inspired by Caldwell (1976) who speaks of the diffusion of the Western model of the family. I had expected, given for instance the strong links with France, the level of literacy in European languages and the number of people who had been "guest workers" in Europe, that Tunisia could well be a country where Caldwell's diffusion ideas would apply. In some regards, foreigners are seen as models for behaviour and social organization. For instance, one frequently hears the West referred to as "la société de consommation". This expression has both positive and negative connotations. There is a desire to achieve higher levels of consumption for oneself, but there is also criticism of consumerism as the supreme value. Thus, while there is a desire to emulate the West, I came to perceive that there are important counter forces, which sometimes touched me rather personally as a representative of the Western world. For instance, would that be the reason why after being invited by a senior demographer to give a talk at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Économiques et Sociales, I find at the appointed hour that not only he is not available but he has not announced the colloquium? Another problem was that, though I had gone expressly with the idea of cooperating with and helping the research team at the Office, the junior researchers were little interested in establishing exchanges with me. I had a strong interest in the Tunisian World Fertility Survey, yet they would not let me see draft versions of the chapters. In fact, there was a time, some four months into my stay when I seriously feared that the only thing I would get out of the year was the experience of frustration in the face of my attempted research efforts. I decided to keep a diary so that I could at least document this experience. Let me suggest that a dimension underlying my professional difficulties is the very conflict inherent in Tunisian society between, let us say Western and Islamic models of development. People are often not even consciously aware of this conflict, yet it influences their behaviour.

It would appear that the pendulum was swung a few times in regard to models of development in Tunisia. During the period of struggle for independence, Islam was used as a force to solicit popular consensus in opposition to the colonial rule. For instance, by considering the family as a sacred ground inaccessible to strangers, and by forbidding the marriage of women to non-Muslim men, the

society was guarding itself against assimilation to the French regime. When a woman, for the first time, removed her veil in public during a socialist party meeting in 1929, Bourguiba condemned her action saying that the veil is "our individuality" and "our distinctive symbol" (Chater, 1978: 7). More generally, in speaking about the forces that prevented permanent submersion into the French regime, Rouissi (1977: 72, 91) points to "Islam" and "demographic vitality". Similarly, Bouhdiba (1973: 158) notes that "what we especially notice in the colonial period is the importance of Islam as a force for authenticity and as a vigilant guardian of the original personality of the nation."

With independence, as already noted, the leadership was quite willing to oppose tradition in its attempt to introduce modernization (Boukraa, 1976). As Bchir (1981: 79) puts it, the state attempted to create a "new man." In view of this objective, schooling was extended to all segments of society, the economy was restructured and religion was adapted to the modern world. All aspects of social life were touched. The high point, many would say the last straw, of this swing was probably in 1960 when, as is frequently quoted, Bourguiba opposed the tradition of the month's fast for the Ramadan by drinking orange juice in public. More generally, it can be said that the political elite has been trying to use Islamic tradition to their advantage. They have both opposed it in attempts to establish greater state control, and used it to generate mass political consensus (Marshall, 1979). For instance, the President is called the Supreme Commander, that is, "Allah's earthly lieutenant" (Charfi, 1973).

Since the early 1970s, however, the forces for tradition have been gaining some momentum. Tessler *et al.* (1978a: 309) argue that the government has abandoned much of its earlier commitment to planned social and cultural transformation. In education, there has been a strong policy for "Arabization". The strongest proponents of the Arabization push are the adherents to Islamic revivalism. Here, far from wanting to be inspired by a Western model of development, the West is blamed for the economic and moral crisis (Ben Achour, 1981). More generally, there is a real basis for inter-generational conflict, as the locally educated youth, who are frustrated in their attempts at social mobility, can come to see not only the West, but the Westernized elite, as the source of their problem (Zghal, 1982). The current elite was often educated in Europe, in fact there are a number of European wives, and they had good mobility opportunities with the departure of the

colonial population after independence. The young educated people do not face these mobility prospects and they can be prompted to convert their Arabic education into a conviction of the value of an Islamic approach to the society's problems.

While the militant Islamic group is a small minority, they can touch important chords in the society. Islam can always call on the monopoly of human energies, on planes relating to both this world and the next. It is often said that in Islam the church and state distinction is not recognized. As Bouhdiba (1973: 157) has put it, "en terre d'Islam, rien ne peut être mis entre parenthèses." If religion is seen as the ultimate basis of identity, then an appeal can forcefully be made for a return to Islamic ideals after a period of alien-inspired deviations (Lewis, 1983).

At meetings of the Maghreb Population Society, someone concluded that all development models are currently under question. Yet there is a search for an appropriate model, often called at these meetings a "projet de société". It was frequently suggested that the Western model would not work and there was need for a model that would be true to their society. Beyond that, very little could be elaborated. One thing is fairly clear, the Caldwell idea of Westernization, and with it the diffusion of the small family model, presents difficulties when applied to Tunisia. As some social scientists said in an interview, the Western attitude engrafts poorly upon the Tunisian. Yet, the dilemma of a model of development remains. The very idea of becoming modern is easily confused with the idea of becoming Westernized. Laroui, for example, has said, each time an Arabic writer criticizes the deficiencies of his society, it is an image of the West that is implicated (cited in Bchir, 1981: 81). Thus, the dilemma is fundamental and it is not surprising that a Westerner wanting to be involved in cooperative research would run into the corresponding road blocks.

### *Tribal Loyalties*

I have talked considerably about Islam as a source of unity in Tunisia. Rouissi (1977: 26) speaks of it as "le grand rassembleur des sociétés au Maghreb." I think it is important to speak of a kind of tribal loyalty or clanishness as a source of disunity. Rouissi (1977: 33) puts it as follows:

tribalism is more than a mode of economic organization and more than a pre-urban state, it is a mode of political organization and of relations of power.



Ibn Khaldoun had made this clanishness the organizing principle of his theory of society. Writing in the Fourteenth century, he saw society as composed of rival clans, the most powerful of which obtains control of the town and thus dominates the surrounding area, until it degenerates and is replaced by another from the more dynamic countryside. Thus renewal always flows from the countryside to the centre. But also, each clan attempts to maintain its distance from the central power in order to be in a better position to take over when circumstances permit.

This mentality of tribal loyalty is relevant to a variety of issues including kinship, regionalism and institutional organization. Regarding families, 19 percent of marriages are cousin marriages. In most cases in this patrilineal society, the boy marries his paternal uncle's daughter (INS, 1976: 187). In our survey, almost half of the respondents were related to their spouse before marriage, including 22 percent who were first cousins through their fathers (see Table 2 presented earlier). Thus, women are kept in the family in spite of marriage. In addition, it is accepted practice to use one's influence to place family members in positions over which one has control, even in government. Regarding regionalism, there is a strong sense of loyalty to one's place of origin. For instance, a disproportionate number of cabinet ministers are from Monastir, the home of the President. On another level, the administrative elite that has come to dominate the country itself acts like a clan whose priority is "establishing and defending the special interests of their own new class" (Amin, 1970: 245). This elite, which is often referred to as "le groupe au pouvoir" must always, by the very politics of the situation, fear the overthrow of the system they have so carefully built. While people are very loyal when they have to be, one senses that the edifice could crumble as basic loyalties involve this "tribal spirit". Thus the so-called food riots in January of 1984 were quickly perceived by the government as explosive and appropriate adaptations were made to control the situation (Baltar and Deure, 1984).

This tribal loyalty is also relevant to institutions. For instance, the institution of Family Planning must be politically very careful to defend its existence and its independence from, for instance, the Ministry of Health. The criticism is raised among the health personnel that Family Planning is rich due to foreign funding and does not share its resources with the rest of the health sector. There is strong resistance to an integrated health and family planning sector where family

planning would be subordinated to other aspects of basic health care (a la Warwick, 1982). In defending itself, the Family Planning Institution paints a very positive picture of itself to the outside world. The methods of contraception are themselves seen by the public as the methods of the Family Planning Institution. When the methods do not live up to expectations, the whole institution of Family Planning is criticized. In addition, this institutional tribal loyalty can undermine the very idea of providing service. After all, the first objective of a clan is to serve its members. We had numerous occasions to be "rubbed the wrong way" by this aspect of Tunisian institutional structure. People whose function apparently involves serving the public often act as though the public is an interference in their lives. On the other hand, once you are no longer a stranger, and institutional loyalties have been extended to include you, they will do anything for you.

This issue is relevant to interpreting some of my problems with my host institution. I was valued as someone who might bring resources, but also feared as someone who could undermine the institution because my loyalties could not be assured. Given the extent to which family planning is supported by international funds, my undermining their image in the donor community would be particularly problematic. Given these dangers, I now have reason to believe that high level management directed the junior research personnel not to share too much with me for fear that I would use this against them.

I have paid insufficient attention to the positive side of this tribal spirit. Notice that it implies that families, kin networks, regional affiliations and institutions are important sources of security for individuals. Tribalism can be very important to new migrants to the city, as it gives them access to a variety of resources. In effect, it is a system of social security and social control. This tribal spirit also implies that Tunisians are very politically astute; that is, they recognize relations of power as fundamental means through which groups are differentiated in society. While we tend to think of salary as a function of ability, they are much more likely to think that it is a function of one's position in these relations of power. This fundamental perception, which I would call political astuteness, guides behaviour as "tribal groups" however defined, sometimes compete and sometimes create alliances in order to better their chances in the social hierarchy. As an example of how different the perceptions can be across cultural lines, let me use the idea of charity. My wife and I were shocked on a

social occasion when people undermined the International Development Research Centre for its charitable attitude: "these people give and expect nothing in return, how very laughable, that is simply not the way the world operates." The next day at church the priest was making one of the usual appeals regarding charity as the supreme value. That was a culture shock for us. Even those of us who are not religious or who might notice the selfish aspects of charity, have taken this charity talk along with our mother's milk. We would not fundamentally find charity laughable. But the Tunisians are right, that is not the way the world operates, it operates through relations of power, and giving normally serves the purpose of establishing other people's loyalties. I think these issues of charity and power are central to the difference between the teachings of Jesus and Mohammed.

### Conclusion

While much of this paper is a critical examination of aspects of Tunisian society, we should not be blind to the broader implications of these observations. When scarcity is endemic, certain groups tend to suffer more than others and often these oppressed groups are women and children. In the West also, sex roles remain resistant to change, as the patriarchal family prevents most women from equal participation in the modern world. Underdevelopment is a harsh reality in which we are all implicated. If, as some critics argue, there is only one development model, that of the world capitalist system, then development involves an imposition of modes of behaviour evolved elsewhere and for the benefit of other groups (Wallerstein, 1974). It should not be surprising that institutional arrangements work poorly when imposed on, or adopted by, a society very different from those where these institutions were first evolved. Such are central problems of underdevelopment itself and I am grateful to the managers of the Office for allowing me to see some of these things from the inside. It is a rare privilege to be admitted to a foreign institution, and if the experience had its negative side, both for me and for them, let me suggest that these difficulties are but part of the very problems of underdevelopment.

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