

## Interview of the Month January 2016

**Guest: Dr. M'hamed Oualdi**

**Dr. M'hamed Oualdi** is Assistant Professor at Princeton University, jointly appointed since 2013 in the Departments of Near Eastern Studies and History. Prior to joining the faculty at Princeton, he was “maître de conférences” at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris from 2010 to 2013. In both institutions, he has been teaching the history of post-1500 North Africa, from the Ottoman era to the post-colonial period. His first book, *Esclaves et maîtres. Les mamelouks au service des beys de Tunis du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle aux années 1880* (Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), based on Arabic and European historical sources, is a study of the *mamluks* slaves and converts to Islam who served the governors of the Ottoman province of Tunis from the 1630s until the colonization of Tunisia by the French in the 1880s. Dr. M'hamed Oualdi received his training in Arabic at INALCO and pursued an education in history at the University of Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne from which he obtained his PhD in 2008.

### **Slavery**

- 1. The involvement of the Tunisian Pirates in the slaves capture and trade is well documented. However, what was the role of Tunisia's rulers and population in the slaves' trade? And were slaves of a common use by Tunisians in their daily lives and businesses?**

The issue of slavery is indeed a crucial issue. Recent works such as Ismael M. Montana's recent book (*The Abolition of Slavery in Tunisia*), Inès Dali-Mrad's studies and my own research published in French have enriched our vision of slavery as a social and political phenomenon in this part of North Africa.

Before answering your important question, let me first define two notions at the center of your question. First, the notion of Tunisia: for the early modern period, I would rather label this country as the “Ottoman province of Tunis”. Indeed, there was a feeling of belonging to a same country – an important 19<sup>th</sup> century historian such as Ahmad Ibn Abî al-Diyâf used the expression of “hubb al-watan”, love for the country. But Tunisia as we know this country nowadays is a historical and social construct, the outcome of a nationalist struggle against French colonization. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people of Tunis lived in a province that was part of the Ottoman Empire and that was surrounded by two other Ottoman provinces, the provinces of Algiers and Tripoli (Tarâblûs al-Gharb). Second notion: the notion of “pirates”. The pirates should be distinguished from the “privateers”. Pirates did not obey to a State or a specific government, they

were acting for their own interests whereas the privateers were always protected and sponsored by a government.

In the Ottoman province of Tunis like in Algiers or in Tripoli, the local state forces were sponsoring privateers who, in exchange, would fight Christian forces such as the Spanish monarch or Italian States. These European states were still in a state of war with the Ottoman sultans. They were sending their own maritime forces to hurt Muslim societies. From the harbors of the Ottoman province of Tunis, privateers attacked these Christian lands. They brought captives and slaves to the sovereigns of Tunis or to the slave markets of the country. These “white” slaves were mostly Italians, Spanish or Maltese. They were treated according to their legal status. If these slaves chose not to convert to Islam, they were seen as captives that could be redeemed. But before regaining their freedom, they worked for their masters, the local sovereigns or dignitaries who were rich enough to purchase these men and women. These slaves acted as craftsmen, workforce in building sites, houseboys and housemaids. If these European captives chose to convert to Islam, then they would find their way in local households: the European sources of that time would label them as “renegades”.

These captives, originating from the northern shores of the Mediterranean were not the only slaves brought to the province of Tunis. Very important groups of slaves were brought from West Africa and to a lesser extent from East Africa. Some of them would leave then Tunis to be conveyed to other parts of the Ottoman Empire including Istanbul, the political center of the Ottoman Empire, where they would be offered to important dignitaries and sometimes to the sultans and their entourage. Racial categories were used to label these African slaves: in the province of Tunis, they were called “abîd”, “shûshân”... They were treated in a very harsh way. These men and women would be used as housemaids and houseboys or eunuchs in the urban households. In the countryside, they would serve tribesmen or country dwellers, mostly in the oasis of the southern part of the country.

In addition to the African and the Latin slaves, the sovereigns of Tunis (the pashas and then the deys and the beys) brought a third category of slaves: Georgians, Circassians and in the 1820s-1830s, Greeks purchased in slave markets of Anatolia (mostly in Istanbul and Smyrna). These men and women were converted to Islam either in their homeland, or in Anatolia. In Tunis, these Georgian, Circassian and Greek men were trained as soldiers, state officers, servants. Some of them could reach the highest State positions, becoming viziers, generals, treasurers. In Istanbul, the women were trained to become odalisques: some of these female slaves including the Italian female gave birth to

local heads of state. For instance, the mother of Ahmad Bey (in charge of the province of Tunis from 1837 to 1855) came from Sardinia. Historians argue that the slave populations were a very small minority: less than 5% of the population. Still, slavery was a social phenomenon that implied domination, a terrible violence and a racial thinking that unfortunately, is still at play in Tunisia today.

## **2. What motivated Ahmed Bey to abolish slavery in 1846? And where does Tunisia's abolition of slavery stand compared to the rest of the world?**

1846 is becoming a date well-known to all, taught as a turning point, as a moment of abolition of slavery in Tunisia, two years before the abolition of slavery in France when the Second Republic's constitution was implemented. In fact, one has to be cautious when referring to Ahmed Bey's decisions in 1846. Some historians would argue that slavery could not be abolished per se: it was a legal status acknowledged in the Islamic law. Could Muslim sovereigns like Ahmad Bey outlaw institutions that were legal in Islam for centuries? In 1846, Ahmed Bey decided in fact that all slaves had to be manumitted. Ahmed Bey prepared this collective manumission. Five years earlier, he decided the shutting down of the public slave market of Tunis. He prohibited the exportation of slaves from the province of Tunis and liberated his own slaves.

How can we explain Ahmed Bey's decision and his change of attitude towards slavery? For a long time, historians motivated these decisions as the outcome of the British abolitionist policies in the Mediterranean and beyond. The British consul in Tunis played a huge role to convince Ahmad Bey to put an end to slave trade in the lands he ruled. More recently, historians such as Abdelhamid Larguèche, Inès Dali Mrad, Ismail Montana have brought to our attention; local discourses, specific strategy and reasoning of Ahmed Bey in order to forbid the slave trade and to set the slaves free. Ahmad Bey and his entourage developed various arguments: compassion for the situation of African slaves and for the oppressed people in Islam; the compulsory need to respect an Islamic principle, namely that Muslims, even the ones coming from West and East Africa should not be enslaved. Through his decision, Ahmad Bey might even have tried to claim his own sovereignty and the autonomy of his government toward the Ottoman authorities of Istanbul. Ahmed Bey's decrees did not put at all an end to the slave trade in the province of Tunis. This trade became an illicit trafficking. Under the French colonization, in 1890, a new treaty forbade slavery in Tunisia.

## **Colonization**

**History says that in 1881 the French occupied Tunisia. One might argue that Tunisia has never been free in the first place. Can you please give a description and comparison between the Ottoman and French ruling of Tunisia?**

Recently, historians of the Ottoman Empire have discussed this question, asking whether the late Ottoman empire became colonial, or used the European tools of colonialism in order to govern its subjects and its domains. In the case of Tunisia, the Ottoman experience was clearly different from the French colonial period.

During the Ottoman era, Tunis was a province among other provinces of the empire, but this part of the empire was autonomous from Istanbul. Since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, local dynasties of beys governed Tunis. The Turkish soldiers (janissaries) were not that numerous: they were less than 10.000 among one million inhabitants by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

During the colonial period, Tunisia was not a French colony but a French protectorate like Morocco. This meant that Tunisia and Morocco kept their own rulers (the beys in the case of Tunisia, the sultans in the case of Morocco). France was in charge of the country's finances, its defense and its foreign relations. But over time, the French administrators started to consider Tunisia as a colony, they started to consider this protectorate as a place to be colonized.

More importantly, the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic empire whereas the French colonial empire was mostly seen by the Tunisian population as a European authority and in some case a Christian authority. As a consequence, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Tunis was ottoman, the local population saw the leaders of the empire, the sultans as Islamic rulers to respect. Tunisian people could even send their petitions and their claims (shikâyat) to a specific office in Istanbul.

After the French conquest of Tunis, in 1881, French were seen as invaders. Tunisian Muslims who would choose to be French were not entitled by nationalists such as Bourguiba to burial in Islamic cemeteries. Indeed, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some historians have represented the ottoman period as a period of Turkish colonization of the Arab world. But this representation has been contested, challenged and revised by a more complex interpretation of the Ottoman rule over North Africa and the Middle East.

### ***Modern Tunisian History***

**Can you please explain the origins of the tension between Bourguiba and Ben Youssef? And what were the root causes that led to the assassination of Ben Youssef? Do you see this event revived in some of the current political debates?**

There was more than a tension between Habib Bourghiba and Salah Ben Youssef, the two main leaders of the Tunisian nationalism. Their personal rivalry and above all political disagreements almost led post-colonial Tunisia to a civil war in 1955 before the independence of 1956.

Bourguiba and Ben Youssef started to fight against each other about a convention signed in 1955 with France in order to put an end to the French protectorate. By its provisions, the Tunisians would govern themselves, they would enjoy an internal autonomy (“autonomie interne”) but the French administration would still control the country’s diplomacy and military affairs. The convention guaranteed the French’s rights to own property in Tunisia. Habib Bourguiba who was the leader of the most important nationalist party, the Neo-Destour, accepted this convention. Salah Ben Youssef who was by then the number two, the general secretary of the Neo Destour rejected the convention.

Moreover, Ben Youssef called for a full independence. He claimed that Tunisia belonged to the Arab and Islamic world, that the country had to follow the steps of the nationalist Egypt and its leader Nasser. In a context of cold war, Bourguiba was more balanced. He wanted to keep strong connections with France that would help to develop and to secure the country. While Bourghiba knew how to use Islam as a political language, however he implemented a secular policy in various institutions: education, justice, land tenure...

In January 1956, the rivalry between Salah Ben Youssef and Habib Bourghiba reached a new stage. Salah Ben Youssef and its followers, the so called “youssefists” were repressed since the beginning of the year. By that time, Ben Youssef left the country. What is interesting here is that Bourguiba would not allow the existence and the organization of a strong opposition that could counter its own party and government. Becoming the head of state of the Tunisian Republic in 1957, Bourghiba always saw his former ally Salah Ben Youssef as his worst enemy who could threaten a so-called Tunisian unity and organize plots against the new Tunisian republic: this strong aversion led to the assassination of Ben Youssef in 1961 in Frankfurt.

Ben Youssef’s followers were repressed and jailed. Who were these men? Historians argue that in 1955, Ben Youssef succeeded in bringing together

behind his leadership various social and political groups including on the one hand, the ones who thought that Islam was the solution and the core of Tunisian identity and on the other hand, the Arab nationalists who were fascinated by Nasser and his Egyptian regime. In a way, the repression of the yousefism led to the repression of the Arab nationalism and a sort of Islamism for decades until the revolution of 2011.

The challenge since the revolution has been to accept not only an elected political opposition but to institutionalize a political debate whereas after the independence, after 1956, a strong opposition was never accepted by Bourguiba in the name of so called unity of the Tunisians.

### ***Arab Spring***

**As a historian, how do you read the “Arab Spring” in general and the Tunisian revolution specifically? How is it different from previous Tunisian popular uprising like 1864 Ali Ben Ghdahom revolution?**

The comparison between the recent Tunisian revolution and the 1864 uprising is very interesting one. In both cases, these political events had a remarkable imprint on the history of the country. The 1864 uprising as well as the revolution of 2011 fuelled in the whole country a deep rage against a corrupted power that was seen as authoritarian and unfair: i.e. al-Sâdiq Muhammad Bâshâ Bey's authority on the one hand and Ben Ali's regime on the other hand. Both political movements started in the western part of the country before spreading in the eastern costs and the area of Tunis.

However, while the 2011 revolution led to a deep political change with the overthrow of Ben Ali's regime, the people involved in 1864 uprising partly led by Ali Ben Ghdahom were violently repressed. The bey Muhammad al-Sâdiq sent soldiers not only to repress the villages and tribes involved in the unrest. His soldiers raped women and imposed huge fines on rural communities. Moreover, while in 2011, protesters struggled in order to implement a new constitution, in 1864, tribesmen, city and country-dwellers, reacted against the new financial and legal order related to the implementation of the first Tunisian constitution in 1861. In 1864, people did not understand the changes of the legal order caused by the new constitution; they asked to stop increasing local taxes. Interestingly, the 1861 Constitution became a myth by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first Tunisian reformists claimed under the French colonial domination that this fundamental law had to be re-established while the leaders first Tunisian nationalist leaders chose the word *dustûr* (Constitution) to name their political party.

### ***Current Topics***

**Given the current geopolitical tension in the MENA region, what do you think of political analysts stating that there is a risk of the Ottoman Empire resurrection?**

After the Tunisian revolution, the Turkish regime was seen as possible democratic model where the Islamists would act as a moderate force. At that time, Erdogan, as a Prime minister, restored some Ottoman symbols as a political folklore. He met North African Islamist leaders such as Rached Ghannouchi and the Moroccan Prime minister, Abdelilah Benkirane. Political analysts have portrayed the Turkish diplomacy as building on an Ottoman past and an imperial legacy. But four years later, this Turkish diplomacy does not seem that proactive in North Africa. Erdogan is facing a strong opposition against his political choices, and violence is spreading in Anatolia as a consequence of the Syrian events. Under such circumstances, the Ottoman Empire is more a legacy, a vestige of the past than a project for the future.