

## ***Otherness in Tunisia: black minority's forgotten identities***

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### ***1. Being black in Tunisia: a few data and some facts***

Black Tunisians account for the 10% to 15% of Tunisian population, according to the last surveys (Grewal 2018)<sup>1</sup>. This uncertainty concerning the current presence of blacks results from current Tunisian census modes, which do not include skin color as a factor; moreover, the total lack of diachronic statistical accounts makes it hard to trace a chronological development of black people presence in Tunisia. Data about the geographical distribution across the country are also poor, although historically the black community in South Tunisia has been always more consistent than in the North, particularly in the regions around Sfax, Gabes, Douz, Kebili, Djerid, Médenine and Tataouine (Abdelhamid 2018).

It is essential to remark that this consistent minority of people with sub-Saharan physiognomy and darker complexion is expression of multiple ethnic phenomena: some of them are Tuareg, a Berberic nomadic ethnicity living in the oasis on the fringes of the desert or in the southern part of the country; others are recent-days immigrants from French-speaking Africa moved to Tunisia for study or work reasons; others, possibly the most part, identify themselves as Tunisians and are the descendants of sub-Saharan slaves deported during the slave-trade era (XVI–XIX centuries)<sup>2</sup>.

Given the extension of the concept of "blackness" in Tunisia, we deem necessary to make a point about the notion of "black" as it is intended in this essay. As it is widely accepted by contemporary anthropology, there are no biological markers supporting the evidence of the existence of discreet groups across humankind, and phenotypes are not a sufficient foundation

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<sup>1</sup> According to a statistics reported by Bahri (1992), they would sum up to 50000 individuals, a number wide enough for holding them as a minority.

<sup>2</sup> Sub-Saharan people entering Tunisia as immigrants after the abolition of slavery (1846) are not in the scope of this discussion, since, though sharing common cultural roots, the historical events moulded their identities in totally different ways.

to justify the reference to the idea of a "biological race". Hence, we use here the term "black" to define a relative and flexible category bound to ethnicity more than race: relative since the individuals fall in that category due to contextual factors and not solely on the basis of physical features – therefore a person in Tunisia can be perceived as "black" despite the color of her skin, but only based on her family tree, the fact that she belongs to the black community and/or occupies a specific social position which defines her, by *relation*, in a group different from the "white"; bound to ethnicity in the sense that all the people grouped under this label must share a common historical and ethnic background in order to be identified as members of a group – in this case the dynamics developed starting from the slave-trade era. These dynamics led to the formation of the black Tunisian identity as we know it today.

Black Tunisians identify themselves as Tunisians and do not claim to be acknowledged as a minority (Abdelhamid 2018); they speak Tunisian Arabic as a first language and – except for some vestigial traits found in the folklore, which we will discuss later – they do not relate to their sub-Saharan cultural heritage. Despite the claims of "tunisianity" and though the official abolition of slavery dates back to 1843, undebatable inequalities between the "black" and the "white" are still found in present-day Tunisia, and on different levels. Again, statistics are missing or incomplete: the matter of the inequality between black and white people has been brought up to the attention of the media or social networks mostly after the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, when other minorities in Tunisia – homosexuals, Jews and Amazighs (Abdelhamid 2018) to name a few – took advantage of the wave of riots to assert their rights to the Tunisian government. Before then, attempts to raise awareness about the black matter were scarce and mostly led by unorganized, popular movements – if not by single individuals<sup>3</sup> – and structured actions to collect evidence about the unequal treatment of black people has never been taken until very recently (Abdelhamid 2018). In adjunct to the past lack of interest, the difficulty in making scientific comparisons between the different ethnic groups in Tunisia draws also from the fact that Tunisian census does not make a distinction based on ethnicity or race. For the Tunisian bureaucracy black Tunisians are, *de facto*, non-existent.

Most of the sources we rely on are newspapers or magazine articles, therefore the tone of the discussion which follows might sound quite anecdotal, often lacking multiple scientific

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning the case of Slim Marzoug, a black Tunisian who in the 60's actively led a campaign against the unequal treatment of the black in Tunisia and tried to form a political party of only black representatives. After giving some speech to the black communities in South Tunisia, his project failed due to the governmental opposition which led to his 30-years psychiatric institutionalization ( Mrad Dali, 2009).

support and a wider outlook on Tunisian society: anyway we believe it can provide a good impression of the issue under focus and, we hope, can stimulate a deeper research and a broader reflection on this century's wound.

The first most striking difference concerns the black Tunisians' social status: they are the population group of choice for heavy work, low-wage jobs or, in the case of women, for housekeeping jobs. Not all the poor are black, but most of the black Tunisians are poor and today it is rare to find wealthy individuals with liberated slaves in their family tree. As we mentioned earlier, statistics are not available due to the official national policy for census, but looking at the proportion of black versus white students in university, which is way lower than the proportion of black versus white people in the country, one may already draw some assumptions about the disparity in educational level across the two groups (Abdelhamid 2018).

A division is outlined even spatially, as black people are usually clustered together in the poorest and most degraded areas of the city and end up forming some sort of unofficial black "ghettos". On the island of Djerba, a section of the city cemetery, named "cemetery of the slaves", is still used by the descendants of the ancient slaves, who are not allowed to bury their dears but in this dedicated area (la Croix 2018).

Even though Djerba's case might be considered a sort of historical relic, being Djerba a relatively isolated corner of the country, there is further evidence of this segregation in Tunisian social tissue: it is almost taboo for black people proposing to white and since they are forced to marry within their community this reinforces the boundary of their cast, rendering them sorts of "pariah" with no or little mobility to a different status (Diallo 2013).

A common observation made by the supporters of black people's cause is that, despite the official measures taken to turn down racism, the language still reflects a "slaver thought": in Tunisian Arabic the terms to refer colloquially to black people are "abd" ("slave"), "kahlouch" ("blacky") or "oussif" ("slave") (Abdelhamid 2018, Bellamin 2014). According to white people's common belief it is common to find a set of stereotypes about black people which, though defensible as typical within-country mockeries between different ethnic groups, reveal an obvious derogatory attitude towards black people: black people would be more suitable for heavy work due to their body structure; it is a common say that black women are of loose morals, because black people are considered savages with promiscuous habits – and this often leads to black women becoming target of sexual harassment; moreover, the presence of black people at ceremonies like weddings and baptisms is believed to protect from bad eye and, as

they can be endowed with supernatural powers and be able to spell away "jinns"<sup>4</sup> (Karass 2015) – this aspect deserves a deeper anthropological discussion, which will be addressed later.

## 2. «From slavery to servitude»: before and after the sub-Saharan slave trade

After presenting a quick overview of black Tunisians' condition in present-day Tunisia, in this section we will go through some historical details to better understand the dynamics which contributed to the make-up of the "black Tunisian" identity. It is essential to stress that the ongoing social situation is nothing but the result of an equation between a past marked by historical processes, in our scenario the slave-trade, and the peculiar context in which these processes happened, namely Islamic Northern Africa.

The slave trade between sub-Saharan Africa and Northern Africa, also referred to as the Arab trade, started as early as XI century: by that age until the half of XIX century, caravans travelled across the Sahara desert and brought jewelry, wild animals and precious stones together with indigenous captives. The captives were abducted from an area which encompassed the whole African continent, ranging from the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Gao and Bornou. The main slave routes crossing the desert were the western one, leading to Morocco and the eastern one, passing through Tripolitania – current Libya – and ending in Khairouan, the greatest trade hub of Northern Africa at those times; once reached the port of Tunis, the goods continued their travel oversea across the Mediterranean, eventually reaching the Ottoman Empire, whose Tunisia was a protectorate from 1574 to 1881 (Montana 2013).

It is worth noting that Islam allows slavery only if the enslaved individuals are non-Islamic, therefore legitimizing captives in the context of *jihad*:<sup>5</sup> the fact that the majority of sub-Saharan people practised the cult *bori*, a form of animism of Hausa origins, allowed Islamic people to hold them as war prisoners without violating the Islamic law<sup>6</sup>.

Once in Tunisia, the slaves were sold in the weekly slave market held in the capital, in an area of the suq called "suq al-birqa", and usually purchased by rich Islamic merchants or court officials<sup>7</sup>. Compared to slaves by other ethnic and geographical origins, black people were

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<sup>4</sup> Jinns are folkloric figures of pre-Islamic origin conceived as supernatural entities responsible for diseases and possessions (Omidisalar 2000).

<sup>5</sup> This means that slaves had to be taken outside the Islamic borders. The Quran and the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) discuss extensively the issue of slavery and the treatment of slaves: Islam conceives slavery as lawful if the conditions we mentioned were met, but the slaves had to be treated in a human, respectful way in accordance with Islamic moral.

<sup>6</sup> This same theological justification applied in the case of Christian slaves, who the so-called Mamelouks.

<sup>7</sup> By law, free Christians and Jews could not own slaves.

usually assigned to domestic service, whereas we know that Mamelouks, the famous Christian slaves employed as a military force, could be appointed with high functions in the court or, once freed, could even become members of Tunisian noble families or aspire to a position in Tunisian aristocracy (Mrad Dali 2005). Nonetheless, as Mrad Dali (2005) and Montana (2013) remark, black slaves were not integrated in the economic structure of the city, as their occupational domain was limited to housekeeping and they did not take part in activities directly linked to the growth of the country: according to a research led in 1964, at the time the city guilds did not summon slaves within their ranks, so that even the most physical occupations remained a matter of "free Tunisians" (Judet 1965). This close and an almost "familiar" transmission of the guilds' know-how may have played a role in the current marginality of black people in Tunisia.

The abolition of slavery was legally determined by a decree issued in 1846 by Ahmed bey (1837–1855), the tenth Husayinid ruler of Tunisia. This decision, as Mrad Dali (2013) points out in his discussion on the relationship between the Bey and the Western World, was possibly due to Ahmed's attempt to modernize Tunisian society in order to improve the political relationships with European countries – and, as Mrad Dali underlines, in that same period the first European abolitionist movements were arising. Moreover, in order to keep this decree within the boundaries of Islamic law, Ahmed needed to provide a sound exegetical foundation, which he gained by referring to the Quran and the Sunna and by having a team of Quranic scholars who commented the verses and quotations as an anticipation of the Bey's political move. What he appeals to in his letter to the Islamic 'ulama – jury of religious scholars acting as "guardians" of the Islamic law – is the idea of "tashawwuf ila al-'urriyya", namely the "aspiration towards freedom", which is deemed to be a leading tenet of Islam and a guiding concept frequently preached by the Prophet himself: given the orientation towards universal liberty, a step as the abolition of slavery acquires value inasmuch God's revelation<sup>8</sup>. As a matter of fact, with this decree Tunisia could claim to be the first country in Northern Africa to abrogate slavery. However, the volition which gave birth to the decree did not come from the people: for former slaves' owners the abolition of slavery would have meant a loss of workforce; likewise, black slaves would have found themselves homeless and with neither economic nor social support to be integrated in Tunisian society.

The lack of a positive response from the people following this first promulgation made it

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<sup>8</sup> Even though in the Sunna and in the Hadith there is no reference to the obligation of eradicating the social institution of slavery.

necessary to issue a second decree in 1890. Things seemed unchanged in people's attitude and the French protectorate deemed necessary to remark the illegality of any form of slavery<sup>9</sup>. As a consequence, the patrons were forced to free their slaves and provide the legal proof in the form of a manumission letter, who was handed to their former slaves. Even then, the freed slaves usually remained at their patrons' house and were assigned to domestic works, since for them this was far more convenient than living a life as peddlers or beggars.

New phenomena developed after the abolition of slavery further show that the only change which black Tunisians underwent was a transition from slavery to servitude (Mrad Dali 2013). "Mrubbin" were black slaves' children whose livelihood at the patron's house could not be paid back by their parents. As a consequence, they remained at the former owner's house and worked as housekeepers; nowadays, the mrubbin tradition has been dismissed, but it is not unusual for wealthy families to take as foster children the daughters of needy families of black descent to later assign them to domestic tasks.

In the context of rural areas, a form of share cropping, the "khammesat", developed. The development of share cropping usually resulted from the former slaves owing a sum of money to their patron and choosing to pay the debt by working in the patron's field. In exchange, they were allowed to live in his territory and keep a part of the crop. Quitting the khammesat would have forced the "khammes" – the share croppers – to pay up in cash, a thing that they could not afford or simply was deemed unprofitable, because overall the black servants regarded the khammesat as a "relationship of mutual satisfaction" (Mrad Dali 2013).

Other relics of this servile past can be seen today in the family structure in the way it is found in Southern Tunisia<sup>10</sup>: within an individual family, where all the members share the same family name, one can find a "white" and a "black" branch, the latter descending from family's former slaves who remained with their patron, and now in a relationship of concealed servitude with the white branch. Though they all belong to the same family group, the two branches do not have an equal relationship. For instance, the members of the black line often show at the family celebrations as *factotum* for the most humble tasks; or else, Mrad Dali (2013) reports that there have been cases of polynuclear families moving from the South to the capital to modernize and start a family business; the black branch followed the white in the capital and even started the business with their white relatives; nevertheless, no change

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<sup>9</sup> The text of the decree of 1890 says: «l'esclavage n'existe pas et est interdit dans la Régence ; toutes créatures humaines, sans distinction de nationalités ou de couleurs, y sont libres et peuvent également recourir, si elles se croient lésées, aux lois et aux magistrats» (National Archive of Tunisia, historical section, paper 230, article 421).

<sup>10</sup> Mrad Dali (2013) speaks about «la quasi-totalité de la région sud du pays».

occurred at the level of familiar hierarchy and in the new business there were only white managers and black workforce. The members of the black branch of such families are identified by the same patronymic than the white one, therefore remarking a condition of past – if not covertly present – ownership.

### 3. *When religion moulds an identity: why Arabs rejected their Africanity*

Since the early abolition of 1846, many scholars agree in saying that not much has changed. It is though fundamental to underline that, even though White Tunisians' racial prejudice certainly plays a great role, also black people's lack of coordinated efforts affects the ongoing situation. Following the Jasmin Revolution of 2010, black people's commitment in standing for their rights made less impact on the media, if compared with that of other ethnic and social minorities in Tunisia – see, among others, homosexuals and Amazigh people – which somehow managed to unite and bring on the media the complaint about the discrimination they suffer (Diallo 2013). As we introduced at the beginning of last section, the current situation is the result of several factors. Here we will make a reflection about how black people's lack of reference to their cultural origins prevented them to create a narrative upon which they could lay the foundation of an individual identity, and how this has intertwined with the contextual Islamic negrophobia deeply entrenched in Tunisian mindset.

The historian Salah Trabelsi (2019) proposes an interesting reading of the reasons why Tunisians confined black people to such a marginal position, retrieving its origin in the early attitude of Arabs to separate themselves from the rest of the African world. From the age of the invasion of Northern Africa, Arabs have considered Sahara as a sort of separation belt between them and the "bilal as-sudani", "the land of the blacks", home to pagan and wild people, according to their conception. This idea was conveyed to converted indigenous people, who therefore tried to distance themselves from their Berber roots, as the Berbers had been ideologically segregated in that realm of incivility to which also sub-Saharan people belonged.

During the Middle Ages all sorts of evidence was brought to support this identity-related dichotomy, and the negrophobia got to the point that Northern African Islamic nobles made up fake genealogies featuring ancestors from the Arabic peninsula, in order «to "whiten" their origin» (Trabelsi 2019) and perpetrate a systematic *damnatio memoriae* of their Berber ancestors. By rejecting their "Africanity", Northern African people's identity progressively consolidated around a religious core. All that is in line with Islam was deemed lawful, hence moral: this enhanced the rise of a moral versus amoral polarity which ended up equating with

the Islamic versus pagan one. In order to support this position, Islamic medieval theology later brought as evidence of the pagan unlawfulness some hadith of the Prophet asserting that (quote in French from Trabelsi's article):

*«Il n'existe, nulle part au monde, des êtres aussi répugnants que les Berbères. Quand même je n'aurais rien à distribuer comme aumône, si ce n'est la poignée de mon fouet, je serais plus enclin à la donner plutôt que d'affranchir un esclave berbère».*

This tells how deep was this «obsessional complex» (Trabelsi *ibidem*) for Northern African Muslims.

The strong formation of an Arabic identity did not correspond to a kindred process in the sub-Saharan territory, which encompassed a plethora of small ethnic groups, each with its own dialect and traditions, but without the experience of a unifying force as was the one provided by Islam, which by that time was eagerly building a powerful architecture based on religious, moral, ethical, scientific and linguistic systems and a solid written tradition. With such a background it is not surprising that the descendants of African slaves ended up being on one hand marginalized by the Arabs, on the other nullified in their cultural specificity.

This brings us back to the peculiar position of black Tunisians in their demand for integration: their strategy to be acknowledged by Tunisian public opinion does not focus on the recovering of their cultural origins, as it is the case for Amazigh people and Jews, but rather on the attempt to be incorporated in a society who still refuses to consider them as Tunisians as they see themselves.

#### 4. *Stambeli: relics of a sub-Saharan heritage*

Tunisian post-colonial political programs certainly played a role in the global tendency to ethnic levelling: after 1956, at the end of the French protectorate era, the Tunisian government worked hard to mold from scratch a new model of "Tunisianity", and all the minorities were an obvious hindrance to the promotion of the idea of a unified Nation<sup>11</sup>.

This program of secularization turned into an ideological warfare against all exogenous Islamic cults, therefore many religious expressions ceased to be, including some Sufi sects

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<sup>11</sup> «La trajectoire tunisienne s'inscrit en cela dans un processus plus global, puisque la création ou la restauration des États nationaux riment souvent avec un discours politique unitaire et reposent également sur le développement d'instruments destinés à porter le projet national.» (Mrad Dali 2015, p. 63)

and many folk rituals which were somehow eccentric with respect to the Islamic Sunna. During the actualization of this program black people have been repeatedly on the verge of losing their identity once and for all, as the last surviving traditions imported from their ancestors' culture into Tunisian cultural heritage have been endangered by the Tunisian government itself. This has been the case for the tradition of communal houses – in Arabic "dari", "dar" meaning "house" – congregational hub for freed slaves spread all over the Tunisian territory and established from the early XVIII century (Jankowski 2014). Each house was a point of reference for a distinct group of the sub-Saharan ethnic landscape and offered a place to stay for freed slaves and migrants, as well as being the hosting place of "stambeli" ceremonies, traditional healing rituals playing an important role in the strengthening of the social tissue within black communities<sup>12</sup>.

Though during Bourgiba's office the dar network progressively shrank to the point of disappearing<sup>13</sup>, stambeli has managed to survive to the waves of modernization until our days. The original stambeli was a ritual performed to heal people from several kinds of physical ailments deemed to be caused by supernatural entities; the patients could recover by falling into a trance and being possessed by the entities responsible for their ailments; during the ritual the entities started with some characters a negotiation to abandon the patients' body; if the entities accepted to leave the body the patients were healed. In addition to the possessor spirits, other characters could show up during the trance playing the role of helpers in the healing process.

The central figures of the ceremony were a priestess, the "arifa", acting as a medium between this world and the spirits and in charge of judging which spirit was responsible for the ailment and which cure was needed, and a group of musicians. Some of them played the "shkashek" – castanet-like iron percussion – and was headed by the master of the ceremony, the "maalem", who directed the musical performance and played the guembri – a three-stringed guitar of African origins – or the "tebl" – a small drum. The preliminary stages preceding the actual stambeli ceremony encompassed a screening of the patient by the arifa, the appointment of the date of the ceremony with the family of the patient<sup>14</sup> and a propitiatory sacrifice.

The pantheon of supernatural entities of stambeli is syncretic and includes "black" spirits

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<sup>12</sup> The description of stambeli fully relies on Jankowski's pioneering ethnomusicological fieldwork, later elaborated in his 2010's book.

<sup>13</sup> The remaining one is Dar Bornu, where the ethnomusicologist Jankowski led a pioneering research on Tunisian stambeli, which he later developed in the book "Stambeli: music, trance and alterity" (2010).

<sup>14</sup> The ceremonies were usually held private and the musicians were given a fee by the patient's family.

of sub-Saharan origin<sup>15</sup> and "white" spirits, namely Islamic saints. In the context of stambeli the latter cannot be responsible for an ailment, but can manifest themselves in the patient's body and guide him in the harder stages.

Every entity is conjured by a specific "nuba", a musical pattern introduced by the maalem. The distinctive elements of a nuba are both rhythmic and melodic, but there is no categorical difference in terms of musical features between a black and a white nuba. Nuba are not sung, but the lyrics can occur in form of invocations<sup>16</sup>.

The whole ritual, from the rhythms to the instruments and from the pantheon to the structure of the ceremony itself<sup>17</sup>, shows a strong hausa mark and its relationship with the bori tradition is still transparent to the performers. Even today, stambeli is held within the borders of the black community: the musicians are black or metisse young men<sup>18</sup> who have to undergo a training with a stambeli master before being able to perform. The transmission continues to be strictly oral and linear<sup>19</sup> even today. Further evidence showing how much effort the black community put in turning stambeli in the core of a new individual identity is given by the connection which stambeli musicians trace between themselves, the "bilali", and Bilal, the first black slave liberated by the Prophet and the first muezzin in Islam. The social status of the musicians gets therefore dignified by this blessed ideological kinship<sup>20</sup> which acts as a grant of the musicians' wholesome conduct. Still today the ceremonies are used as a healing practice – in this case they have the form of an event hosted in private houses open only to a small audience of relatives and close friends – even though recently they are being opened to a wider public, where they are being successfully sold to white people as an exotic masquerade or an entertaining shows for music festivals and private celebrations. Nonetheless, as Jankowski wisely highlights, the syncretic form of stambeli still makes it a

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<sup>15</sup> However, the Hausa pantheon has adapted to include Christian and Islamic figures next to water spirits of African origins. The Islamic "jnun" are not included, as stambeli can handle only cases of possession where the possessing spirits are governed by God, whereas jnun are considered to be under the Devil's rule.

<sup>16</sup> The invocations are uttered in Arabic, but some performers prefer a foreign – "ajmi" – accent, which is deemed more appropriate and effective in the context of stambeli.

<sup>17</sup> A remarkable exogenous element still present in the ceremonies is the arifa, the healing priestess. In a male-dominated culture as the Islamic one, it is uncommon to find a woman in such a cardinal position. This suggests us that this element is derived from a culture, like the sub-Saharan one, where older, matriarchal social constructs are more active than in the Islamic world.

<sup>18</sup> Jankowski was exceptionally given a permission to train as a stambeli performer. During the training he was guided by a maalem with whom he communicated with the help of an interpreter.

<sup>19</sup> This means that one cannot become a stambeli performer charge arbitrarily without being the direct recipient of the tradition: moreover, would that make any sense to become a stambeli performer out of the context of stambeli?

<sup>20</sup> The connection with Bilal relies on similarities in both ethnic background and social role. Although Sunni Islam generally disapproves musical performances, the melodic cantillation of the muezzin call to the prayer can be regarded as one of the most musical moment in Islamic practice.

perfect space for a sort «negotiation of identities». In Jankowsky's words:

«While the discourse surrounding stambeli is fraught with dichotomies (self/other, Tunisian/African, black/white, here/there, departure/arrival, modern/archaic), I argue that the sonic, ritual, and social spaces of stambeli provide a way of negotiating those dichotomies. In other words, stambeli itself is a "way to move"». (Jankowsky 2014)

This negotiation somehow reflects black people's position towards Tunisian culture, for what concerns the request of being acknowledged as part of the Tunisian society, but proves also the attempt to reverse from negative to positive the polarity of the attributes bound to the notion of "Otherness".

##### ***5. Conclusions and new imperative: the built-up of an open negotiation space***

As we have briefly shown, what followed the abolition of slavery in Tunisia is strongly intertwined with the Tunisian complex anthropological background. Islamic world of Northern Africa molded its identity with the purpose of dividing itself from the rest of Africa. The demonization of the resulting pole seems a quite natural consequence of this identity-related need and led to the dichotomy which permeates Tunisian culture even today: black versus white, free men versus the slaves, civilization versus wilderness, "Us" versus "Them": sub-Saharan people have entered the Tunisian world already marked as belonging to the other shore: it is not surprising that, once become free by law, they tried to cut any thread reminding them of their servile past and showed keen to a complete incorporation even at the cost of living as a rootless people.

Although to date this keeps being the main orientation, there are still some members of the black community who keep alive a connection with their past by means of some cultural manifestations, as the ritual one expressed by stambeli.

A worth-mentioning, marginal, feature ascribed to blackness is its supernaturality. Though also this belief stems from the white value system where "black" is equated to "other", it may have developed in a stage where "Otherness" was simply the realm of the unknown and was not perceived – at least ideologically – dangerous to the point of requiring the aggressive negrophobic propaganda perpetrated by Islam. As Jankowski (2006) points out:

«Blackness is associated with a sub-Saharan primitiveness that, in turn has both

positive and negative connotations»

And:

«Many Tunisians also ascribe to black people a mysterious and powerful ability to manipulate the spirit world and to protect against misfortune».

Belonging to the "other" side is implicitly related to being able to connect with the other world and to own some sort of magical power. In the case of black Tunisians, Karass (2015) reports that in the community of Douz – city of southern Tunisia – there is a belief that black people are able to see djinn, and this supernatural ability is the proof that they are the only ones suitable to perform healing rituals as stambeli, a fact which the black community is very proud about.

On one hand, black people's exclusivity concerning stambeli shows how marginal social positions – like the "healer", the "border-keeper" and the "medium" – were in fact left to members of the most marginalized social group in Tunisia, inasmuch disregarded by the white Islamic majority. On the other hand, though, the stambeli community managed to dignify this same marginality: it has created a sect functioning through a system of initiation; it treasures an ancient knowledge transmitted orally from master to disciple and which must be kept within the sect boundaries; it has the power to contact not only bori spirits, but also Islamic saints and, on top of all this, it is blessed by being the offspring of a man close to the Prophet. However, this narrative thrived only within and around the stambeli communities and almost vanished everywhere else, to the point that nowadays black people are mostly regarded as buffoons and lucky charms<sup>21</sup>.

We could further extend the discussion on the interaction between alterity and liminality and the role of the "Other" as escorts from one state to another, things that have been somehow inherent to primitive as well as modern civilizations in every tradition; however, here we only meant to show how many layers constitute the relation between ethnicities in modern-days Tunisia.

We feel the need to stress that what has been said here is valid exclusively to the Tunisian context, and to remind that talking about "Northern Africa" one risks to make generalizations about realities which are very different from each other: within the borders of every nation

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<sup>21</sup> Even today in Tunisian folklore the presence of black individuals is still considered beneficial for rites of passage as weddings and circumcisions (Karass 2015). This is the reason why bands of black musicians are often hired at white people's ceremonies.

every ethnic group holds a different relation with the others: for instance, black people in Morocco, though sharing with black Tunisians the same geographical origin and a similar historical past, interact with the white Arabic majority according to a different configuration: the presence of other minorities inside the country, as the Amazigh one, who fought for its right *as* a minority, prompted black people towards a similar conscious identification and led them to create a group narrative, lacking to black Tunisian . We want this to be only a *memento* against the tendency to equate geographical entities as "Northern Africa" and "Maghreb" with "Islam" and "the Arab world".

Together with this we want to borrow Jankowsky's concept of «negotiation of identities» and keep it as a valuable strategy for two cultural systems to interact with each other: an exogenous system can be integrated into the domain of the endogenous one by borrowing from the latter some elements – the Islamic pantheon, the language of the ritual – but contemporarily developing strategies and narratives to preserve its own separated identity – see the magnification of the cast of "bilali".

In an era where contact between cultures is necessary and inescapable, and where one seems forced to choose between an angry ghettoisation or drowning into a rootless present, such a negotiation can show us the way to a "mindful globalization".

As we showed, reports of violence and discrimination are still a daily occurrence on the news and on social media; thanks to black Tunisians's mobilization during last years, the wave of discontent was powerful enough to reach the Parliament, who was put under pressure to take action towards an issue which could not be ignored any longer: on October 9<sup>th</sup> 2018 the Government issued a law stating that all forms of racial discrimination are punishable by law: exhortation to hatred, racist threats, apology of racism and creating or joining an organization supporting discriminations can be subject to up to three years of detention and up to a fine of 3000 dinars (Carlier 2018). With this law Tunisia is, again, the first country in Northern Africa to overtly condemn racism. While many cheer and welcome this event as a turning point, others are more sceptical and believe that a law, as Tunisian history teaches, cannot change things if not supported by a thorough program of education, which can guide all social classes and all ethnicities to develop a more open system of values – and at the same time to acknowledge and get rid of the burden of the past systems. At that point Tunisia will really deserve to be the beacon it always wanted to be for Northern African countries.

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