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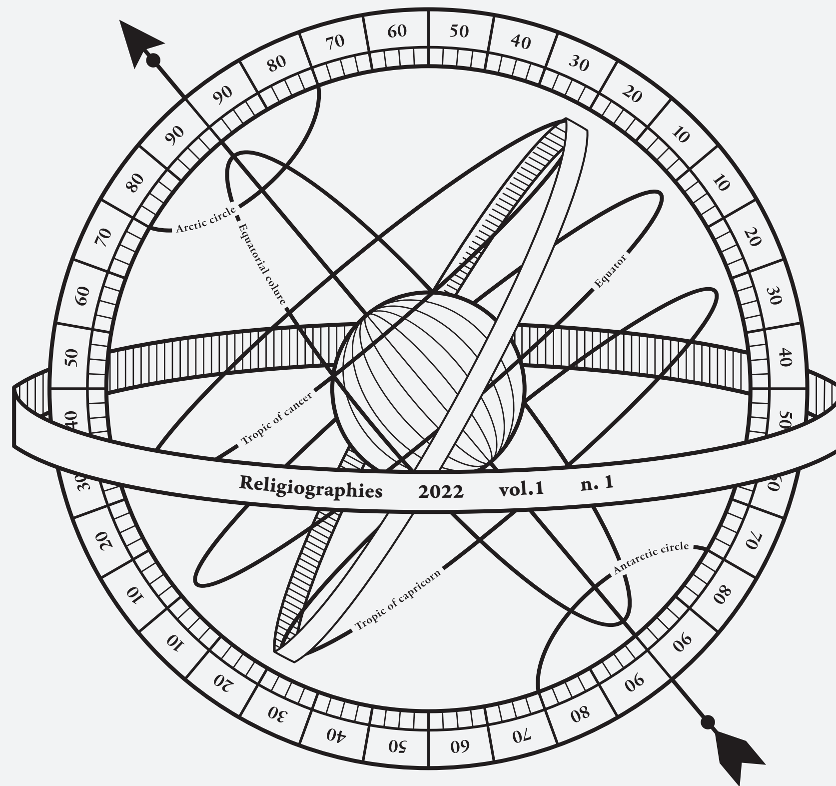

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A Paradoxical Pilgrimage. The Ghriba Synagogue in Djerba

Dionigi Albera, Manoël Pénicaud

Centro Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparate
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Dionigi Albera
CNRS, Idemec, Aix-Marseille University
dionigi.albera@univ-amu.fr

Manoël Pénicaud
CNRS, Idemec, Aix-Marseille University
manoelpenicaud@gmail.com

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Abstract
In North Africa, the long-term coexistence between Jews and Muslims generated many interfaith crossings. It was not uncommon for the followers of one religion to visit a shrine of the other, in order to obtain *baraka* (divine grace). This phenomenon has mostly disappeared throughout the Maghreb, but it persists on the island of Djerba (southern Tunisia), where over a thousand Jews are still living. Every year, for the Jewish holiday of Lag Ba'Omer, a pilgrimage gathers together thousands of Jewish pilgrims in the Ghriba synagogue. Many come from abroad, notably from France and Israel, where many Tunisian Jews migrated after the mid-20th century. Some Muslims also participate at different moments of the pilgrimage. Based on historical research and on ethnographic work carried out in 2014 and 2022, this article elucidates a series of paradoxes that make the singularity of this holy place. Here the interactions between Jews and Muslims at the shrine are characterized by an intense conviviality. Yet, during the last decades this site has been affected by tangible eruptions of bloody violence by Islamist terrorists. The structure of the pilgrimage seems to rest on a delicate balance between local and external forces. More generally, the Ghriba pilgrimage is crossed by major political dynamics, and is recurrently affected by the turmoil of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The shared sacred places, where faithful of different religious affiliations converge, give shape to situations of fragile and enigmatic coexistence. These settings are characterized by a complex blend of oppression and conviviality, open contest and transitory respite, subterranean rivalry and ongoing openness. Distrust and desire for domination often mix with conviviality and human sympathy. Hospitality can find its way through hostility. The effective hybridization of many ritual practices can coexist with the jealous affirmation of one's religious identity.

Various concepts have been conceived to express these complex configurations, looking for specific formulations that can go beyond generic notions such as syncretism or mixedness. Robert Hayden resorted to oxymoron-based formulations, such as 'competitive sharing' and 'antagonist tolerance.' On this basis he has developed over the years a rich program of collective research, as well as a pessimistic theory on the matrix of these exchanges.[1] Many years ago, Frederick William Hasluck[2] resorted to the idea of 'ambiguity' in relation to shared shrines. The relevance of this concept has been explored, in an expanded perspective, in some recent studies.[3] In these latter works, ambiguity is understood not as synonymous with a kind of disorder or lack of clarity, but as the potential manifestation of a wealth of meanings and of a ritual experimentation that insinuates into the interstices of the established political and religious orders.

Probably the idea of 'paradox' may likewise prove useful as an exploratory tool. A first meaning of this word is strictly linked to its etymological roots. The term paradox comes from the Greek, and has a long history in philosophical thought, since at least Plato's *Parmenides*. Its etymology shows that it comes from *para* meaning "contrary to" and *doxa* ("opinion").

1 Robert Hayden and alii, *Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites and Spaces* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

2 Frederick William Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929).

3 Dionigi Albera, "Toward a Reappraisal of Ambiguity: In the Footsteps of Frederick W. Hasluck," in *Pilgrimages and Ambiguity: Sharing the Sacred*, eds. Thierry Zarcone and Angela Hobart (London: Kingston Publishing, 2017), 23-43.

Therefore, as suggested by Merriam-Webster, paradox designates "a tenet contrary to received opinion." It is in this sense that Marcel Proust famously wrote, in *Les plaisirs et les jours*, that the paradoxes of today will be the prejudices of tomorrow. This meaning of the word may be easily extended outside the strict realm of ideas and opinions, encompassing practices and situations whose mere existence contradicts common expectations and viewpoints.

A second meaning concentrates more stringently on the working of contradiction itself in a paradoxical setting. From this point of view, Merriam-Webster gives the following concise definition: "one (such as a person, situation, or action) having seemingly contradictory qualities or phases." The core of this meaning derives from the close association of things that are apparently incongruous. Their match looks unexpected, implausible and somewhat suspect.[4]

These two meanings of the term paradox grasp crucial aspects of the configurations that are observable in shared sacred places. On a general level, it is possible to argue that the latter are usually paradoxical in the first meaning of the term, because they defy some common assumptions concerning religious identities and practices, which are generally supposed to be closed and mono-denominational. From this point of view, they offer interesting observatories to explore the shaping and the negotiation of religious conceptions and behaviours, and also the false premises of the doxa (be it merely common sense, or unsubstantiated scholarly opinion).

The second meaning of paradox alerts us to the proliferation of seemingly contradictory ideas, practices and objects that characterizes the daily choreography at shared sacred places. It also draws attention to the succession of different phases in the control of the site, and in the expression of intermingling, during the time. Moreover, it points to the complex interplay of religious and political dynamics that gives a particular physiognomy to these places.

In this article we will especially explore this second dimension of the idea of paradox, by concentrating on a particular site and chiefly on a particular moment in the year – namely the yearly pilgrimage to the Ghriba synagogue, on the island of Djerba in contemporary Tunisia. Here opposite realities do converge in astonishing ways. On the one side, from the point of view of the interreligious interactions at the shrine, it is possible to perceive an intense religious hybridity. On the other side, during the recent past this site has been affected by tangible eruptions of strong political confrontations, which even came to bloody violence. This pilgrimage displays a powerful concentrate of contrasting religious and ideological undercurrents. Inside the Ghriba synagogue the religious borders between Muslims and Jews can be easily crossed, while at the same time the international attendance at the annual pilgrimage is reinforcing ideological and political conflicts inside Tunisian society, as well as generating clashes between Tunisia and the State of Israel.

As we will argue in more detail below, in order to grasp the main components of this pilgrimage, the approach proposed 30 years ago by Michael Sallnow and John Eade proves very pertinent.[5] In this perspective, the pilgrimage is seen as an arena, where different and often divergent groups intersect, bringing contrasting meanings and practices to the shrine.

This essay is a further step in an ongoing and long-term research project initiated in the 2010s.[6] Based on two ethnographic fieldworks (2014

4
See https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox. A third meaning of the word paradox is more deeply related to the field of logical argumentation and seems less easily transferable to the sociological field. It designates a statement that is apparently contradictory and in fact is true; or, conversely, a statement that at first seems true and in fact is self-contradictory; and so on, including other combinations involving the interplay between the premises and the arguments.

5
John Eade and Michael Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London and New-York: Routledge, 1991).

6
Our fieldwork in 2022 was carried out thanks to the programme "Connectivités djerbiennes. Globalisations méditerranéennes des juifs de Djerba," AMIDEX (Aix-Marseille Univ), IRMC (Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain), CRFJ (Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem), 2020-2022.

Entrance of the Ghriba Synagogue in Djerba, 2022. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

and 2022[7]) and on historical research, it aims to uncover the dynamics and paradoxes that drive this pilgrimage. In order to do so, the articulation between diachronic and ethnographic approaches seemed to us to be the most relevant, in order to give an account of the complexity and the thickness of the phenomenon, without simply remaining on its surface. We are consciously following in the footsteps of the pioneering study conducted in 1979-1980 by Lucette Valensi and Abraham Udovitch, whose book was significantly titled "The Last Arab Jews."[8] It is noteworthy that these historians had adopted an ethnographic approach for this investigation. Our article participates in both a continuity and a renewal of an anthropological look at this pilgrimage following its transformations, with an emphasis on its interfaith dimension.[9]

From a methodological point of view, we attach crucial importance to visual and sound materiality, both in the fieldwork and in its written reconstruction. Images (still or moving) and sounds are particularly valuable first-hand sources in the case of pilgrimages that last only a few days a year. They make it possible to return to the field in retrospect, when comes the time for data analysis.[10] Moreover, this approach echoes that adopted by Valensi and Udovitch in mobilising the images taken in 1979-1980 by the Tunisian photographer Jacques Pérez, that punctuate their book.[11]

This study consists of several nested developments, which first present the local and historical backgrounds of the phenomenon, thanks to numerous sources dating from the end of the 19th century to the present day. Then, after analyzing the different foundation narratives, we focus deeper on the interfaith and inter-ritual dimensions, based on our ethnographic journeys. Besides the spontaneous attendance of the synagogue by some Muslim women, we also critically analyse the political speeches and the calls for tolerance, as well as the reverberation, on the pilgrimage, of the turbulent political context in Tunisia, but also in Israel-Palestine.

7
During these two fieldworks, we focused mainly on the space-time of the pilgrimage. In the future, it would be necessary to broaden the focus to the functioning of the local society during the rest of the year, which we hope to do in the framework of a multi-handed study.

8
Lucette Valensi and Abraham Udovitch, *Juifs en Terre d'Islam: Les communautés de Djerba* (Montreux: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 1984). This book was also published in English: *The Last Arab Jews. The Communities of Jerba, Tunisia* (Chur, London and New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1984). Let us mention the new French version : *Juifs de Djerba. Regards sur une communauté millénaire* (Tunis: Demeter, 2022).

9
On that aspect, see Dora Carpenter-Latiri, "The Ghriba in the Island of Jerba (or Djerba) or the re-invention of a shared shrine as a metonym for a multicultural Tunisia," in *Sharing the* Sacra: *The Politics and Pragmatics of Intercommunal Relations Around Holy Places,* ed. Glenn Bowman (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 118-138; Dionigi Albera, "La Ghriba : étrangère, solitaire et mystérieuse," in *Lieux saints partagés,* ed. Dionigi Albera, Manoël Pénicaud and Isabelle Marquette (Arles: Actes Sud/Mucem, 2015), 140-143; Dionigi Albera and Manoël Pénicaud, "La synagogue de la Ghriba à Djerba: Réflexions sur l'inclusivité d'un sanctuaire partagé en Tunisie," *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 175 (2016): 103-132.

10
Manoël Pénicaud, "The Visual Anthropology of Pilgrimages: Exploring the Making of Films and Photographs," in *Approaching Pilgrimage: Methodological issues involved in researching routes, sites and practices* eds. John Eade and Mario Katić (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

11
Jacques Perez passed away in July 2022, while an exhibition of his work was underway at the Museum of Jewish Art and History in Paris: *Jacques Perez, un regard tunisien.*

An enduring community

The Jewish community of Djerba may be seen as an exception in the recent history of the Jewish population of North Africa. It can be estimated that at the moment of its apogee, in the first half of the 20th century, the latter was not very far from 500,000 in the region including the three countries subjected to French domination (Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco). In the following decades there was a rapid and important migration of this population, attracted by the Zionist project in Israel and also driven by the worsening of its living conditions and the menace to life and property in the newly independent countries, especially due to the shadow of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Presently, the Jewish population has entirely disappeared in Algeria. Likewise, the various tens of thousands of Jews who still resided in Libya and Egypt in the 1940s have all fled those countries. Only a few thousand Jews remain in Morocco and Tunisia. In the case of Djerba, there has been a significant decline in the Jewish population, but not a real collapse as elsewhere. In the 20th century the Jews of Djerba represented one of the largest communities out of the total Jewish population of Tunisia. With around 3,000 people at the beginning of the century, and more than 4,000 in the 1930s, it was the most important Jewish settlement outside the metropolitan area of Tunis.[12] At the beginning of the 1950s, the island's Jewish population was still around 3,000, out of a total of nearly 100,000 Jews for Tunisia as a whole.[13] Nowadays the Jews in Djerba number roughly a thousand, but they alone represent about two-thirds of the entire Jewish presence in Tunisia (which amounts to about 1,500 inhabitants).

The pilgrimage to the Ghriba in Djerba constitutes one of the last traces of a form of religiosity that has been particularly lively for many centuries. The cult of the saints and the pilgrimage to their tombs or shrines have been important for the Jewish populations settled in North Africa and the Near East.[14] These cultural manifestations combined the influences from the Bible, the Talmud and the Kabbalah with others deriving from the cultural environment characterized by the predominance of Islam. From this point of view, the cult of the saints constituted a sort of "conceptual bridge" between Jews and Muslims (Goldberg, 1983). The main forms in which this devotion materialized were the visit (*ziyara*, in Arabic, a word used by both Muslims and Jews) to the sanctuary, and the *hiloula*, the commemorative feast of the saint. The almost total cancellation of the Jewish presence on the map of North Africa has affected the vitality of these manifestations. Almost all of them have disappeared. In many cases the physical structures still remain, but they are rarely visited by the faithful. In some cases, the cult of North African saints has been imported into Israel, with the construction of shrines and the transfer of objects and relics.[15] The recent decades have also witnessed the return of Moroccan Jews established in Israel, in the context of travels that mix a tourism of memory with the visiting of mausoleums and sacred places (Lévy, 2010). The annual pilgrimage to Djerba is a special case from this point of view, not only for the intensity of the ceremonial sequence and the number of people involved, but also because it relies on a substantial Jewish community still present on the spot.

In North Africa the long-term cohabitation between Jews and Muslims has given rise to numerous crossovers and interactions between the two faiths. It was not uncommon for people of one religion to visit a shrine of another religion to obtain *baraka* ("divine grace" or "blessing" in Arabic). The act of sharing holy places (such as the tombs of rabbis or Muslim saints) was an important phenomenon. Hundreds of common

12 Robert Attal and Claude Sitbon, *Regards sur les Juifs de Tunisie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979), 315.

13 Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century. The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 257, 272.

14 Josef Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

15 Yoram Bilu, "Reconfigurer le sacré : le culte des saints juifs marocains en Israël," *Archives Juives* 38, 2 (2005): 103-123.

sites have been documented by scholars.[16] Since in its annual pilgrimage it is possible to see a presence of Muslims alongside the Jews, Djerba hosts what is probably the only example of religious mixing between Jews and Muslims which is still alive in this region.

A Jewish presence in North Africa goes back to antiquity. Likewise, in the case of Djerba, the local Jewish population claims millennial roots in the island. This is possible, but there is no archaeological or historical evidence to support this assertion. The earliest document which provides a historical proof of the existence of a Jewish community on the island comes from the Cairo Genizah synagogue. It dates from the 11th century and shows that the Jews of Djerba were then well involved in the Mediterranean trade. A little later, Maimonides paints an unflattering portrait of the Jews of Djerba, whose opinions, beliefs and practices he criticizes, especially condemning their excess in matters of ritual purity. Significant testimony to the continuity and importance of the Jewish settlement in the island comes from an Italian map of 1560, in which the only inhabited places mentioned are two Jewish villages.[17] Even thereafter, the Jewish population retained its concentration in two *haras* (an Arabic term for Jewish quarters in North Africa). These villages remained exclusively Jewish until the 20th century. Their names are Hara Sghira ("small quarter"), also called Dighet, and Hara Kbira ("large quarter"), six kilometres to the north. While being linked, the two villages also present structural oppositions, which translate into different origin myths. The inhabitants of Hara Sghira claim to have arrived from Palestine after the destruction of the First Temple in the 6th century BC, while those of Hara Kbira claim to have experienced a more recent emigration from the Iberian Peninsula.

The Jewish community of Djerba emerges in a better documented way starting from the 18th century. It is then characterized by a great intellectual ferment. A large number of schools, synagogues and rabbis made Djerba an important centre of religious study and teaching. Several specialists scrupulously codified the peculiarities of local Judaism, which as Maimonides had already noted is characterized by a particular scruple for ritual purity - manifesting in this a sort of echo with the Ibadism that characterizes the Muslim population of the island.[18] During this period, a strict control of the behaviour of the population by the local rabbinical court was established. This constellation of features gave a peculiar shape to local Judaism, creating what Lucette Valensi and Abraham Udovitch defined as a "theocratic republic," which was maintained in the following century and also throughout the colonial period.[19] At the beginning of the 20th century, printing presses were introduced in Djerba. This further amplified the island's massive production of religious literature. In the following decades Djerba became a driving force for the printing of religious treatises for the Tunisian south, expanding its influence also to other regions of North Africa.[20]

The particular conformation of the local Jewish society explains the particular resistance exerted against the westernizing tendencies coming from French colonialism but also from the action of Zionism. This conformation is also probably at the origin of the particular resilience of the Jews of Djerba, who maintained a significant demographic continuity when around them the entire Judaism of North Africa became disrupted and almost disappeared. The assiduity of religious practice is attested, since the 18th century, by the presence of numerous synagogues on the

16
Issachar Ben Ami, *Culte des saints et pèlerinages judéo-musulmans au Maroc* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1990); Emile Dermenghem, Le culte des saints dans l'islam maghrébin (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), Louis Voinot, *Pèlerinages judéo-musulmans du Maroc* (Paris: Larose, 1948); Haim Zafrani, *Deux Mille Ans de vie juive au Maroc* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1983).

17
For a discussion of the historical traces of Djerba's Jews, see Valensi and Udovitch, *Juifs en Terre d'Islam*, 11-15. The Maimonides' reference is *Iggarot u-Sh'elot u-Techubot*, Amsterdam, 1712, 3a, quoted in Haim Zeev Hirsch-Berg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 165. For the map (1560), see Valensi and Udovitch, *Juifs en Terre d'Islam*, *op. cit.*, 15.

18
It is worth mentioning that already Maimonides had noticed this parallel. *Ibid.*, 12.

19
Ibid., 17-21.

20
Ibid., 88.

island.[21] The most famous of these synagogues is certainly that of the Ghriba, which is the epicentre of a well-known pilgrimage.

Contrasting narratives

Ghriba is an Arabic term that means "foreign," "lonely," and also "mysterious." Some local narratives trace the legendary history of this sanctuary, also establishing a link with this denomination. A first block is composed of narratives that are inscribed within an oral and local horizon. They revolve around the theme of a young foreign woman who in an indefinite past arrived on the island. This "foreign," "lonely" and "mysterious" young woman – the Ghriba – is said to have come one day to settle in a hut of branches in a deserted place near Hara Sghira. The locals kept their distance from this "mysterious" woman, and no one dared approach her. But one night, her cabin caught fire; the villagers thought that she was engaged in magic practices and did not come to her aid; the next day, they discovered her lifeless yet still intact body. They therefore understood that she was a saint and decided to erect a synagogue in this precise place. The description of the mysterious young woman makes no mention of her religious affiliation, so because of this indeterminacy, some consider that she may have been either Jewish or Muslim. This version of the story is already mentioned at the beginning of the 20th century in a description of the island.[22]

Another set of narratives is situated on a deeper historical ground. An account present in the community of Djerba indicates that Jewish priests (*cohenim*), fleeing Palestine after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 586 BC by the army of Nebuchadnezzar, landed on this island, which seemed "strange" to them and "mysterious."[23] Deciding to settle there, they founded their synagogue there, by embedding stones from a door of the holy Temple that they had been able to take with them. This legend was first published in a book by Rabbi Abraham Haim Addadi of Tripoli, printed in Livorno in 1849. It was subsequently detailed by Nahum Slouschz who had collected it there at the beginning of the 20th century.[24] Towards the end of the 19th century, a European traveller was told a variant of this legend: at the Ghriba, he writes, "bearded and solemn priests, looking like sphinxes with a red headband falling over their shoulders in the Egyptian style, keep the Tablets of the Law that Moses received at Sinai from Jehovah's hands. I have not seen them, nor any Jew on the island, but the priests assure them that they are in the sanctuary." The latter also asserted that a well, located in the courtyard of the synagogue, would communicate with the Temple of Jerusalem.[25] The author of a geographical description of the island at the beginning of the 20th century takes up the same theme, observing that a legend claims that "a table of Moses" was found on the site of the synagogue.[26]

This second narrative, with all its variants, emphasizes the Jewish character of the synagogue by directly linking its foundation to the Temple of Jerusalem, the symbolic pivot of Judaism. Moreover, it puts the accent on its illustrious and distant origin (in time and space), which links it to seminal episodes of biblical history. At the same time, this story is related to the foundational myth of Hara Sghira, whose first inhabitants would have been Jerusalem's priests fleeing after the destruction of the First Temple. On the contrary, the first narrative proposes a chronology of the foundation of the sanctuary that is much more vague. Even the religious inscription of the founding figure appears rather fuzzy.

21
In the mid 20th century there were about 20 active synagogues, for a Jewish population of about 4,000 people, *ibid.*, 124.

22
F. Gendre, "L'île de Djerba," *Revue tunisienne* 15 (1908): 78).

23
This etymological explanation of the name of the synagogue transforms the hypothetical Hebrew escapees of the 6th century BC into Arabic speakers.

24
Nahum Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909). Nahum Slouschz was an orientalist of great erudition and fervent Zionist, who, in the first decades of the 20th century, visited different regions of the Maghreb – from Libya to Morocco – to document the living conditions of the Jews and to detect the historical and archaeological traces of their past. Below we will refer again several times to this important work. For an appreciation of the contribution of this author, see for example Jörg Shulte, "Nahum Slouschz (1871-1966) and His Contribution to the Hebrew Renaissance," in *The Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture, 1917-1937*, eds. Jörg Shulte, Olga Tabachnikova and Peter Wagstaff (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012), 109-126.

25
Vincent Amaury, *A travers le monde* (Paris: Hachette, 1896), 396.

26
Gendre, "L'île de Djerba," 78.

27
Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa*, 347-348.

28
Albera, "La Ghriba : étrangère, solitaire et mystérieuse," 141.

29
Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan, 1926), vol. I, 46.

Strangeness and hospitality

In spite of the local grounding of the mythical chart of foundation of this synagogue, the Ghriba in Djerba is part of a wider cultural complex, which was brought to light more than a century ago by Nahum Slouschz. During his explorations, he isolated a typology of synagogues present in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, marked by an identical name – Ghriba – and by an attendance extended to Muslims. Slouschz identified six such synagogues, and put forward historical hypotheses as to their origin. In his view, these were not mere synagogues, but sanctuaries whose origins dated back "to ancient times" and even to pre-Islamic times.[27] Basically, Slouschz's hypothesis shared some fundamental assumptions of the stories he had heard from the rabbis of Djerba, simply stripping them of the most picturesque and improbable aspects. However, the historical arguments put forward by Slouschz were very hypothetical, and may be difficult to accept today; yet he had the merit of underlining the existence of a web linking the various Ghriba of the Maghreb, which has not yet been the subject of an in-depth study.

The elements contained in the popular version provide other clues that lead to a larger configuration. For example, the theme of the death of a woman is also present for the Ghriba of Kef, in northern Tunisia, where another legend has been collected that tells of three orphaned siblings who separate, wander and are at the origin of the Ghribas of Annaba, Kef and Djerba.[28]

There are good reasons to think that the theme of the *baraka* stemming from the tombs of unknown strangers went beyond the Jewish sphere, and was common to Muslim milieus. A passage by Edward Westermarck is very significant from this point of view:

> "If a stranger from afar dies and is buried in the place he visits, his grave is regarded as a shrine, and he is called Sîdi or Sîd l-Grîb, "Monsieur" or "Mr. Stranger." At Fez there is the grave of a female saint named Lalla Griba; and the *feddân l-gurba*, outside Bab g-Gîsa, which is a cemetery for homeless strangers who have died in Fez, is considered to possess much *baraka*. Those who are buried there will go to Paradise."[29]

As the above quotation clearly shows, the legendary corpus connected to a dead stranger intersects the theme of hospitality. This aspect is evident also in Djerba's narrative. The inhabitants are inhospitable to the foreign woman, and after her death they try to make amends for this behaviour by giving her a cult and dedicating a sanctuary to her.

The vicissitudes of a pilgrimage centre

The local narratives on a very old origin of the Djerbian Ghriba come up against the lack of historical sources for remote times. The architecture of the Ghriba does not reveal any hints of a very distant past. Several additions and renovations rather suggest an expansion of the sanctuary from the second half of the 19th century onward. Slouschz gives some precise information deriving from his visit to the site at the beginning of the 20th century. About 40 years before his visit (therefore sometime around 1860) the building had been rebuilt. The addition of the vestibule appears even more recent. During his visit in 1906, Slouschz also noticed the ongoing construction of housing for sick pilgrims from far and wide, including those coming from Egypt

and Morocco, drawn by the miraculous properties of the shrine. In short, everything seemed to confirm the growing success of the Ghriba.

Subsequently, the interior decor has again been enriched and the vestibule (apparently built, on what was before an open courtyard, shortly before Slouschz's visit to the site) becomes a room in itself. Important renovation work took place in particular around 1920.[30] In the 1950s, further enlargement works concerned the space to house pilgrims, especially those coming from Libya.[31] Taken together, these expansion works reflect the growing success of the sanctuary, which attracted crowds of pilgrims even from far away. Furthermore, the growth of the pilgrimage seems to be correlated with the strong influence that the Jewish community of Djerba exercised elsewhere. It should not be forgotten that, in addition to exporting rabbis and religious books, the Jews of Djerba were also at the origin of important flows of artisans and merchants. It is possible that these migrants may have contributed to expanding the fame of the Ghriba cult.

During the first half of the 20th century, the Ghriba of Djerba seems to have all the features of an important regional pilgrimage centre. It attracts pilgrims who come not only from the main basin of Djerba's influence – southern Tunisia, Libya – but also from more distant lands (Morocco, Egypt, Greece). At the beginning of the 20th century, Slouschz compares the Ghriba of Djerba to one of the most important European pilgrimage sites. In his eyes "the Ghriba is a sort of Jewish Lourdes, not without its Mussulman and even its Christian votaries."[32] This statement clearly suggests that the miraculous curative powers attributed to the sanctuary are largely recognised even outside the Jewish domain. Despite these overflows from the bed of Judaism, the pilgrimage appears above all as a meeting point for a Jewish population scattered in various Mediterranean regions. On the occasion of the annual meeting, the pilgrimage thus brings together a vast conglomerate of Jewish communities from all North Africa, and even from beyond. The festivities begin on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Iyar, in commemoration of Rabbi Meier Baal Haness, and last until the 18th which corresponds to the festival (*hilula*, in Hebrew) of Lag Ba'Omer.[33] This date celebrates in particular the rise of the soul of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai (called "Rabbi Shim'un" locally), the supposed author of the Zohar, who is buried in Meron in Israel – another important pilgrimage centre. This date is celebrated in many *hiloulot* at the tombs of other Righteous (*tzaddikim* in Hebrew) who enjoy an aura of holiness.

In 1930, Jacques Véhel provides a description of this profuse pilgrimage. In the interwar period, Jewish musicians and singers are brought in from Tunis, but also from Cairo and Alexandria. Boats are chartered to transport the pilgrims from the ports of Tunisia, Tripolitania, Egypt, Greece. Caravans of merchants go to Djerba to sell religious books and religious objects. For several days, ceremonies, songs, music, feasts, hugs, follow one another, in an atmosphere that evokes that of an "oriental Lourdes."[34]

The second half of the 20th century saw a gradual transformation of the context of the pilgrimage. The Jewish population of North Africa experienced a dizzying decrease, to the point of practically disappearing, within a few decades, from most of the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. This is the case of Algeria, Libya and Egypt. The pilgrimage did not lose its importance, but its sociological core experienced a shift. Now the largest contingent of pilgrims is made up of Tunisian

30 Jacques Véhel, "Pèlerinages nord-africains," *L'univers israélite*, 23/05 (1930): 208.

31 Valensi and Udovitch, *Juifs en Terre d'Islam*, 128.

32 Slouschz, *Travels in North Africa*, 264.

33 Lag Ba'Omer occurs on the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer, which is celebrated the day after Pessah.

34 Véhel, "Pèlerinages nord-africains," 208.

Jews who emigrated to Europe or Israel. In this way, the pilgrimage has increasingly become a place of temporary reunion for the Tunisian Jewish diaspora, besides that originating in Djerba. Going to Djerba on the occasion of the Lag Ba'Omer festival is also equivalent to temporarily reconnecting with one's roots (rites, language, music, food, etc.). The space-time of the pilgrimage allows the ephemeral reconstruction of a community innervated by the reinforcement of religious practice and by festive effervescence.[35] In addition, pilgrimage practices display a hybridization with those of mass tourism (use of travel agencies, sojourn in luxury hotels).

Returning to a land that has often been left in a hurry – because of a feeling of insecurity – requires overcoming a double difficulty: the memory of the uprooting and the current threats to the Jewish presence in Muslim countries. The turbulences of Mediterranean geopolitics have invited themselves into the synagogue of Djerba. The sanctuary has been tragically wracked on several occasions by the tensions of a political environment fuelled by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and by the rise of Islamist terrorism. In 1985, a Tunisian soldier in charge of the security of the Ghriba opened fire in the sanctuary, killing five people. This act was a retaliation for an airstrike that a week before the Israeli army had made on a suburb just outside of Tunis, targeting the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters, and causing the death of 36 persons. After a period of crisis, the annual festival of Ghriba gained momentum again. In the early 2000s, the pilgrimage attracted several thousand pilgrims, including many from Israel.[36] But a tragic turning point suddenly interrupted this expansion. On April 11, 2002, a few weeks before the Lag Ba'Omer holiday, a suicide bombing attributed to the Al-Qaeda organization caused the deaths of 19 people, including 14 German tourists, in front of the synagogue entrance. Since then, the sanctuary has enjoyed significant protection from the authorities. During Ben Ali's regime (1987-2011), the pilgrimage was an opportunity to show the tolerance of the Tunisian government and society. Ministers often made their appearance in the synagogue, with public speeches that had an enthusiastic welcome from the crowd of pilgrims.

The last decades have been characterized by recurring political crises that have had serious repercussions on pilgrimage, which has thus known its ups and downs. With the fall of Ben Ali's regime in January 2011, the entire country was plunged into a period of turmoil. For two years the pilgrimage was particularly reduced, because many foreign pilgrims did not participate. After a relative resumption of the pilgrimage, another crisis was provoked by the attacks perpetrated at the Bardo Museum in Tunis in March 2015 and on a beach in Sousse in May 2015. Here again, pilgrims from outside feared threats of an attack which circulated in particular on social networks. Moreover, information issued by the Israeli government warned against the risk of terrorist attacks, trying to discourage Jewish people from attending the pilgrimage. In the following years the pilgrimage has experienced some resilience, before being severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

As can be clearly seen from what has just been said, in recent decades the history of this pilgrimage is by no means linear. It has experienced ups and downs, periods of prosperity and others of crisis. The Ghriba synagogue and the pilgrimage that goes with it can be described in terms of an intricate web of paradoxes. In the following sections we will limit ourselves to indicating some of them, without undertaking a more in-depth analysis,

35 Valensi and Udovitch, *Juifs en Terre d'Islam.*

36 Shlomo Deshen, "Near the Jerba Beach: Tunisian Jews, an Anthropologist, and Other Visitors," *Jewish Social Studies,* New Series, vol. 3, 2 (2010): 90-118; Sylvaine Conord, "Le pèlerinage Lag ba Omer à Djerba (Tunisie). Une forme de migration touristique," in *Socio-anthropologie de l'image au Maghreb. Nouveaux usages touristiques de la culture religieuse,* ed. Katia Boissevain (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 105-116.

which would require a much larger space. We will stress some features of the arena created around this synagogue and its pilgrimage, with a number of concentric circles and a juxtaposition of borders which intersect the field generated by the Ghriba.

A web of paradoxes

A first aspect concerns the religious qualification of the synagogue. The very nature of this religious building manifests some paradoxical features. To understand the complexity of the configuration of the Ghriba, it is necessary to make a general distinction between place of worship and holy place. The first corresponds to the space of collective, regular and routine religious practice (synagogue, church, mosque); the second, on the other hand, is marked by a denser sacrality which gives rise to more exceptional practices, in the unique space-time of the pilgrimage. In several respects, the Ghriba falls within both of these registers, and in the course of all its documented history, it manifests a double nature. On the one hand, it is a place of worship with a local character, closely linked to Hara Sghira. It is even the only synagogue in this settlement that contains Torah scrolls. Like any synagogue of the island, the Ghriba is a place of prayer, study and assembly for the men of the village. On the other hand, the Ghriba is a centre of pilgrimage with international impact. As a place of worship, the Ghriba is a uniquely masculine space. As a holy place, and especially at the time of pilgrimage, the synagogue becomes a mixed space, mainly occupied by women, who are the protagonists of many rituals, often linked to fertility. More recently, the Ghriba has also become a tourist spot, turning into a stopover on discovery tours of the island: a type of visit that is also found in a large number of holy places, and less in routine places of worship.

We have already pointed out the existence of diverging narratives concerning the origin of the sanctuary. Even today, the two registers coexist and can be in turn mobilized in the local discourse according to the occasions, the interlocutors, and the purposes. When it comes to promoting the pilgrimage and establishing its prestige, historical arguments are put forward. This makes it possible to accentuate the importance of the synagogue from the point of view of heritage and to emphasize its direct kinship with the holy of holies of Judaism. Such filiation erects and legitimizes the exceptionality of the Ghriba, in the mythical time of this diaspora of the 6th century BC. The opinion according to which the stones brought back from Jerusalem would be none other than the Tablets of the Law – which amounts to seeing in this building a substitution of the Temple – still finds some followers today.[37] In contrast, the inclusive narrative, centred on the unknown young woman, largely dominates today among pilgrims (but not among local Jews), with variations that show a mythological creativity.

Furthermore, the post-mortem hospitality granted to this stranger in the local pantheon of holy figures also reverberates on the relative opening of the sanctuary itself. It is no coincidence that in Djerba, as in the other Ghribas, attendance also involves Muslims, who in turn attribute *baraka* to figures and places that are foreign to them from a religious point of view. Thus, a game of mirrors and a sequence of concatenations are established that also involve ritual practices. In 2014, a Jewish woman coming from France, met in the synagogue, established clearly this link when she exposed a slightly different version of the foundational legend:

37 See for instance Bernard Allali, *Les juifs de Tunisie : un autre regard*, (Paris: Éditions Bernard Allali, 2014), 324-329.

Blessing of Pilgrims in the Synagogue, 2022. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

Jewish and Muslim women praying side by side, 2014. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

> "The Ghriba means 'the loner' in Arabic and in Jewish [sic]. They say it was a young girl that people found on the beach. The Muslim Tunisians said she was a girl of theirs, and the Jews here said she was a girl of theirs. So, they built a synagogue where you walk as if you were inside a mosque, with your head covered and bare feet."

The polarization that emerges from the legendary corpus more generally pervades the religious practices associated with this sanctuary. It determines a field where opposites can coexist and find forms of conciliation.

A cauldron of rituality

Another aspect that highlights the duplicity of this pilgrimage site derives from the contrast between the austere and rigorist tendency of local Judaism, and the complex ritual choreography implemented at the sanctuary, which leaves much room for the fervour of popular devotions. According to our observation in 2014 and 2022, the synagogue becomes indeed the theatre of an intense ritual effervescence during the pilgrimage days. In the first room, a few Djerbian rabbis sitting on benches recite prayers for visitors who make offerings in exchange. These sacred gifts and counter gifts are materialized by the sharing of biscuits, dried fruits, and fig alcohol (*bukha*). Pilgrims mix various languages, Arabic, Hebrew, and French.

The atmosphere becomes festive, punctuated by smiles and laughter, jokes, percussion rhythms (playing *darbuka*), and collective songs. Pilgrims move freely, without any sexual division of space. At the back, an employee draws from a well a sacred water that visitors pass on their faces while praying, or else they pour into plastic bottles. According to one lady: "When you have a problem, when you can't work, this water allows you to do what you have to do. If you have bad luck or problems in your store or in your house, then you have to wash the floor, or simply your hands!" The rituality becomes more intensive in the second room, the historical heart of the synagogue. Its specificity is that one has to take off one's shoes to enter it. But we observed that, in the constant flow of pilgrims, many do not respect this rule. In that room, worshippers are more concentrated on their own ritual performance, because requests are more susceptible to be granted there. The burners attract many devotees, mostly women, who light candles. Some of them burst into tears, without trying to hide themselves because this type of effusion is accepted by all. Private and public spheres are intimately nested.

The eastern wall houses five sacred cabinets, reminiscent of the Temple Ark of the Covenant (*heikhal*) where the Torah scrolls are kept. Many pilgrims come to pray against this wall covered with ex-voto. Let us mention here the case of a Jewish woman accompanied by a Muslim one, both from Paris. Accustomed to the place, the first spontaneously invites her friend to reproduce her gestures, in particular the fact of praying in the direction of Jerusalem. In fact nothing then makes it possible to distinguish their respective religious belonging.

An emblematic (almost exclusively feminine) ritual consists of inscribing one's wish on chicken eggs. Throughout the day, women are waiting to descend into a sort of small crypt through a narrow opening in the eastern wall. It is believed that this is the exact place where the inanimate body of the mysterious Ghriba was discovered. Eggs are directly related

to fecundity, and most of the expectations to marriage and childbirth. Women enter that tunnel to deposit their eggs and candles. Muslims also discreetly perform this eggs ritual.

From a theoretical point of view, these few examples - which would deserve a longer and more detailed ethnographic description[38] - lead to an understanding of the space-time of pilgrimage as an arena of heterogeneous practices and behaviours that cohabit under the same roof. Then the theoretical model defined by John Eade and Michael Sallnow,[39] who see pilgrimage centers as "empty vessels" that pilgrims fill with the meanings of their choice, seems particularly operative, including at the ritual level. Several levels of practices and interpretations coexist, sometimes in a contradictory way and above all varying according to the origin of the pilgrims, local or foreigners. For example, many pilgrims from abroad extinguish and then take with them the candles they have just lit. However, this practice is considered "abnormal" by local Jews. Similarly, the practice of laying dozens of eggs per pilgrim is contested by locals who do not engage in this ritual with such fervour.

A Woman Pilgrim and Votive Eggs, 2022. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

The Ghriba Menara, 2014. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

This type of divergence reinforces the paradox stated above, between on the one hand the external pilgrims who are the main actors and promoters of the ritual effervescence, and on the other hand the local Djerbians who are much less demonstrative. More religiously conservative and rigorous, the latter do not look kindly on the abundance of heterodox rituals that some - among the more orthodox - even associate with idolatry. This contrast reveals a collision between these two spheres, which at first glance escapes observation. The informed observer can see that during the pilgrimage days, the external pilgrims are the most numerous in the sanctuary. But at the end of the day, the latter return to their seaside luxury hotels, while most of the local Jewish community, which is mainly based in Hara Kbira, arrives in numbers. In other words, it is as if the locals are taking over the place. The Djerbian women take the opportunity to pray in the Ghriba, a space reserved for men the rest of the year. Then the whole space of the Ukala is taken over by these numerous families and the festivities can be in full swing.

Let us introduce the more profane space of the Ukala, which is part of the Ghriba complex and which is situated opposite the synagogue, on the other side of a road that is now closed. The Ukala is a former caravanserai, where non-Djerbian pilgrims (including many Libyans) were once housed in small rooms. In the open-air courtyard, vendors sold pastries, jewellery, amulets (e.g. *khamsa*) and souvenirs, displayed on ephemeral stalls. In one corner, women were attracted by a monumental candlestick more than two metres high called "Menara" and made by a silversmith. They devoutly tied shimmering scarves of fabric and artificial silk to it. Then came the crucial sequence of the auction of the Menara *rimonims*, which are the silver ornaments of the Torah placed atop the candlestick on this day. Pilgrims were publicly competing - for up to several thousand dinars - for the privilege of symbolically acquiring these holy pieces, which were then returned, while large sums of money became donations to the shrine.

At the end of the auction, the Menara was solemnly carried in procession outside of the Ghriba. In the past and before the attacks, the procession had to pass by Hara Sghira. But since then, it has ended down the street a few dozen metres away for security reasons. The pilgrims walked as if everything was normal, but the concentration of security forces was

38 Albera and Pénicaud, "La synagogue de la Ghriba," 183-194.

39 Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*, 15.

very strong. Armed men in balaclavas advanced among the pilgrims; snipers were posted on the roof of the synagogue; a helicopter flew over it and intelligence services filmed everything. In other words, the procession, which was once (and still partially is) an occasion of sharing and conviviality, had become overprotected and seemed to be under siege. Such a contrast looked also paradoxical.

A mix of hetero-rituality and poly-rituality

Coming back at a theoretical level to analyse ritual performances and the issue of inter-rituality between different religious groups, the analytic distinction between hetero-rituality (silent cohabitation of ritual practices) and poly-rituality (official speeches and gestures showing tolerance and mutual acceptance) seems particularly relevant in the Ghriba's case.[40] On the one hand, hetero-rituality implies that "the distinction between religious groups is put into brackets, and it is not performed through the ritual. There is no planned overall ritual sequence but a multiplicity of individual ritual packages that may converge, diverge, and be superimposed, drawing on a larger pool of ritual practices that present family resemblances and permit some forms of translatability from a religious group to another."[41] This form of inter-rituality mainly concerns the ritual arena described above, as a mix of spontaneous ritual mimicry and bricolages. On the other hand, poly-rituality occurs with the orchestration of interreligious gathering and understanding: "the existence of different religious identities is constitutive and is expressed and performed through the ritual sequence and the provisory interdependence between them in the spatial and temporal setting of the ritual. In this case, the architecture of the ritual sequences is oriented toward an articulation of the components that maintains the distinction between religious groups, which are considered coherent wholes."[42]

In other words, both hetero-rituality and poly-rituality are at work during the pilgrimage. When it comes to poly-rituality, the rhetoric of inclusiveness and so-called *convivencia* is developed in several moments inside the choreography of the pilgrimage days, which always includes some official interventions by political authorities. Therefore, each year the pilgrimage offers an opportunity to reaffirm the "tolerance" and "openness" of Tunisian government and society. This is obviously a political message that Tunisian authorities want to send to the Tunisians and to the world. Already during the Ben Ali regime, ministers used to visit the site during the pilgrimage days, and in their speeches they would exalt Tunisian tolerance, dialogue and fraternity, extolling the central role of President Ben Ali. In 2014, the former Minister of Tourism Amel Karboul gave a speech before the synagogue during the pilgrimage, emphasizing the friendly coexistence between Muslims and Jews for centuries: "Today, Tunisia, which brings together all religions, which tolerates all ideologies, wishes to experience a new 21st century *convivencia*. I believe in Tunisia's ability to have its golden age. Not just Tunisia, but the whole region. It will not be an exception, it will show the way. Our country is yours. You, Tunisians who left to come back, a little more often, a little longer, maybe forever!"

After the break imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the pilgrimage revived in May 2022. On this occasion also the pilgrims were welcomed in the area of the synagogue by the new Prime Minister, Najla Bouden, accompanied by the Minister of Tourism, Mohamed Moez Belhassine.[43]

40 Dionigi Albera, "Ritual mixing and inter-rituality at Marian shrines," in *Crossing Ritual Borders: Opportunities, Limits, and Obstacles,* ed. Marianne Moyaert (New York: Palgrave, 2019), 137-154.

41 *Ibid.*,152.

42 *Ibid.*, 152.

43 In 2012, President Moncef Marzouki visited the Ghriba in order to solemnly commemorate the 10th anniversary of the attack on the synagogue. More recently, in March 2020, President Kaïs Saïed also visited the synagogue. He in his turn asserted the peaceful coexistence in Djerba between inhabitants of different religions.

The German, Canadian, and French ambassadors were also present. The case of Hassen Chalgoumi is symptomatic of this official poly-rituality: known as the imam of the French city of Drancy, this French-Tunisian citizen was invited, as special guest, to deliver a speech of tolerance, by the auction moderator, in these terms: "Bless him! [. . .] May God give us 500 million people like you! May we have peace in the world, may we have *shalom*, may we have *salam*, may we find ourselves, Jews and Muslims: we all love each other and we want to love each other!" Then the imam declaimed the rhetoric of living together to the crowd of pilgrims: "The Ghriba is a miracle! It connects us all, it is a flame of hope!" His words were greeted with thunderous applause.

Tolerance speech of imam Hassen Chalgoumi, 2022. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

Another significant moment of poly-rituality occurred in 2022 (replicating a performance that had already occurred in previous editions). During one of the musical interludes that punctuated the auction and official speeches, a Jewish pilgrim took the microphone and began to sing in a very solemn way the Muslim call to prayer "Allah Akbar" (*God is Greater*), then "Sh'ma Israel" (*Hear, O Israel*), the well-known centrepiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services, then "Adonai" (*My Lord*), and again "Allah Akbar" in a very vibrant and emotional voice. His performance was obviously planned but it looked improvised, and the audience was surprised at first, before applauding and welcoming this call for peace.

A different initiative of poly-rituality occurred in May 2019, when the Jewish pilgrimage coincided with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan for the first time since 1987. Thus, the Tunisian authorities and the Ghriba committee organized an *iftar* (fast breaking ceremony) dinner. Many guests were invited at sunset to break the fast close to the synagogue. Called the "Iftar of Fraternity," this unexpected ceremony gathered together Jews, Muslims, Christians, but also the Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, other ministers, foreign ambassadors, and rabbis from European countries. According to the Tunisian press, Chahed claimed that "Tunisia remains a pioneering country in the consecration of cultural diversity and civilization."[44] Obviously, it was also an operation of communication, as is proved by the presence of many journalists. This event can also be decrypted as an alternative attempt to promote peaceful coexistence in the register of official interreligious dialogue. In effect, such shared *iftar* gatherings during Ramadan are quite frequent in interreligious milieus, but it was a first at the Ghriba.[45] But beyond the symbol of a shared ritual of commensality, it should be noted that the event was strictly reserved for handpicked guests and never involved the local population. Indeed, the ceremony was held on the first evening of the pilgrimage under high security because of the threat of terrorism. These conditions therefore relativize the real impact of such an inclusive initiative on ordinary people.

During the pilgrimage, access to the site becomes very difficult, especially for Djerbian Muslims and, more generally, Tunisian ones, because one has to show a foreign passport or an official invitation, which limits the Muslims' spontaneous participation. Some of the villagers cannot easily return home because of security measures. A woman we met in the synagogue in 2014 told us that she had been barred from entering twice, in the previous days, "because I'm a Muslim, I don't know why!" Finally, an outside observer cannot avoid noticing the tension that lies between situations of coexistence - actual, staged or idealized - and the difficulty of accessing the sanctuary.

From our observations, inclusive discourses advocating tolerance and

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Samir Dridi, "Pèlerinage de la Ghriba: un bel exemple du vivre-ensemble," *La Presse de Tunisie*, May 24, 2019, https://lapresse.tn/8990/pelerinage-de-la-ghriba-un-bel-exemple-du-vivre-ensemble/

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A week later, on May 29, a similar event was organized in Tunis by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Also called the "Iftar of the Human Fraternity," it brought together Muslims, Christians, and Jews and repeated the unitary message, "We are all Tunisians," the need for tolerance and the call to accept the religious Other. The event received extensive media coverage.

Sniper on the roof of the Ghriba Synagogue, 2022. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

interreligious coexistence are conveyed "from the bottom" by the pilgrims themselves, be they Jews or Muslims. On the spot, the pilgrims willingly express their feeling of Judeo-Muslim fraternity, like this Parisian pilgrim encountered in 2014: "There is a great fraternity between Arabs and Jews. We grew up with them, we played with them, we never had any problems. Between families, we exchanged a lot of things!"; and a Moroccan Jew added spontaneously: "We were brothers and sisters! Muslims believe in the holy woman, and in her miracles, they come to deposit their eggs and they say prayers. It proves that we are connected!"

Another aspect of the perceptible feeling of inclusivity for foreign Jews is that most of the people proclaimed their "Tunisianity." Indeed, their belonging to Tunisia constitutes a major stake in the pilgrimage: even if they live abroad, they remain Tunisians in their heart. Such a patriotic aspect was materialized in the dozens of pennants of the Tunisian flag which were suspended across the Ukala courtyard, which meant in a sense "You are at home." In exchange, these pilgrims were very grateful to the state: "Thanks to Tunisia for welcoming us and providing us these security forces so that we can continue to come every year! [. . .] Please applaud the Tunisian police, I beg you! I feel like I'm seeing a war movie, they love us so much! They are there, everywhere, downstairs, upstairs, on the roof!", the auctioneer said on the microphone. This overprotection reassured them and demonstrated, according to them, the consideration of the state that had not forgotten them. But in another sense, these security measures relativized the spirit of openness.

Echoes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

In the last years, the arrival of pilgrims from Israel has also generated political struggles connected with the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each year, strong controversies emerged at the local level and especially at the national level. Some political parties and social networks made these controversies harder. After 2011, anti-Semitic and radical slogans were heard in Tunis. Consequently, in 2012, the Israeli National Security Council strongly advised Jewish nationals against travelling to Tunisia, in particular to Djerba, because of the risk of an attack. In 2014, some Tunisian deputies demanded that Israeli cruise passengers be banned from entering Tunisia. In 2019 a polemic erupted over a video broadcast on an Israeli channel, showing Israeli pilgrims going by bus to the Ghriba, chanting: "Long live Israel . . . Long live Tunisia!" This video circulated widely on social networks, which stirred controversy to the top of the Tunisian State. Some demonstrations were even organized by groups fighting against the so-called normalization. Another manifestation of tension occurred locally in 2020, when a road sign was installed without any authorization on the roundabout near the Ghriba in Djerba, with the inscription: "Jerusalem, Capital of Palestine: 3090 km," accompanied by the Palestinian flag. Thus, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has repercussions on the local scale, but not only. As the picture was published on Facebook, it spread digitally around many networks, whether of pro-Palestinian activists or shocked pro-Israeli Tunisian Jews. Once again, the pilgrimage centre coagulates geopolitical tensions. The Ghriba is impacted by the Mediterranean geopolitical tumults, mainly the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, we observe the central, increasing, and catalytic role played by social networks that propel a local pilgrimage into the globalized and digital arena.

A political key figure: René Trabelsi

Year after year, the Ghriba pilgrimage has become a contact zone between locality and globalisation, at the same time traversed, boosted, and disturbed by its internationalization, with a strong entanglement between religious and political dimensions. This predicament is currently well illustrated by the role played by René Trabelsi, a key figure of contemporary pilgrimage, who in some respects seems to incarnate several of the paradoxical characteristics associated with this pilgrimage. He lives between Paris and Djerba, and is both the eldest son of the current head of the local Ghriba committee and the director of a tour operating company based in France, and very involved in the logistics of the Ghriba pilgrimage. Both an orthodox Jew and a businessman, he is an "impresario" of this pilgrimage, with the goal of developing its magnitude, both in a religious and an economic perspective. When we interviewed him in 2014, he clearly stated his main objectives. His ambitious target was to attract up to 20,000 Jews from all over the world for the pilgrimage. He was really open to the Muslim participation but for him priority would have to be given to Jewish pilgrims. Through the figure of Trabelsi, we see how the Ghriba has become a crucial lever for economic development and the affirmation of Jewishness in the Tunisian national community.[46] The links between pilgrimage and politics are also evident in the heritagization initiatives carried out during the last years, in which Trabelsi has been involved. Since 2012, the Tunisian state has proposed the inscription of the whole Djerba island in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The candidature valorises the mythological past of the island, associated with the island of lotus-eaters in Homer's Odyssey, but also with the hypothetical existence of the Ghriba synagogue since antiquity. Thus, the narrative put forward is that of the "mysterious" island supposedly discovered by Hierosolymitan priests in the 6th century BC. The obvious political goal is promoting Djerba in terms of tourism and culture on an international scale, in order to attract more visitors. Among other heritage initiatives directly supported by Trabelsi, let us also mention the project of a Ghriba Museum within the area of the sanctuary.

René Trabelsi's TV Interview, 2014. Photograph © Manoël Pénicaud.

After the terrorist attacks of 2015 in Sousse and Tunis, not only did the participation of foreign pilgrims in the Ghriba decline significantly, but the whole tourism industry collapsed. In November 2018, the Tunisian prime minister Youssef Chahed appointed Trabelsi as Minister of Tourism, arguing that he was a renowned professional of this economic sector. This choice was not minor and it had a strong impact in public debates in Tunisia and in the wider Arab world. Trabelsi then became the country's first Jewish minister for more than 60 years,[47] Moreover, he was often qualified as "the only Jewish minister in the Arab world." At the beginning, the appointment of Trabelsi was criticized by several sectors of the political world, because of his lack of diploma and also because of his Jewishness. Yet he gradually won the support of public opinion, given the largely positive results of his political action. Under his mandate, cruise tourism revived and many hotels reopened. For 2019, Trabelsi set himself the goal of attracting nine million foreign visitors in Tunisia. At the end of the year this goal had even been exceeded.

That year, the Ghriba pilgrimage was particularly successful, with an attendance of more than 5,000 people, according to the organizers. This success was the result of an intense marketing campaign orchestrated by the Tunisian government. The Ghriba pilgrimage opens the tourist season, and it may have a positive impact on the number of arrivals that follow. In

46 Mourad Boussetta, "Reducing barriers: how the Jews of Djerba are using tourism to assert their place in the modern nation state of Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies* 23, 1-2 (2017): 311-331, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1383160.

47 Albert Bessis and André Barouch were ministers under Habib Bourguiba in the 1950s.

other words the pilgrimage is both an economic lung (or locomotive) and an international showcase for Tunisia. Because of the wide Jewish diaspora, many Tunisian Jews aim at coming back to their "country of heart," by combining seaside tourism, memorial travel, and pilgrimage. These aspects are not at all perceived as antinomic, nor incompatible; they are on the contrary all combined. Quite popular, and on the strength of his success, Trabelsi was even the only minister to be renewed in office by the new government in January 2020, but he finally was replaced in April 2020.

Under his mandate, Trabelsi was accused of wanting to normalise relations between Tunisia and Israel, often called "the Zionist entity" in Tunisian political debates. In June 2019, he had to take an official position claiming in the Tunisian press that he was "against the normalization with Israel."[48] According to the *Times of Israel* newspaper, he also had to condemn "the praise of the Israeli army on Tunisian soil," and declare that the Ghriba pilgrims must "behave properly,"[49] in relation to the polemic concerning the video broadcast showing Israeli pilgrims chanting: "Long live Israel . . . Long live Tunisia!" During a street demonstration, a photo of Trabelsi was even burnt.

In February 2020, another controversy arose when Meyer Habib, deputy of the French living in Israel, part of whose family comes from Tunisia, called for a tourist boycott of Tunisia. In reaction to a position taken by the Tunisian President against a Franco-Israeli sportsman, this deputy close to the Israeli conservative right argued that "anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism," considering that Tunisia, "once a model of living together, is falling into obsessive hatred," and comparing this country to Iran. Trabelsi stepped up to the plate by sending him an open letter calling on Habib to apologize to the Tunisians.

The position of the Tunisian President of the Republic regarding the Ghriba and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears also ambiguous. According to a press release from the presidency, when President Kais Saied officially visited the Ghriba with René Trabelsi in March 2020, he "underlined the necessity to differentiate between the Jewish religion, which is one of the divine revelations, and the Zionism which occupies the land of Palestine and oppresses its people," adding that "it is time for humanity to end this injustice."

The 2019 pilgrimage represented the climax of René Trabelsi's dual role as pilgrimage impresario and tourism minister. It is under his leadership that the *iftar* mentioned above was organized. The 2020 edition of the pilgrimage was hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, when Trabelsi had already given up his post as minister. The international pilgrimage was cancelled and only locals confidentially visited the site. In addition, René Trabelsi himself became seriously ill with the virus during the spring of 2020 and remained hospitalized in Paris for over a month and a half. His followers were informed of the severity of his illness through social networks. Once healed, the ex-minister considered himself the beneficiary of a Ghriba miracle. This is what he confessed to a journalist, Hichem Ben Yaïche, who posted a dedicated message on his LinkedIn account. As a non-Jew, it is significant that this journalist adds: "From having made ten pilgrimages to the Ghriba, in the context of my work, I can testify to the power of this place." In August 2020, Trabelsi returned to Djerba and went to thank the Ghriba, a gesture which falls within the popular register of private devotion, far from any political stake.

In 2021, the pilgrimage also remained restricted, with strict health

48 "René Trabelsi: 'Je suis contre la normalisation avec Israel'," *La Presse de Tunisie*, June 24, 2019, https://lapresse.tn/13741/rene-trabelsi-je-suis-contre-la-normalisation-avec-israel/

49 "René Trabelsi, Juif et ministre tunisien, 'contre la normalisation avec Israel'," *The Times of Israel*, June 25, 2019, https://fr.timesofisrael.com/rene-trabelsi-juif-et-ministre-tunisien-contre-la-normalisation-avec-israel/

protocols (individual prayers, none of the usual gatherings, and compulsory mask). A few people did come from abroad, however. Inside the Ghriba, Trabelsi was accompanied by about 30 French pilgrims. He told the press: "This year, the number is not high, but that does not matter. What matters is that we have been given the chance to come here to pray for the entire world."[50] In 2022, when the pilgrimage resumed with good success (with the arrival of around 3,000 pilgrims, according to the organizers), Trabelsi returned to his functions as a travel agent and organizer of pilgrims' sojourns on the island, while also assuming an unofficial political role, receiving important guests such as the Tunisian prime minister and several ambassadors.

René Trabelsi returning as a pilgrim to the Ghriba, 2021.

Conclusion

This article represents a modest attempt to update, 40 years later, some aspects of the seminal research work carried out by Lucette Valensi and Abraham Udovitch on the Arab Jews of Djerba. In a theoretical perspective, we took up the case of the Ghriba pilgrimage to explore the pertinence of the notion of paradox for an analysis of the often-contradictory components that are at work in several sanctuaries attended by faithful of different religious obediences. This work is part of a quest for new analytical tools that could somewhat replace more traditional ones, like syncretism or *métissage*. In conclusion, it seems that the idea of paradox may prove useful to grasp some significant elements, alongside other concepts, like ambiguity or polytropy, which partially recover its analytical field. The Ghriba synagogue appears as a rare laboratory to observe a long-term common rituality practiced by Jews and Muslims in North Africa. Moreover, still in the 21st century it remains a place of spiritual magnetism and of interfaith mixing. The annual pilgrimage is a matrix of intertwined contrasts and paradoxes, whose range exceeds the issue of interreligious sharing. Their articulation is highly complex: several paradoxes appear entangled and nested, creating a convoluted architecture.

The sets of paradoxes described and analysed throughout this article can be organized around a number of foci. They concern, for example, the dual nature of this synagogue as a place of worship and a holy place, with the oscillations between the predominance of one or the other dimension during the annual cycle, as well as the changing characterizations of this space in terms of gender; although it lacks, like all other synagogues in Djerba, a space reserved for the prayer of women, the latter can frequent the Ghriba synagogue as pilgrims or tourists at various times of the year, and then become the main protagonists of the ritual actions that take place there during the festival of Lag Ba'Omer. With the impossibility, for reasons of space, of following all these threads, we will single out only one aspect of paramount importance: namely, the delicate balance between local and external forces on which the structure of the pilgrimage seems to rest. This aspect is evident from the opposition between the two founding narratives of the sanctity of the synagogue: the one purely local and immersed in a rather indistinct religiosity, without a clear confessional identity emerging; the other that makes the Ghriba synagogue a sort of holy relic of the First Temple of Jerusalem, thus charging it with a universal meaning for the whole of the Jewish world. A sub-paradox inscribed in this second narrative is the attribution of an Arabic name Ghriba to a holy place that would have been created in the 6th century BC. This paradox also refracts on the interpretation of the ritual practices. Some

50 "Pèlerinage de la Ghriba 2021 : Un retour discret, mais retour tout de même," *Kapitalis*, April 28, 2021, http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2021/04/28/pelerinage-de-la-ghriba-2021-un-retour-discret-mais-retour-tout-de-meme/

pilgrims, for example, interpret the tradition of entering the innermost part of the Ghriba synagogue barefoot as an imitation of what Muslims do in mosques. On the other hand, we have also listened to erudite local aetiologies which see this habit as a perpetuation down the millennia of a typical custom of the faithful in the Temple of Jerusalem.

It is then possible to read in the very structure of the pilgrimage the results of another contrast between local and external dynamics, with paradoxical outcomes. In fact, since the pilgrimage began to experience great success, towards the end of the 19th century, it seems to operate a sort of accommodation between the pietistic tendencies of the Djerbian Judaism and a much more exuberant religiosity introduced in the synagogue and in the adjacent spaces by pilgrims who came from elsewhere, often from very far away. This paradoxical coexistence between divergent tendencies can still be read now in the subdued criticism of many local Jews of the most ostentatious manifestations in the religious practices of many pilgrims of the Tunisian diaspora, as well in their silent distancing from most of them.

Relations with Islam are also affected by the paradoxical effects of this tension between local and external dimensions. The relative quiet coexistence between Jews and Muslims in Djerba is upset at the time of the pilgrimage, when a massive deployment of the army and police hinders local life. The space of the synagogue represents the acme of the contrast between contradictory tendencies. The warm conviviality between Jews and Muslims inside the Ghriba, and the omnipresent rhetoric of inclusivity, highly contrast with the huge display of security forces outside the buildings. In fact, there is a contradiction between the message of tolerance and the potential threat of attacks like that of 2003, between the situation inside and outside. More generally, the Ghriba pilgrimage is crossed by major political dynamics, with an international scope, being regularly affected by the turmoil of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Every year the arrival of Israeli pilgrims arouses anti-Israeli animosities in Tunisian society. Conversely, the Israeli government advises regularly its citizens against going to Djerba for the pilgrimage.

The figure of René Trabelsi, both an observant Jew from Djerba, economic impresario of the pilgrimage and former Tunisian minister, embodies the subtle combination of the different facets of the pilgrimage as a complex social phenomenon. The fact that, after his exclusion from the government and his serious illness, he recently claimed to have recovered from the Covid-19 thanks to the therapeutic power of the Ghriba, in a sense, brings the story full circle.

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