

# **Development and Disenchantment in Rural Tunisia**

The Bourguiba Years

**Mira Zussman**



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The author (*left*) with women from both town (*right*) and countryside (*center*). Dress remains an important indicator of identity, and the women of Medjerda debated the appropriate dress for the anthropologist. Country women felt the author should dress country style when working on the farm. Town women claimed that a European should wear the latest French fashions. All agreed the author should not don a *safsari*, or veil. *Source*: Courtesy of Marc Zussman.

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# Development and Disenchantment in Rural Tunisia

The Bourguiba Years

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Mira Zussman

First published 1992 by Westview Press, Inc.

Published 2018 by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

**Zussman, Mira Fromer.**

**Development and disenchantment in rural Tunisia :  
the Bourguiba years / by Mira Zussman.**

p. cm.—(State, culture, and society in Arab North Africa)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8133-8238-6

1. Rural development—Government policy—Tunisia—  
Case studies. 2. Rural development—Medjerda River  
Valley (Algeria and Tunisia)—Case studies. 3.  
Medjerda River Valley (Algeria and Tunisia)—Rural  
conditions—Case studies. I. Title. II. Series

HN784.Z9C69 1992

307.1'412'09611—dc20

**92-5749**  
**CIP**

ISBN 13: 978-0-367-01602-9 (hbk)

To Fatima,  
who taught me  
and made me laugh at my own mistakes



The great challenge to an historical anthropology is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?

—Marshall Sahlins  
*Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*

## Song of Medjerda

مجردة يا مجرده يقولوا  
عليك شر الغربة  
وانت ليلة البلدان  
كل جمعة سوقك يحفل  
رجال مع نسوان  
فيلك ثروات غنية  
صناعات ومعامل ششية  
لهاهم وخضرة وجنيرية  
يقدر تتصنع تتنزه  
على حاشية الواد العشية

*mjerda, ya mjerda yagulu* Medjerda, oh Medjerda they say of you  
*‘alik sharr ul-ghurba* you bring hunger and loneliness  
to the stranger  
*w-inti lillat el-buldan* but you're the queen of the countryside.

*kul jim'a sugik yahfil* Every Friday your market  
*rjal ma'a niswan* gathers men and women together.  
*fik tharawat ghniy* Treasure lies within you —  
*day'at w-m'amil shshiya* estates and *chechia* makers.  
*Sabtik min kul thniya* Your harvest is renowned —  
*tmatim, w-khudra, w-generiya* tomatoes, vegetables and artichokes.

*yigdir titdassih, titnazzah* Promenade and be at ease  
*‘ala hashiya el-wed el-‘ashiyah* on the banks of the river in the afternoon.

—traditional folk song



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**The author** (left) with women from town (right) and countryside (center) (*frontispiece*)

*Photograph section (following page 116)*

**Firing up the oven:** Women begin the long process of baking bread

**The finished product:** Fifteen loaves of bread are baked daily

**Lessons on the farm:** Rural families enjoyed teaching the author the tasks of farm life

**Bedouin encampment:** A local political leader tries to convince a nomad to send his son to school

**Spinning with a drop-spindle:** Some country women continue to practice crafts such as spinning, weaving, embroidery, and pottery

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**Opting out of agriculture:** The son of a farm worker returns home laden with luxuries after five years as a worker abroad

**Women sitting 'arbi and men sitting *souri*:** Men have individual settings at the table, women and children eat out of a collective bowl

**Friday in Medjerda:** The streets swell with fellahin

**Visit of the prime minister:** Medjerdis line the streets one Friday

# Preface

My first introduction to the lower Medjerda Valley was in 1976 by Werner Kiene, then director of economic development programs in North Africa for the Ford Foundation, and by professors Ali Ben Zaid Salmi and Moncef Ben Said, codirectors of the Department of Rural Social Sciences at the National Agronomy Institute of Tunisia (INAT). The region of Medjerda turned out to be an ideal fieldsite, and I am grateful to the team at INAT for introducing me to the region. My fieldwork in the late 1970s was supported by two sources: A Fulbright Hays Research Fellowship and an International Doctoral Research Fellowship provided jointly by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council for Learned Societies. Subsequent travel grants from the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and California State University Faculty Research Grants also were instrumental to this study. Without the financial support of these organizations, this research could not have been conducted.

In Tunisia, I am indebted to the researchers of the *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Economiques et Sociales* (CERES) for stimulating discussions when I came into the capital, Tunis, and to the archivists at the *Archives Nationales*. In addition, I am grateful to the administrators of land-management agencies—in particular, those of the *Bureau de Contrôle des Unités de Production du Nord* (BCUPN), the *Commissariat Regionale de Développement Agricole* (CRDA), the *Office de la Mise en Valeur de la Vallée de la Medjerda* (OMVVM), the *Office des Terres Domaniales* (OTD), and the *Projet Tuniso-Belge de Vulgarisation*—for their assistance, participation, and interest in this study.

My greatest debt is to the people of the lower Medjerda Valley, whose generosity, hospitality, and warmth made the region dear to me. The fellahin of Medjerda understood better than I did what I was after. The impact of land reform policies on rural life came alive under their tutelage. At first, many thought it strange that I had come to learn instead of teach, that I saw myself as a student and not an expert. They were used to so many experts telling them how to live and work that the fellahin were at first skeptical and then amused by my willingness to learn. But the fellahin of Medjerda took it upon themselves to be the finest teachers. They opened their homes and their lives to me and made sure that I took careful notes, visited them frequently, ate properly, and asked the right questions. They introduced me to their extended families and neighbors and reminded me



frequently to take lots of photographs, a few of which are included herein. The women taught me how to milk, churn, weed, clean sheepskins, pluck chickens, stuff *merguez* sausages, boil up a resin depilatory, and put on henna as well as to prepare a year's supply of couscous and harissa. They told me what was important—family and children—and felt my belly waiting for me to conceive. When I did, they predicted a boy and taught me how to care for him. More than anything else, the fellahin of Medjerda taught me about values and priorities. The individuals who helped me most know how deeply I feel my debt to them. The fellahin of Medjerda insisted that I find the old French colonial families who once ruled over the region so as to understand the colonial enterprise from more than one perspective. The study then expanded to other parts of Tunisia, where colonial families still lived, as well as to France. Eventually, the study came to include more and more archival research, in Europe and in other parts of North Africa, on the Protectorate period. Only some of this later work appears in this volume. Most exciting for the fellahin were my meetings in France with family members of the legendary mayor of colonial Medjerda. The colonial period came alive for me as a result of these encounters.

Earlier versions of the chapters that follow have benefited from the criticisms and comments supplied by Ameer Ben Arab, Frederick Barth, Kenneth Brown, Elizabeth Colson, Elaine Combs-Schilling, Adnan Daoud, Alain deJanvry, Morris Fred, Fred Huxley, Lamont Lindstrom, Laurence Michalak, and Lucette Valensi. I am especially grateful for the instructive correspondence with Jean Poncet during my research in Tunisia and France. Burton Benedict, Elbaki Hermassi, and, most of all, Nelson Graburn scrutinized the progression of this research and offered their continued support throughout the years. They have all done their best to steer me in the right direction. This book is only one of the paths I have taken in my study of Medjerda. My own students have encouraged me by their enthusiasm, insight, and support of Middle East Studies at San Jose State University. My family has been uncommonly patient in awaiting the completion of this study (only to see me begin the next). The encouragement of my husband, Marc, his accompaniment to North Africa on numerous occasions, and his continued participation in the research process have been instrumental to my fieldwork. In addition, he has provided me with a continual source of support, comfort, and childcare at those times when I never seem to leave the computer in the attic. Our children, Michael and Rayna, must be thanked for their cheerful explorations in North Africa as well as for their endurance of the writing process. Michael, conceived in Medjerda, is adept at finding his way through the medinas of North Africa, and Rayna keeps asking why I did not name her Fatima. My in-laws, too, have offered their unfailing support and encouragement, and my own

parents have given me a lifelong commitment to the study of Middle Eastern culture.

Names of local people and places have been changed to protect their anonymity. Medjerda is the name of the entire fertile valley that traverses northern Tunisia. This study was carried out in the lower, or eastern, portion of the valley. The name is derived from the river, Oued Medjerda, which meanders throughout the length of the valley. Fellahin, farm managers, agency representatives and archivists provided me with copies of maps and documents that I did not even know existed. Most of the maps were constructed by combining regional geographical surveys with land agency farm plans and merging these onto a single topographical master. Both Figures 1.2 and 1.3 were compiled by combining over a dozen separate farm surveys supplied by three different state agencies. The regional farm plans tended to be on different scales which I had to standardize before proceeding. For this reason, the maps should be taken as schematic, rather than cartographically precise, and I take responsibility for any errors in this regard.

Standard Arabic transliteration is used and italicized throughout the text, with the following exceptions. Arabic words which are found in English, such as *couscous*, *souk*, *hadj*, and *hammam*, are not italicized. English language dictionaries have alternate spellings for these terms. I have used spellings which best approximate local pronunciation of Arabic dialect. Thus, a term like *souk*, or open-air weekly market, may at times be spelled *soug* or *souq* to reflect variations in local usage. Some spellings have come to English through the intermediary of French and it is the French orthography which has become standardized. A good example of this is the word *couscous*, which would have been written *Kuskus* had it entered English directly from the Arabic. The inconsistencies of transliteration reflect both local usage and the degree to which a term has been adopted by the French during the colonial period and its subsequent entry into English. The songs, sayings and proverbs found in these pages are taken from the courtyards and fields of Medjerda. There appeared to be a variety of versions of each, and those familiar with the region may have encountered alternate forms. The sayings and proverbs which head each chapter are transliterated in rural Tunisian dialect. The Arabic calligraphy, generously provided by my colleague, Hussein Al Hussein, Imam of the Masjid of Santa Clara, provides a more standardized rendition of the transliterated Arabic.

French terms are italicized, with the following exceptions. Words like *coopérateur* and *agro-combinat* are treated as English terms because they are the more common forms found in rural development studies on North Africa. The use of foreign terms and the variations in their spelling should be looked at as artifacts of different degrees of cultural contact and are as much a part of the data as the narrative.

I thank Ruhama Veltfort for her editorial assistance, Louis Collonge for computer assistance, and Rachel Mundy-Johnson for her patience and aid in the preparation of the manuscript. I am grateful to John Entelis, editor of *State, Culture, and Society in Arab North Africa*, and Barbara Ellington of Westview Press for their encouragement and support.

*Mira Zussman*

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# مجردة اسهار الغربة / مجردة خبز الشربة

## Introduction

*mjerda isharr ul-ghurba / mjerda khubz u-shurba*  
*Medjerda, land of injustice and exile / Medjerda, land of bread and soup*

Long years after the departure of the French from northern Tunisia, the memory, imagery and influence of the colonized past has persisted. This imagery, phrased locally in an uneasy dualism of *‘arbi* (Arab) and *souri* (French) classifications, has pervaded the daily life of the fellahin of the Medjerda Valley despite decades of colonial absence.

The fellahin of Medjerda express their colonial reminiscences and contemporary experiences through what Sahlins has called “historical metaphors and mythical realities” (1981). Thus, local Medjerdi interpretations of present experience are couched in seemingly anachronistic categories from the colonial past: contemporary national interventions are associated with the French and referred to as *souri*, while local initiative and customary practices are considered *‘arbi*, or Arab. National policy directives and foreign development programs vividly, bitterly, and *nostalgically* bring to mind the years as laborers under French colonial landowners.

Throughout Tunisia, certain epithets characterize given towns, villages, and tribes. These epithets are standardized and almost always negative. Medjerda has two epithets by which it is known; one is positive and the other is negative, but both serve to heighten the *‘arbi/souri* theme. The first is the one by which Medjerda is best known to others throughout the country: *mdjerda isharr ul-ghurba*, or “Medjerda—injustice and exile.” The second is one which the Medjerdis themselves promote: *mdjerda khubz u-shurba*, or “Medjerda— bread and soup.” Both epithets recall the colonial occupation of the region. In the first, *isharr*, here translated as injustice, also means disaster—injury, evil, sin, evildoer, and culprit. *Ghurba* has a triple connotation: first, it refers to exile and banishment—life away from home and separation from one’s native country. First, *ghurba* refers to the Moorish expulsion—exile—after the reconquest of Spain and their subsequent re-

turn to North Africa. Indeed, the people of Medjerda claim they originated elsewhere and came to the region seeking refuge and opportunity. Secondly, *ghurba* refers to those whose origins stem from the Gharbi tribe and region of Morocco, or from the Maghrib in general. Thirdly, it refers to Westerners, not only in the Maghribi sense, but also in the Western sense, *i.e.* European. Thus, the ambiguity of the term *ghurba* itself embodies the historical contradictions of the region's population: Are they Maghribi, *i.e.* North African or are they Westerners, *i.e.* European? To whom does the land of Medjerda belong?

The epithet readily conveys Medjerda's painful history and duality, and encapsulates Medjerda's origins, acknowledging the tribes and townsfolk who were forced to leave their homelands because of drought or political upheaval and who emigrated to this spot on the Medjerda River and came to call Medjerda home. In addition, it recalls the incursion of French, Italian, and other *colons*—who not only uprooted themselves, but also uprooted the *‘arbi* inhabitants and society which stood in their path.

The second epithet—"Medjerda: bread and soup"—offers a positive characterization of the same dual identity. The bread referred to is not the indigenous *khubz tabouna*, but rather French *baguettes* and Italian breads which are still baked with pride and care in the regionally renowned *boulangeries* of Medjerda-*souri*, just as they were in the colonial days. The soup referred to is the homemade Tunisian *shorba*. The epithet speaks of the delicious *souri* bread and heavenly *‘arbi* soup of Medjerda—both of which local people claim are famous throughout the country. French bread tastes best when dipped into Tunisian *shorba*: they complement each other and enhance each other's best qualities. They represent the best of both worlds. Between "injury and exile" and "bread and soup," lies all the ambivalence Medjerdis feel about their *‘arbi/souri* heritage.

### The Town and the Region

As the proverb indicates, the town of Medjerda was founded by the Moors when they were forced to flee Spain at the end of the fifteenth century; it was built on the ruins of the much larger ancient Roman city. Stones from the ancient amphitheater were used to construct the town, as well as to reconstruct the Roman dam in the region, and Roman artifacts found under the plow decorate both the mud huts and the courtyards of the fellahin of Medjerda. The countryside appears more Roman or French than Andalusian, but the *medina* of Medjerda retains its Moorish architecture, particularly in its arcades, tile work, and bath-houses. Mosques and *koubbas* dedicated to saints rise above the maze of narrow lanes; whitewashed walls are punctuated by blue-painted fortress-like doors—many of which are

lined with handsome Andalusian tilework. The founding families of Medjerda have kept alive their heritage and yet, since the last wave of Moors arrived in 1632, the Andulsi have dwindled and now constitute a minority in both the region and the town.

The town became known as “the land of *chechia* makers,” for the Andalusians of Medjerda specialized in manufacturing the red felt hats worn by men throughout North Africa. The town prospered from its agriculture as well as from its textile industry. The fertile lower Medjerda Valley, which surrounds the town, was covered with vast olive orchards and wheat fields, while vegetable gardens were cultivated along the river. Every family had its land, its gardens, and its flocks grazing in the hills above the valley. Rural hamlets—*douar*—arose in the countryside and blended nearly invisibly into the earth.

The Medjerda River meanders through the valley, crosscutting the 51,000 hectares that make up the Delegation of Medjerda. The Djebel El Kebir rises over 600 meters along the western reaches of the region. The average rainfall is a plentiful 475 millimeters per year, but it fluctuates widely from year to year. In 1947, for example, there was a sparse 230 millimeters while in 1953 the 820 millimeters of rain caused heavy flooding. Winter cold can approach  $-3^{\circ}$  Centigrade and the fierce summers are unrelenting at around  $45^{\circ}$  Centigrade (URD de Medjerda 1963). The soil is rich but salinated in parts of the region. The French claimed that at the turn of the century, much of the Medjerda’s land was uncultivated and had been used primarily for grazing.

The French began settling the region almost as soon as the Protectorate was declared in 1881. They built a town of their own alongside the *medina* and filled it with *épiceries*, *boulangeries*, and *charcuteries*. The French town was dominated by the *église française*. The panorama of the countryside quickly became dotted with the red tile of French villas, villages and farmhouses. Water works were begun on a large scale during this period. Roads were paved and farm machinery was imported. The region evolved into a replica of the French countryside.

In 1905, the town of Medjerda had approximately twenty-five hundred residents and the region as a whole had not quite 15,400 people (Canal 1914). Rapid expansion of colonial farming attracted Italian migrant workers and impoverished nomads from southern and central Tunisia. The latter fled drought-ravaged lands and left their dying flocks behind them and arrived at the verdant colonial farms of the Medjerda Valley to become agricultural laborers. What had once been known as an Andalusian town became home to a conglomerate of peoples.

The growth of agriculture in Medjerda was further accelerated by the inauguration of a number of organizations and programs unique in Tunisia.



First, in 1895, was the founding of the *Ferme-Ecole de L'Alliance Israélite Universelle* which included four thousand hectares in the environs of Djemiliya. The school was dedicated to teaching farm methods to young Tunisian Jews so that they too could participate in the expanding field of agriculture. Although few if any of the graduates of the *Ferme-Ecole* became farmers—many turned instead to marketing or management—the school's 4,000 hectares were rapidly transformed.

Secondly, in 1901 the *Colonie Agricole Indigène de Djebel El Kebir* was established on the *habous*, or religious foundation, property of Henchir Mellasine. At this site, sixteen hundred hectares were ceded by the *Djema'ia*—the Administration of Religious Foundations—for the foundation of an agricultural school for Tunisian boys. Described later as “more military than pastoral” (Violard 1906:238), the school accomplished great agricultural feats by using young schoolboys to clear the rocky, brush-covered plain. While the *Alliance* school had emphasized theory over practice, the *Colonie Indigène* apparently did the reverse (Violard 1906:236-239).

Thirdly, an experiment at Bordj Toungar used Tunisian prisoners as the labor force for colonial estates. And fourth was the creation of the *Société Foncière et Agricole* at Sidi Ug'ud, an organization of colonial farmers who lobbied to obtain markets abroad, import of agricultural machinery, and oppose the immigration of Italian workers into Tunisia.

This last lays bare the rationale of the colonial regime for developing programs like those enumerated above, which had the purpose of recruiting and developing an indigenous work force and promoting modern agriculture among the indigenous population. French colonial farmers demanded more agricultural laborers at the same time that they insisted on fewer Sicilian workers. They feared that the Italians might begin as workers but would rise to compete with them in the land market. The French *colons* of Medjerda, however, were opposed both to the immigration of Italian workers and the training of the indigenous Arab labor. Whenever possible, they opted for a third alternative—mechanized farming. The *Société Foncière* later evolved into the powerful *Société d'Agriculture de Tunisie*, or French Agriculturalists' Union, which in the post-colonial period became UNAT and the *Dar El Fellahin*.

The borders of the Delegation of Medjerda have changed numerous times, but the town of Medjerda has remained the administrative center of the region. The town is the seat of the Municipality, or town government, as well as the *omda*, or district government, and the Delegation, or regional government (see Figure I.1). Medjerda, once part of the Governorate of Tunis, by the 1970s had been incorporated into the newly formed Governorate of Zaghouan. The governorate in turn is responsible to the national government just as each lower administrative level is responsible to the next highest. Here we are concerned with farms throughout the Delegation of