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Life in the Collective Era: How Land Cooperatives Tried (and Failed) to Promote Local-National Integration in Tunisia

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Life in the Collective Era:
How Land Cooperatives Tried (and Failed)
to Promote Local-National Integration in Tunisia

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Abstract

The frequent metaphor of Tunisia as an island requires reevaluation. An island demands continuity unto itself, a feature that Tunisia distinctly lacks. Despite higher than usual levels of ethnic and religious homogeneity, Tunisia has historically maintained low levels of local-national interaction and accommodation. This analysis examines how the post-independence government of Habib Bourguiba sought to coax rural and agrarian communities into participation in the national identity and thereby promote continuity throughout the country via disruptive, large-scale government projects as part of the “modernity drive.” Specific attention is given to agricultural cooperatives and land collectivization in the 1960s. This analysis is further built on a case study of the application and lingering effects of such land policy in the village of Chebika – a rural mountain oasis of the Tunisian south representative of the closed off, subsistence based lifestyle common at independence.

Acknowledgements

No man is an island, nor is Tunisia. I would not have been able to complete this project without the assistance of Mounir Khélifa, my indefatigable Tunisian sage, and Asma Nouira, a thoughtful and guiding mentor. I would also like to thank Huda Mzioudet for braving the night bus to Tozeur with me as my indispensable guide and translator.

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Introduction

Tunisia is often described as an island; not as a matter of geography and continuous coastline, but rather as a product of social and cultural cohesion frequently at odds with its region dominated by the long-standing conflicts in Algeria and Libya. As far back as its generally peaceful transition from French protectorate to independent North African state under Prime Minister turned President-for-Life Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia has earned accolades from throughout the international community, only reinforcing the perception of Tunisia as unique within its region – an example of stability and progress alone in a sea of discontent.

Bourguiba himself made little effort to hide his disaffection for Tunisia's physical location, wishing he could cut his nation away from the southern shores of the Mediterranean and push it closer to the European coast. Bourguiba drew inspiration from secular Kemalist Turkey and eschewed the call of Nasser's ascendant Arab Nationalism. In so doing he enacted robust, top-down reforms to Tunisian society including the Personal Status Code of 1956 enforcing women's rights, the drive for universal primary education with French-language instruction within 10 years of independence, and the resettlement of traditionally Berber mountain villages like Chebika and Tameghza in order to bring services, schools, and roads.¹ Together these actions amongst innumerable others constituted a self-styled *jihad* against underdevelopment, through which Bourguiba hoped to make Tunisia yet again an island – an island of modernity.

¹ Perkins, Kenneth J. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 140, 142.

This frequent metaphor of Tunisia as an island is undoubtedly helpful and informative, but like many a trope it fails to consider the more holistic image of Tunisia. An island demands above all continuity unto itself. It may be more apt to call Tunisia an archipelago – a collection of islands closer to one another than anything else, but nevertheless distinct. It is worth noting that Tunisia has exhibited a greater degree of national cohesion historically than its neighbors in North Africa due largely to its small size, generally high level of ethnic and religious homogeneity, and a lack of the large geographical barriers that have fostered dissident and isolated voices elsewhere in the region.² Yet, at the same time, Tunisia has always suffered from a comparatively low levels of local-national interaction with subsistence-based production keeping rural communities free of the obligation to engage with their urban counterparts beyond obligatory interactions such as taxation, conscription, and law and order.³

Bourguiba understood, possibly with more clarity than any of his post-colonial contemporaries, that to build a state it would be essential to bring these disparate communities under the singular banner of the Tunisian republic. More than simply building schools and roads, the modernity project thus sought to coax connections between the various islands of the Tunisian archipelago as a part of what was described by Ahmed ben Salah – a lead architect of the Bourguiban modernity drive and the subject of discussion later in this analysis – as “a temporary and inevitable tutelage” comprised of the forceful interjection of

²Larson, Barbara. “Local-National Integration in Tunisia.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 20.1 (1984). 18.

³ *Ibid*, 19.

government into daily life.⁴ One of the largest areas of concern to the government when it came to promoting local-national integration and the vitality of the nascent Tunisian state was land and agriculture policy, an issue of fundamental importance to daily life for countless Tunisians, especially in the heavily agrarian south and northwest of the country.

The primary task of this analysis is threefold, with each successive component narrowing in on the achievement or failure of the Bourguiban modernity drive. First, to define and understand the modernity drive itself as a tool of statecraft for manufacturing a cohesive national identity; second, to scrutinize land and agricultural policy in the 1960s, specifically land collectivization and agriculture cooperatives as an essential pillar of Bourguiba's New Republic; and third, to examine a case study of how life in Chebika, an isolated mountain oasis in southern Tunisia representative of the country's rural communities, has or has not changed as a result of state land and agriculture policy in the name of modernity.

Methodology & Limitations

The majority of historical background on the role of the Bourguiba government in the modernization of Tunisia has been gathered from scholarly sources made available through university databases in addition to a handful of published works accessed in print. Sources were read in both English and in French.

⁴ qtd. in Vandewalle, Dirk. "From the New State to the New Era: Toward a Second Republic in Tunisia." *Middle East Journal* 42.4 (1988). 604.

Many of the sources consulted are rather dated, some from as far back as the 1960s. While these sources offer a helpful picture of the technical process by which land reform was activated and carried out, they are largely incapable of judging the long-term impact of such actions – which this analysis will hope to extrapolate. Previous research, moreover, has primarily concerned itself with either the broad strokes of development in Tunisia or minute policies. This analysis attempts to connect this narrative of state formation and modernization all the way down to the level of the oasis.

In order to obtain a better understanding of Chebika and how it fits within the larger picture of land policy and collectivization under Bourguiba's modernity drive I conducted a research trip to Chebika and the neighboring oasis town of Tameghza. This trip served the dual purpose of allowing me to explore the city and the oasis at Chebika in person as well as to conduct personal interviews with various citizens and gatekeepers within the city. I was accompanied on this trip by Huda Mzioudet who served as a translator and guide.

Although such a trip was essential to my ability to conduct this research, there were inherent limitations associated with it, most notably the relative brevity of the trip (only four days – just one of which was spent in the city of Chebika itself). I was unable to ask follow up questions after the original interviews were conducted due to the difficulty in accessing the subjects. This proved problematic when the project took on a slightly different focus (agricultural collectives) after the interviews were already completed.

Additionally, the topic of land and land ownership remains a sensitive one in Chebika and although I developed an array of contacts capable of speaking on

the subject, it is important to take some of the answers with a grain of salt and understand their potential biases. Jean Duvignaud – a French sociologist who spent the years 1960-1966 studying the city and whose subsequent work *Change at Shebika: Report from a North African Village* will be referenced frequently in this analysis – observed the inherent difficulty of determining land ownership with it taking in some cases over a year of research and interaction for subjects to admit that they were no longer the actual owners of their land.⁵ Land has historically functioned as a source of tremendous pride and self-worth in the Tunisian south so even today many farmers may not be willing to openly disclose true ownership arrangements.

The interviews themselves were conducted in accordance with standard policies for the protection of human subjects. Subjects were provided with information on their rights (including their right to decline to answer a question or conclude the interview at any moment) in advance of the interview via a consent form, the content of which is available in the appendix. The form was available in English and French and in the case that a subject was not literate in one of those languages the content of the form was relayed verbally in Tunisian-dialect Arabic by my translator.

Subjects were also granted anonymity for their participation and their names as well as those of the specific organizations that individuals represent have been removed or sufficiently altered to prevent identification. Transcripts of the interviews were made, except in the case of one informal interview with a local farmer, and are available in the appendix. The original audio recordings

⁵Duvignaud, Jean. *Change at Shebika: Report from a North African Village*. New York, NY: Random House/Vintage Books, 1970. p. 81

have been deleted. Upon reviewing the transcripts, a translator was used – the transcripts are word-for-word although the first-person and the third-person were used alternately. The use of translation services is also a limitation to the extent that there are no direct quotations available in the exact syntax of the subject.

Discussion/Analysis

The Bourguiban State: Enemy of Underdevelopment

The Theoretical Foundations of the Bourguiban State

The Tunisian sense of superiority is largely attributable, at least in the post-colonial moment and subsequent few decades, to the policies and vision of President-for-Life Habib Bourguiba. While many of his fellow nationalist party leaders across the Arab World sought to establish personal and political legitimacy through violent action and rhetoric against their former colonists, Bourguiba embarked on a rather different project of state-building inspired by socialism, paternalism, and an often veiled sense of secularism. Above all, however, each of Bourguiba's theoretical impulses was mediated by an overarching sense of pragmatism. This sense of pragmatism was on display for the world to see when Bourguiba ignored the violent objections of other Arab leaders and chose to accept internal autonomy from France in 1955 rather than demand full independence.⁶ Bourguiba claimed that other events in North Africa, notably next door in Algeria, would soon cause the French to grant full independence regardless and it was more important to maintain a functional

⁶Hahn, Lorne. "Tunisia Pragmatism and Progress." *Middle East Journal* 16.1 (1962). 18.

relationship with the French for the time being. He was proven correct within a year.

Bourguiba was influenced by socialist writers throughout his schooling and made frequent reference to the likes of Mao, Trotsky, and Khrushchev in his public speeches and writings.⁷ Socialism, for Bourguiba, was primarily a matter of promoting the national welfare before that of the individual. In pursuit of an improved national welfare, Bourguiba began to adopt an increasingly paternalistic approach to governance. Bourguiba acted at times with little regard for traditional social or cultural structures within the country, acting as if he alone knew what his countrymen needed.⁸ Such paternalism and socialism combined to form an increasing authoritarianism in Bourguiba's actions and the development of a strong cult of personality. Through various displays of pageantry, including elaborate celebrations of Bourguiba's birthday and weekly addresses by Bourguiba in the style of President Roosevelt, Bourguiba styled himself as the nation's founding father, demanding the collective trust to make decisions for all.^{9, 10}

Perhaps most consequential to Bourguiba's attempt to impose modernity on Tunisia is his sometimes veiled sense of secularism. Bourguiba viewed overt Islam in Tunisia as a threat. One of his first actions was the passage of the Personal Status Code of 1956 that, among other things, was noteworthy for abolishing polygamy and arbitrary divorce as well as a number of other measures

⁷Mestiri, Brahim. "La Pensée Politique et Sociale du President Habib Bourguiba." PhD diss., Université d'Ottawa, 2002. 177.

⁸ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 145.

⁹ Hahn. "Pragmatism and Progress." 23.

¹⁰ Larson. "Local-National Integration." 20.

targeted at women's liberation.¹¹ These actions constituted Bourguiba's attempt at a social revolution within Tunisia following independence. Yet in recognizing that they were not necessarily unanimously supported decisions, Bourguiba utilized Islamic jurisprudence (albeit moderate and reformist jurisprudence) to justify them thereby veiling the full extent of his secularism.

The "modernity drive" embodies the confluence of Bourguiba's ideological foundations – socialism, paternalism, secularism, and pragmatism. Decrying the *laissez-faire* approach of classical liberalism, Bourguiba declared a formal *jihad* against chronic under-development ("moral, cultural, and material") in 1960.¹² Bourguiba's *jihad* exempted all Tunisian citizens from fasting during Ramadan and urged them to continue to work instead of resting. This decision was justified under the Quranic exception that warriors do not have to fast or rest during the religious holiday.¹³ By drafting all Tunisians into the now-literal fight against under-development, Bourguiba made it abundantly clear what his prerogatives as President were.

The Bourguiban Modernity Drive in Action

The concept of modernity itself is inherently difficult to define and relies heavily on subjectivities and matters of personal interpretation. Thus it is important to operationalize the term by the definition used by its perpetrator. Used in this analysis, "the modernity drive" does not refer to a philosophical articulation of what it means to be modern, but rather is a reference to a specific

¹¹Brown, L. Carl. "Bourguiba and Bourguibism Revisited: Reflections and Interpretation." *Middle East Journal* 55.1 (2001). 56.

¹² Mestiri. "Pensée Politique et Sociale." 184.

¹³ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 145.

set of policy actions taken by Bourguiba following independence which includes the agricultural cooperative and land collectivization project of 1960-1969, as well as other dirigist actions including dramatic reforms to education, social institutions, and religious organizations.

The modernity drive was not a fundamentally charitable action engineered by Bourguiba to increase quality of life throughout Tunisia. Improvements in national infrastructure and economic opportunity were essential to the success of the nascent Tunisian republic on the verge of a demographic explosion. In 1956 the country had a birthrate as high as 2 percent a year (one of the highest rates in the world at the time), a majority of the population under the age of 21, and only 40 percent of working age adults were formally employed with an average per capita income of 127 USD a year.¹⁴ Bourguiba was also acutely aware that his political longevity and that of his Neo-Destour Party (to be renamed the Destour Socialist Party in 1964) would be well served by the aggressive expansion of its ranks through the direct penetration of the national government into local life through massive public works projects.

Bourguiba obtained unquestioned control over the modernity drive and its various projects through most of the 1960s by actively seeking to coopt other actors – some who would otherwise have the potential to rival the mandate of the Neo-Destour party. Through the establishment of the National Planning Council in 1958, Bourguiba sought to connect representatives of major national labor organizations including the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT – the most powerful labor organization in Tunisia), the Union Nationale des

¹⁴ Hahn. “Pragmatism and Progress.” 20.

Agriculteurs Tunisiens, and the Union Tunisien des Industriels et Commerçants with government officials.¹⁵ Bourguiba also coopted prominent leaders from these organizations into senior roles within his government, most notably and relevant to the subsequent analysis of agricultural cooperatives was his invitation of Ahmed ben Salah, former Secretary-General of the UGTT, to serve in a number of different high-level posts including the Ministries of Public Health, Social Affairs, Planning, Finance, the Economy, and Education.

Although the goal of the modernity drive was to facilitate interaction between locals and the government to promote integration, the resulting collaborations were not always equal or productive. The ambassadors sent out by the national government to local communities often did not share local values and norms, which often lead to criticism of the rural *mentalité* as being conservative, fatalistic, irrational, and risk averse.¹⁶ These critiques of rural society often devolved into a paternalistic echo chamber that galvanized authoritarian behavior, an effect described as “Pygmalion syndrome” whereby reform-minded elites who found no suitable response among society for their reforms consequently radicalized in their actions, which made the ultimate goal of reform increasingly difficult to achieve.¹⁷ Local goals including an increased quality of life and long-term survival often fell at odds with national development goals that operated in the short-term. The government could have avoided such difficulties if it considered empowering local actors who were well versed in the social and

¹⁵ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 150.

¹⁶ Bellin, Eva. Review of *Development and Disenchantment in Rural Tunisia: The Bourguiba Years*, by Mira Zussman. *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 27.2 (1993). 235.

¹⁷ Vandewalle. “From the New State to the New Era.” 604.

cultural traditions or worldview of a certain community to be liaisons with the state instead of sending in party supporters and technocrats.

Land Reform as Statecraft: 1960-1969

The Agricultural Economy at Independence

During the colonial period, French commercial farmers accounted for a disproportionately high level of agricultural output relative to their number and the amount of land that they owned. Colonists had access to the most fertile lands, usually in the country's northwestern areas such as Bizerte, and modern farming machinery and techniques.¹⁸ The subsequent withdrawal of most commercial farmers and associated capital following Tunisian independence left some of the country's most fertile lands fallow, held by the state following expropriation and occasionally land transactions between colonists and the newly independent government – although the former was more common.

Overall agricultural production fell to a fraction of its pre-1956 levels despite the vast majority of Tunisians – some 75 percent – engaged in the agricultural sector either formally or as a matter of subsistence.¹⁹ Despite the significant amount of Tunisians engaged in agriculture, it generated only one-third of the national income following independence.²⁰ This disparity was the result of various factors including soil erosion from frequent and heavy inundations (which the average farmer was unaware how to combat), primitive methods of land exploitation, and the inability to use the *habus* (potentially fertile

¹⁸ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 149.

¹⁹ Hahn. "Pragmatism and Progress." 20.

²⁰Ibid, 21.

lands owned by religious orders) for farming which altogether equaled the destruction or waste of 25,000 acres of land every year.²¹ Countless other acres of land were also rendered fallow or vacant as the result of scattered and fractured landownership, especially is the country's rural oases in the south, notably Chebika.

Agricultural Cooperatives in Theory

Agricultural reform therefore became a central tenant of the development project. Its importance to independence was acknowledged as early as the 1955 national congress of the Neo-Destour Party in Sfax and codified in the first 10 Year Plan. Ahmed ben Salah as head of the Ministry of Planning was the chief architect behind the land collectivization and agricultural cooperative project that was designed to address the looming agricultural crisis. Ben Salah's appointment to the Ministry of Planning marked a clear decision by Bourguiba to pursue a more aggressive, socialist policy towards the country's economy.

The reasoning behind the project was simple enough, that starting with the expropriated *colon* estates (those belonging to the former French colonists) in the northwest the government would nationalize major land plots and gradually incorporate smaller plots and individual parcels held by farmers. Once nationalized, these lands would increase in yield as a result of better access to modern farming technologies and government direction, the additional yields would then more than meet the demand of the growing population.²² The surpluses could then be prepared for export and fund the development of other

²¹ Ibid, 22.

²² Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 154.

sectors within the economy. A major hope was that the export of excess agricultural goods would make up for the lack of foreign capital in order to fund the further development of industry like the extraction of phosphates, iron, and zinc. By 1961 the government had acquired nearly 4,000,000 acres of *habus* and 7,400,000 acres of land that was previously held at the tribal level in addition to the restoration of the *colon* lands to the national farming project.²³

The theoretical origins of the agricultural cooperatives are well placed within the overarching paternalism and socialism of the Bourguiban modernity drive with collectivization seeking to establish public ownership over the means of production. Due in part to incomplete trust between the government and farmers as well as the socialist desire to increase state employment, the agricultural cooperatives also spawned a large technocratic class of administrators and farm managers, though many proved to lack rudimentary knowledge of rural society and farming techniques. By 1968 the cooperatives fully included more than one third of all rural land and one quarter of the rural population.²⁴

Not only did agricultural cooperatives appear to be a solution to the Tunisian economic crisis of early independence, but the practice also sought to bridge rural-urban disparities and promote local-national integration. During the period of agricultural cooperatives, government penetration into rural communities reached its height between ramped up social services, an increase in political activity and representation, and in many localities virtual government

²³ Hahn. "Pragmatism and Progress." 27.

²⁴ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 154.

control over the economy.²⁵ Such a massive mobilization of government resources was often Trojan-horsed into these communities as a part of the collectivization efforts. While one should not assume that attempts to coerce rural communities into a dirigist national identity was the primary motivation behind one of North Africa's largest land use projects in the post-colonial era, it was more than a tacit factor in ben Salah and Bourguiba's cost-benefit analysis.

Agricultural Cooperatives in Practice

The need to divide "agricultural cooperatives in theory" from "agricultural cooperatives in practice" should offer a hint as to the execution of what was supposed to be a magic bullet for the Tunisian economy. The resulting economic and social dislocations from the massive reorientation of state agriculture policy had major unintended consequences for Tunisia's developing economy. The Tunisian government, true to form, thought that it would avoid the pitfalls of major statist projects elsewhere in the region, yet:

As in Egypt, a parasitic private sector ... emerged at the margin of state enterprises. As in Algeria, high savings and capital accumulation rates were offset by weak managerial expertise, technical problems within agricultural cooperatives and public enterprises, and government support of an inefficient public sector.²⁶

Public opinion towards the cooperatives rapidly soured as promised wages failed to appear, amounting to only one third of the original projection by 1968.²⁷ Wages remained low due to a combination of factors including the low prices at which the government chose to buy the agricultural goods (cooperatives

²⁵ Larson. "Local-National Integration." 19.

²⁶ Vandewalle. "From the New State to the New Era." 605.

²⁷ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 155.

had no choice but to sell their harvests to the government at the pre-determined rate), a series of poor harvests nationally between 1964 and 1968, and lengthy gestation periods as land was turned over from less profitable wheat production to more profitable crops such as olives and citrus.²⁸ The situation was so bad that the 1960s saw an overall drop in agricultural production and by 1969 only 15 percent of over 250 cooperatives were running at a profit.²⁹

Of those cooperatives that did succeed in turning a profit, the government was especially proud. One such cooperative that the Bourguiba government trumpeted as a success of the cooperative system was the project in the Mejerda Valley of south-central Tunisia. The cooperative project there was successful in financing a sprawling irrigation and drainage network that connected and supported 35,000 acres of farmland.³⁰ However, such success stories were increasingly rare as agricultural cooperatives continued to expand in Tunisia. Determined to salvage his policy, ben Salah made the decision to bring all remaining farmlands in the country under collective control in 1969, a decision that sparked serious unrest amongst large landholders who had previously been left alone without threat of having their lands collectivized.³¹

Forms of resistance to the collectivization of lands were abundant throughout the 1960s. Originally the low-level farmers and small landholders protested by robbing and vandalizing bakeries (largely associated with the government as the result of grain subsidies), organizing walk-outs, and damaging

²⁸ Ibid, 156.

²⁹ Ibid, 156.

³⁰ Hahn. "Pragmatism and Progress." 27.

³¹ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 157.

olive groves by digging up and replanting the trees with their roots in the air.³² These protests were easily ignored by the government and local administrators and did little to prevent the cooperative project from going national.

Another act of resistance that became widespread and shows just how much unintended consequences of land collectivization subverted the original intentions of the project is that many farmers, aware of the coming collectivization, chose to sell their land before it could be confederated into the cooperative system.³³ In this way a socialist project had the ironic and counterintuitive result of exacerbating the disparities between small, poor farmers who chose to sell their land for fear of having it seized and the large landowners who benefited from these sales, often at below the full value of the land.

Socialism by definition is meant to render the means of production as a public good, yet the knee-jerk reaction of farmers to sell resulted in further the estrangement of the proletariat class from the land as the essential means of production. The farmers were left with only their labor as capital and most ended up workers or *khammes* on the land they once owned.³⁴ The status of landowners-turned-landless workers only further deteriorated once the cooperative project reached them because all cooperative workers were paid a wage fixed by the government and were banned from seeking additional or alternative employment outside of the agricultural sphere.³⁵ Adjusted for inflation and alterations to the cost of living, the average *coopérateur* (the name given to farmers who worked

³² Simmons, John. L. "Agricultural Cooperatives and Tunisian Development." *Middle East Journal* 25.1 (1971). 53.

³³ *Ibid*, 46.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

the land under the cooperative system) was no better off working in a state-run collective farm in 1969 than on a French *colon* estate in 1955 – and even then workers on the *colon* estates were often allowed to seek alternative opportunities in the informal sector such as growing gardens and selling the produce from them.³⁶

The peasantry thus began to search openly for the so-called benefits of independence, with many arriving at the conclusion that the rewards of independence were unequally distributed with urban centers like Tunis and the *sahel* (the eastern coast of Tunisia including cities such as Sfax, Mahdia, and Monastir the birthplace of Bourguiba) benefiting at the expense of the interior. As a policy meant to support integration between the urban elite and rural poor, agricultural cooperatives did little to increase peasant participation at the national level.³⁷ While there were isolated efforts at increasing the bargaining power of peasants in negotiations on matters including salaries and representation, such attempts merited little success. The biggest benefit to the rural poor was the introduction of streets, schools, clinics and other tangible representations of modern culture; however, the overarching goal of promoting buy-in to the state was ultimately not well served by the agricultural cooperatives of the 1960s that left most locals feeling taken advantage of and deceived.

The End of Land Cooperatives in Tunisia

The conclusion of the cooperative project in September of 1969 left few winners. Outraged by ben Salah's stubborn insistence on pursuing cooperatives,

³⁶ Ibid, 49-50.

³⁷ Ibid, 50.

attempts to circumvent executive authority and the national party in matters of land distribution, and alienation of the powerful landed elite from which Bourguiba and his party drew extensive support Bourguiba revoked ben Salah's ministerial portfolios and pursued charges of treason against his once protégé.³⁸ The charges stuck and ben Salah was tried and convicted. He escaped from imprisonment and fled abroad in 1973 where he stayed until Bourguiba's death in 2000.

The charges against ben Salah may not have been fully merited – the goals of the ten-year plan were established three years prior to ben Salah receiving the agriculture portfolio and fit well within the overall modernity drive initiated by Bourguiba himself.³⁹ Nevertheless, the legal charges against ben Salah were largely unimportant. The true charge against ben Salah was economic mismanagement. Whether agricultural cooperatives were bound to fail or ben Salah's management is solely responsible is beyond the scope of this analysis. What is valuable is to see the multiple levels on which it failed to promote much desired local-national integration.

Amidst the fallout of ben Salah's trial and conviction, the government distanced itself from the policy of mandatory land collectivization which was by then widely perceived as corrupt and attempting to eliminate private ownership in Tunisia. Farmers who were already participating in the cooperative system were permitted to withdraw and a moratorium was placed on the collectivization of further lands.⁴⁰ The former *colon* estates in the northwest remained in the

³⁸ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 155.

³⁹ Simmons. "Agricultural Cooperatives." 52.

⁴⁰ Perkins. *History of Modern Tunisia*. 155.

cooperative system as the government possessed full title to those lands. These collective farms continued to find success.

The damage elsewhere, however, to rural society and landownership was already done. Many farmers having sold their lands for fear of confiscation earlier in the 1960s were unable to reclaim their lost capital and found themselves either permanently resigned to the status of day laborer or were forced out of the agricultural sphere entirely. Those who stayed as laborers often found themselves falling into debt to their employers and those who pursued work in the cities rarely found it, both types frequently found themselves forced to live in *bidonvilles* (shantytowns common throughout colonial North Africa) in a repeat of the economic hardships under the French.⁴¹ Disenfranchisement therefore became widespread throughout the rural communities that had seen their economic standing either plateau or dramatically deteriorate over the course of the past decade.

As a tool of statecraft, agricultural cooperatives in Tunisia were better policy than practice. They failed to inspire real growth in the agricultural sector, only further estranged workers from their means of production, and nearly cost Bourguiba's modernity drive its sense of legitimacy. The channels of communication and accommodation that were forced open by the blunt instrument of land collectivization were largely slammed closed following the project's conclusion by angry farmers yearning for the time when they were able to simply use the land to support themselves and their families. Consequently, the Bourguiban modernity drive was saved by virtue of other projects outside the

⁴¹ Ibid, 156.

scope of this analysis including the aggressive promotion of education and women's rights. Were Bourguiba's *jihad* to be evaluated on land alone, history and many Tunisians would not look back as kindly on their nation's founding father.

Chebika: A Case Study in Continuity and Change

Chebika functions as a compelling and accessible case study of the successes and failures of land and agricultural reform within the Bourguiban modernity project for a number of reasons: 1) Chebika remained largely isolated from the rest of Tunisia up to and through the independence decade with only a small amount of mediated interactions between its population and the state; 2) agricultural activity within the oasis has always been at the center of life in Chebika as a means of subsistence; 3) there is a large amount of continuity amongst the population at Chebika with families that have lived there and shared experiences for generations, offering credibility to the study of their oral histories; and 4) extensive study of the city was conducted by a team of French sociologists led by Jean Duvignaud between 1960 and 1966. Thus when one seeks to understand the extent to which large-scale land reform and agricultural cooperatives were able to coerce those living on the fringe of Tunisian society into active participation in the new state, Chebika is a useful example.

History of Chebika

In order to assess the change at Chebika, or possible lack thereof, inspired by Ahmed ben Salah's land cooperative project and other land and agriculture based initiatives, it is important to first place Chebika within its appropriate

historical context. Originally called *Qasr al-Shams* (Castle of the Sun), Chebika lays claim to being one of the furthest reaches of the Roman empire into Africa – a claim backed up by the remains of military fortification and rusted weaponry long since repurposed into ploughs.⁴² At the time of Duvignaud’s research in the 1960s, Chebika was comprised of roughly 30 families with population estimates, for lack of census or records or real concern for such classification, between 200 and 300.⁴³ This number has held roughly steady today with only minor variations due to studying or foreign employment. Individuals in the area moreover claim that these are the same people who have been living in Chebika and the surrounding areas for upwards of the last 1,800 years.⁴⁴ The Chebika sense of self is inextricably tied in to its long history.

Chebika is further distinct as a mountain oasis – a relatively rare geological phenomenon that has enabled communal life for such a length of time. The waters that have provided locals with a subsistence-based lifestyle originate from within the mountain itself. The walls of the mountain have acted as much to keep Chebika contained as the stretches of desert all around have acted to blunt the spread of the city.

Chebika’s first major interactions with government in Tunisia related to perhaps the most traumatic event in the city’s recent memory. In 1969 there was a major inundation that resulted in the destruction of many of the city’s homes and buildings which were built out of natural building materials like mud, stone, and

⁴² Duvignaud. *Change at Shebika*. 55.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 60.

⁴⁴ Subject 3. Interview by author. Audio recording. Tameghza, April 22, 2016.

wood.⁴⁵ Following the flooding of the old city – which mirrored a similar event and relocation in Tameghza, another mountain oases and the nearest town to Chebika at a distance of approximately 17 kilometers – residents began to rebuild at the base of the mountain only a few hundred meters away from the original city. They received assistance from the government during the subsequent relocation and reconstruction, particularly in the contribution of modern building materials including concrete and steel.⁴⁶ Relocation assistance constituted a one-time project from the government intended for the finite purpose of relocation and while it does connect to the overarching drive towards modernization by the Bourguiba government it is not on par with land collectivization and agricultural policy as a deliberate tool of long-term and methodical government infiltration into local life.

As opposed to large cities in the area such as Tozeur and Naftah where disparate parcels of land gradually fell under the ownership of a small number of individuals and were confederated into large plots, in Chebika the largest parcels do not exceed a few acres and are often loosely defined with borders delineated by improvised fences and barbed wire.^{47, 48} At the time of Duvignaud's research he tallied the parcels at 176 with 47 different owners, though he continued to struggle with an exact number of land owners due to the sensitivity of landownership and the desire of many men in Chebika to hide the fact that they had lost direct ownership of land that was previously in their families for

⁴⁵ Subject 1. Interview by author. Audio recording. Chebika, April 23, 2016.

⁴⁶ Subject 3. Interview by author.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Duvignaud. *Change at Shebika*. 80.

centuries.⁴⁹ The most common relationship between men in Chebika and the land they worked was that of a *khammes* (derived from the Arabic word for five) – roughly similar to an indentured servant who would tend a parcel of land and all of its palms in order to receive 1/5 of the crop as payment. The primary crops of the oasis in Chebika have always been palm dates, olives, and other foods necessary for subsistence including carrots, onions, and grains.⁵⁰

Chebika's Experience with Land Collectivization

Although land collectivization was a component of Tunisia's first major economic plan since independence in 1962, Chebika did not experience the direct action of land seizure and collectivization until 1969 – a testament to resistance amongst the city's farmers and the support for private ownership, but above all attributable to the remote nature of life in Chebika which had no French interaction or *colon* estates to speak of.⁵¹ In general, agricultural cooperatives were set up more rapidly in the north of the country where the *colon* lands were easily expropriated. They then made their way down to the larger cities in the South such as Tozeur. In both of these instances, the cooperatives were comparatively easy to set-up as a result of the large amounts of farmland already collected into large plots either by the French or the landowners who had amassed sizable plots in the larger oases. By the time Chebika finally began the process of collectivizing its farming, ben Salah and his cooperative policy in general were nearing their end.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 81.

⁵⁰ Subject 5. Informal interview by author. Chebika, April 23, 2016.

⁵¹ Subject 1. Interview by author.

Despite their belated start, the farmers at Chebika labored through the process of collectivization just like any other rural city in Tunisia at the time. All 176 parcels of land were nationalized and placed in the trust of the farmers as a collective union. It is clear to see how ben Salah and Bourguiba hoped to use the collectivization of farm land as a way to gather the political and nationalist support of poor or landless farmers like the *khammes*. One might expect this action to be especially salient in Chebika where, prior to land collectivization, the lands were largely owned by outsiders to the community including miners from Redayif, farmers from nearby Tameghza, and interestingly also Bedouins who grazed their herds in the nearby areas.⁵² Yet, across multiple interviews, the land collectivization of 1969 emerged as a sensitive issue still to this day in Chebika.

There were those who benefited in this way from the collectivization – farmers who owned no palm trees before that period, but acquired trees as a result.⁵³ But responses were not universally positive, at least in part because the collectivization process turned a blind eye to the centuries of private ownership and hard work that had become central to the ethos of the Chebikan farmer. To clarify, the idea of private ownership exhibited at Chebika, at least historically, is less a matter of physically owning the land, but rather is a process of working the land and making it fruitful as an almost religious, alms-giving activity. Duvignaud noted that in his experience in Chebika:

None of the *khammes* or the owners looks at his piece of land as we do in the West: as a possession which yields a certain profit. For fifty or sixty of the eighty workers whom we questioned, land is a part of the divine

⁵² Duvignaud. *Change at Shebika*. 83.

⁵³ Subject 1. Interview by author.

creation which, through man's work, participates in the transcendent, mystical process that leads every living thing to...sprout or grow.⁵⁴

This sensitivity to the issue of land collectivization was apparent throughout the interviews conducted. Interestingly while most other historical events at question were readily accessible to interview subjects via oral history (the relocation of the city, developments in the tourism sector, etc.), any answer to the question of land collectivization was prefaced by saying that they were not familiar or had a very limited recollection.^{55, 56} In a sense it almost seems as though the issue of land collectivization was removed from the oral history of Chebika, or at least it was too sensitive a topic to address substantively with an unfamiliar researcher.

Ultimately when the national policy of land collectivization was jettisoned from the national *jihad* against underdevelopment and ben Salah from the government, Chebika began the process of returning the collectivized lands to their previous owners. Although there was no information available on the process through which lands were returned or reassigned it would be an interesting area for further study. The majority of lands were easily given back to their prior title-holders, but it does appear that there were some farmers who were able to leave the collectivization experiment with more land or trees than they had prior – a source of continued bad blood within the community.⁵⁷ By 1970 the attempt at collectivization formally concluded in Chebika and the majority of

⁵⁴ Duvignaud. *Change at Shebika*. 82.

⁵⁵ Subject 2. Interview by author. Audio recording. Chebika, April 23, 2016.

⁵⁶ Subject 1. Interview by author.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

farmers returned to the previous exploitation of their own land without any state interventions.⁵⁸

Long-term Effects of Land Policy in Chebika

The first and foremost effect of the failure of land collectivization that roiled the government has been a persistent hesitancy from subsequent administrators to address land policy in a large and systematic way. Although there is ample justification for this pause, it has resulted in a purposeful neglect of communities such as Chebika where agriculture has always maintained a position of primary importance. The very issues that land collectivization was set to solve – low productivity of land due to over farming, primitive farming techniques, and scattered claims to land ownership – continued to plague Chebika following the restoration of private land management.

Across all four of the interviews conducted with subjects who lived in Chebika, scattered land ownership in the oasis was identified as a major problem for life in Chebika today. The scattered ownership of lands resulting from divided inheritance, the use of lands to pay debts and dowries, and the outright abandonment of certain lands has long been viewed as an obstacle to rejuvenating or increasing production within the oasis.^{59, 60} The scattered ownership often results in full parcels allowed to become fallow as former landowners or the children of former landowners or *khammes* simply walk away from the agricultural lifestyle in favor of other sectors including tourism, the service sector, and others.

⁵⁸ Subject 3. Interview by author.

⁵⁹ Subject 1. Interview by author.

⁶⁰ Subject 2. Interview by author.

The awareness of this issue of scattered ownership is promising; however, little concrete action has been taken to resolve it – but not for lack of trying. Interview subjects detailed previous attempts to involve the national government more directly in the management and distribution of lands.⁶¹ Another previous proposal originated by a civil society organization in Chebika went a step further to request assistance in developing a new modern oasis entirely which could be used to reinvigorate agricultural production in the city.⁶² There is an ongoing project to rejuvenate the oasis and increase interest in land cultivation by teaching the introduction of a three strata oasis system (the stratification of crop type so that there are three layers with date palms, fruit trees, like apple trees, olive trees, or vines, and ground vegetables like carrots and onions) to diversify and increase output per parcel.⁶³ This latest project, however, is funded not by the Tunisian government but by the World Bank’s Global Environment Facility with a grant of nearly \$6 million USD split between various projects in southern Tunisia.⁶⁴

The desire exists within Chebika to make serious reforms to this issue of scattered land ownership. Yet, the government does not appear willing to reinsert itself into local farming affairs in a large and systematic way. This unwillingness to assist in projects may be in part the result of the weakened national state due to the revolution in 2011 and ongoing democratic consolidation, but it is also a clear outcome of the failed agricultural policy of the 1960s which featured a strong and forceful interjection of government in to daily life in the oasis. Although there are some examples of partnerships from Chebika to the international level, this is not

⁶¹ Subject 4. Interview by author. Audio recording. Chebika, April 23, 2016.

⁶² Subject 1. Interview by author.

⁶³ Subject 2. Interview by author.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

viewed as a sufficient alternative to a close partnership with the state due to myriad bureaucratic hurdles and burdensome requirements after receiving funding.^{65, 66}

Assessing the Success or Failure of Government Action in Chebika

The concern of this analysis has not been simply to ask if land collectivization succeeded as a policy. The answer to that question is more a matter of fact and history than an ongoing debate within the academic community. Rather, this analysis has sought to situate the land collectivization policy of the 1960s within the broader picture of Bourguiba's modernity drive as a tool for statecraft intended to promote national unity by coercing local-national interaction and interconnectedness. So the question, then, is: Did it work in Chebika?

Although the quantity of communication between Chebika and greater Tunisia has increased, there has not been a corresponding increase in the sense of Chebika as a part of Tunisia. One Chebika resident described living there to Duvignaud by saying, "Nobody cares about Chebika. We're the tail of the fish..."⁶⁷ The quotation could have easily come from one of the interviews conducted just this past month.

There has come to exist a sense of nostalgia, that things were better and simpler in Chebika before the relocation of the town and forceful interjection of government into agriculture with one interview subject even going so far as to

⁶⁵ Subject 1. Interview by author.

⁶⁶ Subject 4. Interview by author.

⁶⁷ Duvignaud. *Change at Shebika*. 54.

refer to the earlier times as “the Golden Age of Chebika.”⁶⁸ It is not so much that residents of Chebika look at their modern amenities including internet and plasma TVs with disdain, but rather that they yearn for a time when they were not dependent on projects outside of their city and their control. Further examples of Chebika being failed by the outside community are numerous including the five entrepreneurs from Sidi Bouzid who came to address deficiencies in potable water nearly half a decade ago only to abandon the project and the stalled Italian water reclamation project that sits like a UFO atop the city.^{69, 70}

To the extent that the Bourguiban modernity drive sought to coax interactions between locals and the national level, the infrastructure set up to support the projects was largely extractive in nature. The schools that were set up throughout the country and in Chebika as well were intended to identify talented individuals and offer them employment far away from their rural home. Roads as well were set up with the interests of the state exceeding those of the local community. In Chebika for example, the roads that were built following independence were not accompanied by any proliferation in transportation or accessibility for those who do not have vehicles of their own. The *naql rifi* (the long-distance rural taxi) makes its way through Chebika only once a day, which poses major problems for residents who try to work in or commute to other major cities in the area such as Tozeur or Tameghza. So while roads and other physical manifestations of modernity exist now for rural communities as a result of the modernity drive, their utility rarely does.

⁶⁸ Subject 1. Interview by author.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Subject 4. Interview by author.

Duvignaud identified three conflicting forces at work in Chebika as he was leaving in 1966, all of which remain relevant to Tunisia today: 1) that of the system of the large-scale exploitation of the land; 2) that of the modern economy; and 3) that of stagnation in the precarious equilibrium of poverty.⁷¹ The first conflict can be paraphrased as the remnant appeal of Chebika's Golden Age, the second as ben Salah's goal and Bourguiba's hope never materialized due to mismanagement, and the third the painful reality of life in Chebika today. The modernity drive was well-intentioned and agricultural cooperatives worked in theory, but the reality of life in Chebika and elsewhere throughout the period was entirely different. Chebika is an example of a community that, incapable of distinguishing between the abuses of the colonial era and the collective era, turned back in on itself and is only just beginning to again look beyond the fortified walls of its oasis.

Conclusion

Although Bourguiba failed to articulate a consistent and functional land policy following independence, he was nevertheless successful in crafting a unified state. The other aspects of his modernity drive merit independent research as well including his policies on women's rights that enfranchised and activated new citizens in the Tunisian enterprise who went on to make substantial contributions to society and culture. Bourguiba's educational reforms, which

⁷¹ Duvignaud. *Change at Shebika*. 91.

were later expanded on under the ben Ali government, also deserve credit and study for their role in consolidating the Tunisian state.

Opportunities for future investigation in this area are abundant, including conducting additional research into the successful land collectives such as the Mejerda Valley project of which only brief reference is made above. While it is easy to chronicle the ways in which land reform failed to increase local-national integration, a closer examination of successful projects in the northwest of the country could prove similarly informative. I envision a future comparative analysis between Chebika and a similar community (in terms of isolation, historical significance of subsistence, etc.) in the Tunisian north. A further untouched element of the agricultural cooperative policy in this analysis is the prevalence of corruption and patronage in determining the allocation of resources. Certain communities that came to better grasp the rules of the game were able to reap larger benefits from statist interference than others.

Though this analysis has been frequently critical of the conceptualization and application of the Bourguiban modernity drive and agricultural cooperative program, it should not be mistaken as arguing that disparate Tunisian communities remain as isolated from one another and the government as ever. Recent events in Tunisia that shook the nation and the region like the Jasmine Revolution are a testament to the power of various communities communicating and coordinating with one another in moments of solidarity. It would also be interesting to examine the long-term effects of dirigist policy on rural communities today and to what extent those past experience have had on how the community views the democratic transition today – has there been an increase in

skepticism towards the government? are these communities especially large supporters of democracy? if so, do they tend towards liberal, conservative, or Islamist beliefs?

Despite these recently increasing examples of local-national integration, the metaphor of Tunisia as a unified island remains premature and misleading. At independence Tunisia was comprised of a large number of isolated communities functioning as independent islands unto themselves. Bourguiba acknowledged the decentralized nature of Tunisian society as a direct challenge to his ability to consolidate personal and political control in the state and subsequently embarked on an ambitious modernity drive characterized by large statist interjections into local life. Among the various policies of Bourguiba's *jihad* against underdevelopment, agricultural cooperatives and land collectivization stand out as directly targeted at fostering higher levels of local-national interaction and integration. Despite best and increasingly aggressive efforts by the government under the direction of Ahmed ben Salah, agricultural cooperatives failed to promote national cohesion and often had the opposite result of disenfranchising rural farmers and estranging them from the means of production. The case study of life in Chebika before and after land collectivization corroborates a picture of communities forced open by the interjection of government projects only to be left damaged, angry, and struggling by the failed policies. Thus Chebika remains an island, Tunisia does not.

Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Transcripts

Interview 1

4/23/2016 – Interview with head of local civil society organization
Huda Mzioudet, translator

ITS: Name of organization and primary function of organization?

#1: He is general coordinator of this NGO. It's an NGO funded by the World Bank for the rehabilitation of the touristic tract of Chebika.

ITS: Have you lived your entire life in Chebika? Is your family from Chebika, how long have you lived here?

#1: He was born here his whole family is from here. He was born in 1976. His father is still alive; he (his father) was a *khammes* working under another landowner.

ITS: What is an average day for this organization?

#1: He wanted to add something about the association. That they are heavily involved in civil society and that they try to reach out to locals here so their job is not only regarding the rehabilitation of the city, but also other aspects of daily life of Chebika locals. As an organization because they have taken advantage of the democratic transition but also this air of freedom after the Tunisian revolution of trying to empower, give more importance to Chebika because as a town that has almost always been neglected by the authorities, they're trying to reach out to policy makers and effect life of the locals through empowering them through different projects. Not only rehabilitation of the town. And in particular the fact that this town is suffering from lack of water – that is one other issue that they are dealing with in this association.

ITS: Having mentioned lack of water, what are some of the other major challenges to life today in Chebika?

#1: There are many challenges unfortunately mainly unemployment, marginalization, poverty, we've been trying to contact people in charge whether at the national or regional level and we're not really get any reaction from them to these issues that we're facing on a daily basis. And you noticed also when you tried to reach us here that transport unfortunately is a big issue as well for Chebika.

ITS: Would you say that these are similar issues, similar challenges that Chebika is facing as it has historically? So prior to its relocation? Are these new problems or are they old problems?

#1: He wanted to ask about if the village is that's being restored now or after?

ITS: No, so are these challenges that Chebikans are facing today, are they the same challenges that people in the old Chebika faced?

#1: He did not witness or hasn't lived through old Chebika. He was born in 1976, but from what he has gathered older generation that in 1969 there was a relocation of the old population to the new Chebika and new houses were built outside of the old town. In 1969 the old town was flooded and many of the houses some of them were huts or made of mud and wood and so basically they all almost were destroyed so that forced locals to come down to the new town and the state has contributed to the building of most of the houses in the new town. He remembers when he was young that the current challenges that Chebika is facing were not that big challenges back in his childhood because basically life was simpler back then and life was just centered around providing for the livelihood of families. For the *khammes* it was centered around working in a landowner's farm and he gets his share of the crop and the landowner would get most of the share of the crop of the land that is worked by the indentured servant. Life was also just centered around agricultural activities including crops of wheat and oasis palm trees, etc. So issues of marginalization or unemployment were not on the agenda at the time especially when he was young.

ITS: Is there a sense amongst the community at all of a sort of nostalgia for life before, when life was simpler? And potentially is there a difference in perceptions of that between the older generation and the younger generation?

#1: My main wish is that would go to the old town because life was simpler back then but also agriculture activities were more natural. We used to grow vegetables and palm trees, more biologically diversified way. Using natural water sources. Which is not the case now.

ITS: Do you believe that there has been a return to the importance of agriculture following the decrease in tourism?

#1: Yes, tourism has been hit hard by the terrorist attacks in the area. So a lot of people who used to work in the tourism sector have left and they are extremely marginalized. The main problem with agriculture in Chebika especially in the old forest here is the scattered ownership of land. We contacted the state to suggest that it gives us a new agriculture district, meaning another modern new oasis in which we could just grow start new agriculture activity there. The government unfortunately did not respond to that plea, not only that but anything regarding

this area. We have a project regarding drinkable water that has been launched 5 years ago and it hasn't been implemented yet.

ITS: In regards to the problem of scattered land ownership, who owns land in Chebika?

#1: The lands are owned by locals here but sometimes you have lands that are not productive enough and the locals do not know what to do with them so they will sell them to nonlocals from Redayif, from Gafsa, Tozeur, or Tameghza in order to generate more money out of it. One other reason for this scattered ownership is for example when you have a family with the father and his 4 or 5 children and he divides the land among his offspring and that contributes to the scattering of ownership in Chebika. Because of this issue of scattered land ownership, some of the land is no longer fit for any agricultural activity or production. You can notice that here in Chebika that there are lands that are still produce agriculture products but others are no longer used for such activities. And that's one consequence of this issue of scattered land ownership.

ITS: So in 1969 there was this attempt at land collectivization from what we heard yesterday. Which then failed by 1970. Amongst farmers in Chebika and Tameghza. If you're familiar with it can you talk about why it failed?

#1: From what he remembers, from during that year all of the lands were collected under one land. All farmers were forced to labor the land, to plant crops together, and that was the only souvenir (memory) of this collectivization period.

ITS: Was that a decision made collectively by the farmers or imposed by the government?

#1: It was imposed by the government This issue of collectivization is extremely sensitive in Chebika. Even talking about it can be very sensitive because it has so many sides to the issue. There are people who benefitted a lot from the collectivization experience. For instance, there were some farmers who did not own any palm trees before that period and thanks to that experience of collectivization they were able to own palm trees. This is according to what people have said. It can be true, it can be exaggerated, it can be wrong.

ITS: In what ways is Chebika more connected to Tunisia today than it was historically or has that not improved much?

#1: He would call the era when things were simpler as the Golden Age of Chebika. Because at the time locals did not need to move a lot to neighboring areas because they were working the lands and were self-sufficient. But unfortunately since the post-independence government made things even worse for Chebika regarding two issues: potable water and public transport. Chebika is still suffering from almost a complete absence of public transportation. They

have been petitioning to the Tunisian government to provide the town with decent public transportation, unfortunately that hasn't been addressed yet. There was an attempt to have the rural transport but it is not enough because it is still making connection between Tameghza which is more or less where Chebika depends on administratively speaking at the level of the district and Tozeur to which they depend on the regional level. And at least they were not really asking for frequent transport to Tameghza but at least something that would connect Chebika to neighboring Tozeur and Tameghza with something that would ease communication or connection between the two neighboring towns.

ITS: When the government fails to provide assistance are there any specific ways in which people in Chebika have attempted themselves to rectify these situations?

#1: They usually resort to the private sector. For example, if there's a local of Chebika who will use his car or his van to ease transportation between neighboring areas to Chebika.

ITS: If you could outline the problems with potable water in Chebika.

#1: 5 years ago in 2011 there was a project for potable water. 5 entrepreneurs they came to address this issue and start a project. Unfortunately, the whole project has failed ever since. This association tried to see with the local authorities and with the governor, but there was no response to that unfortunately. The entrepreneurs that were on this project they claimed that the plastic canals that could be used for the portable water project were costly which explains why the project was stopped.

ITS: So when the projects are looking for assistance do they look beyond the government of Tunisia? So for example the World Bank which is contributing a lot of funding for this organization and how yesterday we heard about the World Bank for the Environment which is injecting 6 million dinars. So how are these connections made from the international level to places like Chebika?

#1: We're going to just focus on potable water. Even himself he went to the water headquarters in Tozeur and spoke to the director there on how to ease the transport of potable water to the Chebika area. And the director suggested that could be done with the world bank if the locals, civil society here could get funding from the World Bank or grants in order to make this project become a reality. He was told by the manager of the water company that this is extremely difficult to fulfill and he thinks that even with international organizations this is not something that might happen any time in the future.

ITS: Why?

#1: World Bank projects are not integrated within state budgets. For example, there are projects dealing with the rehabilitation of the old town or of the touristic

track. This could be done, but the Tunisian government must take its own share in that project. The example of potable water – the World Bank when he came to Chebika he saw that there was a problem with potable water and suggested that he would help them with the establishment of a sanitation station in Chebika and when the project started (in 2010) they thought that it will be a serious project that will start on good basis but unfortunately it did not come to good fruition ever since.

Interview 2

4/23/2016 – Interview with head of local agricultural society
Huda Mzioudet, translator

#2: He is a civil society activist with a ... project that is funded by the World Bank for Environment through an agreement with the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development. As a civil society activist he helps with the organization of different projects here in different industries including agriculture, tourism, culture, and development. Agriculture is the most important thing.

ITS: What are the major challenges facing agriculture and farming in the oasis today?

#2: The main challenges are regarding the scattered ownership within the oasis and the aging of the oasis in Chebika since this oasis dates back for thousands of years. The main issue in Chebika is regarding the output or the decreasing production from the agricultural activities in the oasis and that unfortunately drove a lot of farmers away from the oasis and from agricultural activity in general. So this project came in order to bring the farmers back to the oasis in order to try and improve the production – the agricultural production. This includes, for example, the rejuvenation of the oasis, the adoption of this three strata system in the oasis with palm tree production, fruit, and other vegetable production – so trying to diversify more the agricultural production in the oasis here in Chebika.

ITS: What is the primary system of farming that is currently used as far as the prevalence of the *khammes* system still and the relationship between those who farm the land and who own the land?

#2: In the past the work of the *khammes* was the most activity in the agricultural sector in Chebika whereby the livelihood of not only the *khammes* but also the farmer depends on that. Now his activity has become almost secondary if not unimportant because basically the land has been abandoned and so there is no more interest from the *khammes* to work in the oasis because he's got other

activities to do in order to sustain himself and survive as a farmer. And sustain his family.

ITS: So would you say generally there is a lack of interest in agriculture as a primary sector in Chebika today?

#2: Yes - it's become a secondary thing. Before 2011 tourism was the main staple of the economic sector in Chebika. Unfortunately, after the Tunisian Revolution unfortunately with the crisis with the terrorist attacks a lot of young people abandoned the tourism sector and now they're trying to get back to the agricultural activity in the oasis.

ITS: Is there a sense of nostalgia for this time – the simpler time – before major changes at Chebika, before the relocation of the city when agriculture was a central part of life. Is there a sense of nostalgia for that and does he view his organization as attempting to return to a system similar to what was used then or is it an attempt to further modernize the system?

#2: He would like to see something similar regarding the agricultural activity as was the case in the past particularly with the presence of women in this sector. In the past women were present in the agriculture activity in the oasis growing vegetables and other stable products and so their contribution to the development of the oasis was huge. Unfortunately, that's not the case now, they have almost no role in the rejuvenation or the development of the oasis and he would like to see more of the women contribution in the development of the oasis.

ITS: Could you talk a little bit if you're familiar and comfortable with discussing it, the 1969 attempt at land collectivization and what effect that had on farming.

#2: Basically he doesn't really have a lot of familiarity. Since he does not really have a lot of knowledge of that, but from what he gathered the collectivization experience has worked mostly with the northwest of Tunisia but not in the southwest of Tunisia.

ITS: So in doing the work for the rejuvenation of the oasis do you find that the government of Tunisia is helpful to you in this process or is it more often an obstacle or just not a source of assistance generally.

#2: Regarding the oasis, there was an agreement with the regional administration of agriculture that depends on the Minister of Agriculture here in the area to for the rejuvenation of the oasis basically regarding the diagnosis for example of different palm trees and trying to see if there are different palm trees that have maybe some issues maybe they are aging or they have illnesses so to try and find a cure to that. So that's basically one of the ways how the government tried to intervene to help with the oasis. Within the ministry of agriculture there's a research center that collects data on all of the palm trees in the oasis especially

regarding the ones that are facing the problem of extinction and disappearing. So they collect those like DNA data bank. And so they collect all the information regarding different types of palm trees. And so through these the data it could try and prevent the death of certain palm trees and produce other palm trees through those data.

ITS: What are options or possibilities that have been considered to confront the issues surrounding scattered land ownership?

#2: So far there is nothing – we don't have some kind of local governance regarding this issue of scattered land ownership. The problem is that this issue of scattered ownership is making a lot of farmers to almost leave the oasis and no longer working on – abandoning the oasis. We probably have to wait until we have more control over the local – over this issue as a part of local democracy and local governance. In 2015 there was a strategy by which they signed some kind of contract with the national contract for the production of oases which was signed between civil society organizations and activists and also relevant department administration through the Ministry of Environment.

ITS: Anything else that you would like to add?

#2: Even before the revolution there were attempts at getting assistance from abroad – basically from a Swiss Bank in 2006 that tried to address this issue. Now with the World Bank for Development they've got his 4-year project between 2015 and 2019 through the auspices of the Tunisian Ministry of the Environment and they set up this project on the sustainable management of the oasis ecosystem in Tunisia. If we get more funds allocated to projects for the protection of cultural activity or the oasis, then we'll probably stop. For this project to be sustained in the future, for example one project regarding cleaning of the oasis for which we bought vans to clean the oasis that's something that would make this project sustained in the future and help us in this activity.

Interview 3

4/22/2016 with head of local farmers' union

Huda Mzioudet, translator

ITS: Primary job or function of your organization?

#3: Defends the rights of the farmers in coordination with the Minister of Agriculture. Originally an employee of the Ministry of Education.

ITS: Have you lived your whole life in this area?

#3: Yes, he's a farmer and has his own plot of land.

ITS: How old is your organization?

#3: Since 1956, it is a part of the National Union of Farmers. There is a local office here in Tameghza and a regional office in Tozeur.

ITS: What sort of rights do you find yourself defending on behalf of the farmers?

#3: We primarily deal with working with the land itself. And the role of the Farmer's Union is to defend the rights of anyone who either owns the land or works the land. And after the recent changes after the revolution, the union has taken a more proactive role in participating in policy, decision making, strategy for land ownership and other related...the only sector that has resisted after this change in Tunisia is the agriculture sector. Unfortunately, the tourism sector almost died. Services have weakened. Tunisia has always been self-sufficient so it does not need foreign manpower in agriculture which is something I want to focus on. For example, now Tunisia is the #1 producer of olive oil in the world (since 2015).

ITS: Is it most common for workers to farm the land that they own, or do most farmers work land owned by other people?

#3: Usually it is more farmers who are owning and using their own lands. That's usually how most farmers in Tunisia are. They primarily farm small sectors in small plots of land. This is along the livestock raising. In the last 4 years raising livestock has developed by 150%. As for raising dromedaries and camels the government allocates or gives credits that can be paid over 7 years for each farmer to have 10 heads of camels to encourage farmers to invest in that sector.

ITS: From what I've read of Chebika's history specifically, prior to its relocation (1960's) many of the farmers did not own the land that they were farming, there were a lot of landowners from Tameghza, from Redayif, and the nomads who owned this land. How has that changed?

#3: To correct that Tameghza as a town has existed at least 1800 years and that my own father has owned land since 1937 even the residents have all owned land before 1960s. These are lands that have been inherited from their forefathers that goes over 2 centuries ago.

ITS: Throughout the colonial period, were these lands taken away or nationalized at any point? Has it been seamless ownership or have there been periods of interruption?

#3: Even under the French colonial system there were people who still owned land here. So there was not expropriation of their land. In 1969 there was the experience of collectivization with Ahmed ben Salah. 1969. They nationalized the lands and they collected them, all the farmers, under the form of union of different farmers all owning the lands. 1970 that experience has failed so people they returned to the previous exploitation of their own land without any state

interventions. To stress a little bit more that private ownership is not something new in Tameghza and the neighboring areas. This has always been the case.

ITS: How common – primarily farmers are farming their own land. But how common is it for farmers to hire in work – to hire in their labor?

#3: In the case of Tozeur, Tameghza, and the surrounding areas they are not large plots of land. The largest would not exceed 3 or 4 hectares and they are mostly palm tree lands. 5 or 6 years ago you had something like an indentured servant who would be hired to work after the land and tend the palm trees or the oasis and he will get 1/5th of the crop. A *khammes*. Right now he will get paid in cash no longer does he get his own share from the crop that he has been working on for the whole year. Basically this farming or agricultural sector has become a secondary activity – more and more people are looking for alternative activities for example in masonry or service sector. But they still keep working on the land, but it's no longer the primary activity as it has been in the past. Chebika and Tameghza they have similar issues and the same characteristics when it comes to farming.

ITS: How prevalent today still is the *khammes* system?

#3: It's almost extinct. Because the standard of living has developed. Almost everyone does not need the services of a *khammes* because it is not sustainable enough.

ITS: Historically when it was a more prevalent system the *khammes* – did they usually live in the same towns? Were they people who didn't own land that were hired to work on the land? What was the relationship historically in this area between the *khammes* and those who did own the land?

#3: It was mainly a relationship of an employee to his employer it was not a status of servitude or anything like that. There was no over-exploitation of the *khammes* by his employer.

ITS: So if there was a plot of land in Chebika, the *khammes* were usually also from Chebika?

#3: Usually the *khammes* was a local. If someone is coming from outside they would need housing and because transportation, it's very hard. Transport system is not very developed. Things have developed, now people can live in Chebika and work in Tozeur and vice-versa.

ITS: So is there any significant or tangible changes to land ownership, farming, etc. from the old city to when they city was relocated? Chebika specifically? Was there any change to the general concept of land ownership relative to the resettlement of the village?

#3: Regarding Chebika the plot of land has preserved its geographical location. There was no urban encroachment. So what happened with the Chebika locals is that they slightly left the old town and lived next to the old town while preserving the oasis system. And this has been reinforced by the state's policy of banning any urban planning or construction in the oasis. No houses. Or in the farming land. In most of the almost of all of the oases are found in the south of Tunisia. And the best quality of dates is found in Tameghza.

ITS: The relocation of many of these mountain oases that happened in the 1960s, today is it looked at by the residents as a voluntary action as a beneficial action or as a decision imposed by the government?

#3: It was a natural development because of the development of life in general and the standard of living. For example, the way that the old town has been built originally they were built using clay now they are using concrete and steel. The old town basically was built using wood and clay whereas the new town has the modern life and in Chebika you have modern houses with internet and modern TVs (plasma). You have bloggers, you have people who are activating the culture industry.

ITS: As specific as possible the year the relocation in Chebika and Tameghza happened?

#3: 1969 there were floods. This is when they started to...and because of those floods a lot of those houses were flooded so a lot of people thought about building new houses outside of the old town.

ITS: The people who still live in Chebika or Tameghza are a lot of them the same families as before or has there been an increase in people coming in?

#3: The number of population has not changed mostly. Even if people are leaving Tameghza just for studying most of the time. There are also some Tameghza and Chebika locals who have migrated for example to Europe. Also employees or civil service who work outside of Chebika in certain areas. And if they come back it is very likely that the land cannot be sufficient for them to live on.

ITS: What would you say have been the most significant changes to life between the old city and the new city? Has there been any cultural shift or anything along those lines?

#3: The main change was touristic. Chebika has become the main resort for tourism industry. This has effected the tourism – the tourism industry has effected the agricultural industry. A lot of young people they are no longer interested in working on the land. 4 years before the revolution Chebika would receive 4,000 tourists every day from all over the world.

ITS: So now that tourism is down again is there a re-emerging importance to the land and agriculture? Has there been a readjustment of the importance of the land? Now that tourism is less prevalent is agriculture more important once again?

#3: Right now there is some return to the rejuvenation of oasis in Chebika. More and more people there. There is re----- of agriculture through livestock. Dromedaries and camel raising. Rejuvenation of palm trees. The maintenance of water sources. Manufacturing of fertilizers. And encouraging artisans by providing them with small credits. Caring for women issues. Giving her a small grant in order for her to be able to raise for example rabbits. Livestock, rabbits, or handicrafts. Basically people are going back now to agriculture because for them this is the only solid sector that is able to sustain them. And even during conference and seminars that I've been attending the state has been encouraging the return to agricultural as the only solid sector for the region.

Interview 4

4/23/2016 with local activist
Huda Mzioudet, translator

ITS: What is your name and what do you do?

#4: He is a local of Chebika, his father used to be a farmer. He is currently working in the Ministry of Finance and he helps with the association here.

ITS: What do you believe are the biggest challenges that Chebika today faces?

#4: The main challenges that Chebika has been facing – there are two. Drought and the tourism sector.

ITS: Have you lived in Chebika your whole life?

#4: Yes

ITS: Your father was a farmer – have you been a participant in the agriculture sector in Chebika yourself?

#4: He used to help his father a lot. Especially with crop date collection also with wheat and other agriculture products.

ITS: When he is considering some of the problems in Chebika today, how does he believe they can be fixed?

#4: There are two issues. Potable water – if that issue is solved that will alleviate many of the issues that Chebika is facing. The second issue is that of land for construction use – if the issue of those lands is solved that will help alleviate

issues regarding the territorial distribution of lands and also find solutions to the demographic distribution here of the population in Chebika.

ITS: What specific actions are being taken either by this organization or individuals in Chebika to address these issues?

#4: We suggested to the state for example as to how to deal with the potable water and the other main issue is how we suggested to the state how to solve the issue of collective lands. So instead of for example people being allocated lands from different tribes or different families, that the state will take an active role in the distribution of those lands.

ITS: Would you say that you feel there has been support from the government on these issues?

#4: The government helped for example in the project of potable water they spent money on this project. The problem was with the entrepreneurs who did not approve the final project.

ITS: Were those entrepreneurs from Chebika?

#4: They were from different areas but mainly from Sidi Bouzid and other areas in Tunisia.

ITS: Anything else you would like to contribute on this topic?

#4: Regarding civil society here in Chebika we would welcome that there would be some kind of – regarding projects in general – that certain areas there needs to be awareness of the specificities of certain areas because certain projects would be done differently for example in rural areas from in urban areas so if there's respect to the specificities for these areas in any type of project that should be considered. And also the issue of trust is very important in carrying out any project in this area.

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List of Interviews

In accordance with standard procedures for the protection of human subjects, names have been replaced by numbers in order to preserve anonymity of participants. Audio recordings have been deleted. Transcripts of interviews are available in the appendix. Interviews were conducted in English and Tunisian-dialect Arabic with Huda Mzioudet serving as translator.

Subject 1. Interview by author with head of local civil society organization.

Audio recording. Chebika, April 23, 2016.

Subject 2. Interview by author with head of local agricultural society. Audio

recording. Chebika, April 23, 2016.

Subject 3. Interview by author with head of local farmers' union. Audio

recording. Tameghza, April 22, 2016.

Subject 4. Interview by author with local activist. Audio recording. Chebika,

April 23, 2016.

Subject 5. Informal interview by author. No recording or transcript available.

Chebika, April 23, 2016.

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Program and Term: SIT Tunisia – Spring 2016

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