The Ghriba: The Role of “The Stranger Woman” in an Islamic Plural Society

TAMURA Airi

I Djerba Island
   Islamic Mobile Trade Society
   Geographical Feature and History
   Mode of Living in Djerba
II The Jewish Community and The Festival of el-Ghriba
   Jewish Community in Djerba
   The Festival of el-Ghriba
III Stranger Women in Djerba
   El-Fenigiya and the Arab
   Es-Salawtiya and the Nomad
   Lilla Hadriya and the Fishermen
   Visiting Arifa: Nūra
IV Who are the Stranger Women?
   Comparison among Case Studies
   Japanese Ethnology and the Theory of Stranger-God
   Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Medium Saints
V The Role of the Stranger Women
   Transactional Point between Locality/Universality
   Islamic Plural Society and Open system

Introduction

In this paper, I will talk about the patterns of interaction and systems of inter-relation within and between different cultural and ethnic groups in one Islamic society, Djerba in Tunisia. Despite popularly held stereotypes about the intolerance of Islamic societies, views which owe a great deal to adverse media reports, many people often overlook powerful sources of tolerance and charity that are prevalent in the societies inspired by belief in Islam. The misunderstanding of Muslim ways and patterns of association have always been a source of vexation and Samuel Huntinton's Clash of Civilizations makes clear some of the sources of tension that have created hostility toward Islam and Muslim culture. Even in the societies in which racial conflict is not openly articulated, Muslim ways and patterns of
association have remained a source of social strain. Within this context, research aimed at understanding the nature of ways of life informed by Islam has a certain relevance given such prevalent and pernicious misunderstandings.

Taking into account this issue, I would like to discuss the situation in the island of Djerba, in South Tunisia, which is a suitable example of a multi-cultural Islamic society. Because this island can be treated as a typical example where the exigencies imposed by the limiting local ecological conditions which ensure that scarcity places a continuous and immediate strain on communities which must resolve religious and ethnic differences in order to survive.

For the purpose of this perspective, I will focus particularly on the Jewish festival in the island, in Arabic this festival is called el-Ghriba, it means the Stranger Woman in English. This festival is a focal point for the long existing and legendary Jewish community on the island and Jewish émigrés who have left the island for lives in other countries often make pilgrimages to this place. Interestingly enough, I have found that beliefs concerning the Stranger Women are not unique to the Jewish community but that Arabs and Berbers on the island also share this belief. The stranger female plays an important role in rituals concerning marriage and child illness. There are thus important questions concerning the durability of these myths and about why they prevail amidst religious diversity. The fact that this belief is shared by such diverse communities, suggests that these people entrust something important within their society to the Stranger Woman?

Also, I would like to introduce some of the achievements of Japanese ethnology as the broad framework for the analysis and compare this with related ideas emerging from the Western context. This broad discussion will allow us to situate the patterns of interaction and systems of inter-relation within and between different cultural and ethnic groups in Islamic societies. Contextualizing the Stranger Woman in this way, helps us to understand the sense of the phenomenon and to grasp the system of relations articulated within it and to understand the meaning of otherness at the heart of this society’s understanding of its membership.

I Djerba Island

Islamic Mobile Trade Society

Before looking in more detail at the character and social role of the Stranger Woman, we need to understand another problematic word, "Islamic" which means here, simply, an area where Muslims live. One of the distinctive features of the geographical regions in which Islam has been influential is that it has developed around a variety of ecosystems, including desert, steppe, oasis, forest, the basin of great rivers and urban landscapes. It spreads across what is now West Africa, East Africa, the Middle East and Mediterranean coast, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The most significant feature of this region is that nearly half of the continents of Africa and Eurasia were connected by a trading network based on the stable commercial system that was established by Islamic law from the 8th century. This system was established during the Abbasid Empire and utilized land and sea based trading routes and encouraged the development of these commercial patterns of relation through augmenting the infrastructure for trading, through providing a strong base of practical necessities for trading relations to be maintained, for example, a good water supply, caravan inns and market facilities, but we must not underestimate the Islamic world's contribution to such fundamentals of trade as a usable currency, letters of credit and an ethos of honour necessary to guarantee exchange relations. The Islamic world also provided a variety of products, which were freely and actively exchanged at what by today's standards is an extremely low tariff (usually 5% for Muslim merchants). Goitein, who studied the Cairo geniza archives, found at the synagogue in Cairo in the late 19th century, has suggested that Islamic society has historically been a great example of a "free trade society".\(^{(2)}\)

Under this system, people were free to migrate throughout the Islamic world. Clearly, personal journeys are common in a religion which advocates that once in a person's life they must visit Mecca. Hence, a mobile trade society is a characteristic of the Islamic world. It thus seems necessary to consider the ways in which groups of people living in such a multi-cultural society built relationships both among themselves and outside the Islamic world.

With all of this in mind, I would like to look at the patterns of relations on the island of Djerba in Tunisia and consider it as a microcosm of the patterns of relations within the Islamic World more generally.

Geographical Features and History

Tunisia is a small country on the Mediterranean Sea in northern Africa. It is located at the point where the Mediterranean Sea is split, between East and West, by the Sicilian Channel. This is the area where the Atlas Mountains, which stretch from the folded stratum forming the Alps to merge with the Sahara tablelands, make a breathtaking backdrop to much of the islands scenery. Tunisia’s location provides a wide variety of natural geographies and ecological environments with sea, mountain, dry steppe, oasis and even desert across the Middle Eastern Region (Map 1). Within Tunisia, within a relatively small area one can see many different ways of living and it thus represents a good research location in which to understand the way in which different social structures emerge within cultural traditions and the way these are impacted upon by a variety of environmental factors. Djerba has thus been formed through the complex history constituted by different cultural groups’ adaptation to the exigencies of this challenging and highly variable eco-system and natural environment. It is interesting that the groups in these conditions have managed to forge a way of living and system of practically instituted beliefs about each competing group that has allowed the emergence of what may be regarded as a model of pluralistic coexistence.

Djerba is a small island off the Bay of Gabes near the Libyan border. Climatically, it is a mixture of both Mediterranean and African desert climates and its highest
point is 55 meters above sea level. The island is almost completely flat, without rivers, lake or marsh to provide a source of water. Consequently, the life of the inhabitants was until recently sustained by underground water and an average annual rainfall of 210 mm. The population of the island is as thus necessarily restricted. It was difficult to support anything over 70,000 people. In 1975, the estimated population was 74,600, however, probably half of these people, found work outside the island. (3) This means that, in effect, the island's population has hardly changed in the 100 years since France conducted a population survey in the second half of the 19th century. (Map 2)

In the flat cultivated land, which spreads across Djerba, there is a diverse variety of flora and cultivated plants. This island was once famous for producing olive oil, and is unique in the sense that as well as figs, dates palm trees and olives indigenous to the Mediterranean, they can also grow apples, pears and fruits that are rare to this region. Furthermore, already by the 10th century many useful plants, originally from the tropics such as bananas, flax and cotton had been introduced. The island has also been well known for a long time as a region for producing special products such as wool, silk and cotton fabrics; Khalfa grass matting; rugs, manufactured leather goods, ceramics, silver jewelry and wares. Moreover, climatic conditions mean that

there is a limited number of regions in which such products can be produced. Date palm trees grow all around the coastal area and olive trees grow inland. The area to the west of the town of Midun is the richest irrigated area and wheat, vegetables, apple and pears are grown (Map 3). As a result of these conditions, Djerba has historically been important as a trading centre, as the place where the Mediterranean Sea route meets the caravan route that traverses the Sahara desert, fulfilling the role of a linkage node for interchange between people of diverse backgrounds from across the Mediterranean, Arabia and Africa. (4)

The history of the habitation of Djerba begins in the Neolithic era. From the period of recorded history, Greeks and Phoenicians visited the island frequently, and it especially became famous as the Island of Lotus-Eaters, where Odysseus drifted ashore in Homer’s epic and in the 4th century BC, it is referred to in the works of Herodotus. Placed under the rule of Ancient Carthage in the 3rd century BC, Jerba became known as Meninx (the land of receding waters) due to the fact that it had the highest tides anywhere in all of the Mediterranean. The island’s bay has always provided an anchoring point on the southern coast of the Mediterranean which meant that Djerba quickly developed as a commercial and trading region. After the fall of Carthage, it prospered as a linking point between the Mediterranean and African trade regions which continued on to the Byzantine Period.

The Arabic invasion in the 7th Century dramatically changed the make-up of the island’s population. Alongside the rise and fall of subsequent Islamic dynasties in Northern Africa and political movements in the Mediterranean, various groups of people were swept to the island’s shores along with the tide of history. In 740, the Aghlabid dynasty took control of North Tunisia, Djerba became a foothold of the Islamic sect, Khawārij, part of the Rustam dynasty. In 944, the Khawārij sect became the base for a rebellion that targeted the Shi’aite of the Fatimid dynasty centered in Tunisia. In the 12th century the Normans of Sicily came to set their sights on Djerba as the strategic point in the South Mediterranean and when Norman Roger II invaded the island in 1135, many inhabitants were killed or turned into slaves. (5)


In 1159, the Muwahid dynasty, whose roots lay in Marakesh took over the entire part of northern Africa, and yet its authority did not manage to penetrate to the interior of Djerba. A similar situation arose in 1207 when the Hafsid dynasty which gained its independence from the Muwahid. Djerba continued to be embroiled in the struggles of the crusades and harassed by a variety of Christian dynasties and Italian city states bent on achieving control of the trading context in the Mediterranean. An example of the kinds of physical and economic violence suffered by the island was the seige of the island by the King of Argon’s in 1310, when three quarters of the population were either slaughtered or condemned to slavery.

During the 15th Century the local el-Sammuni family managed to gain power, temporarily, over the island. However, in the 16th Century the entire coastline of Tunisia became the front line in the struggle for hegemony between the Ottoman Empire, the Spanish Kingdom and other European powers. Hence, Djerba became a base for merchant pirates attempting to circumvent both powers subsequently came under the aegis of the Greek, Barbarossa brothers and their pirate cohort, Dragut. In 1533, in order to oppose the military actions of the Spanish Empire, who were attempting to be the dominant power on the Mediterranean Sea, Barbarossa and his entourage decided to cooperate with the Ottoman empire and Barbarossa himself was appointed Captain Pasha, grand admiral, of the Imperial navy. Spain, fearful of Barbarossa’s power, invaded Tunisia in 1535, and the Hafsid became a puppet state. Following this, however, in 1560 Djerba was retaken by the Ottoman Empire, and in 1574 Tunisia also became part of its empire. At the end of the 16th Century the contest for dominance within the region between Spain and the Ottoman Empire based in the Sicilian Channel relented, and Djerba, enjoyed a period of political stability. The island again became an active commercial point for the African slave trade and as an intermediary to the trans-Saharan trade route, producing silk and woolen fabrics.

The Ottoman Empire’s rule over Tunisia was indirect and gradually military governments like the Murad and the Husaini dynasties were able to gain actual authority. These administrations managed only the cities in the northern region, and were unable to exert control in central or southern Tunisia. It was not until the middle of the 19th century that Djerba was integrated into the Tunisian central government, which was again suspended during French colonization between 1881 and independence in 1956. It is this complicated history of drastic political and

economic transformation which has made Djerb as a strategic trading point whilst remaining a partially independent region whose hinterland has remained opaque to the gaze of state agencies, leaving communities free of governmental interference and able to organise and relate relatively independently of institutional forms given in state organisation. These conditions have fostered the emergence of a pluralistic social structure constituted amidst unusual, if not, unique features.

Mode of Living in Djerba

The most obvious characteristic of the population of Djerba is the way in which, through a process of historical formation and natural conditions, various communities have coexisted on an island which poses great obstacles to the development of dense and large populations. Ethnically, it includes black-Africans, Berber, and Arabs, religious denominations from Sunni and Ibâd (Khwariji); Muslim to Jew. These ethnic groups are also sub-divided by different means of subsisting, involving agriculture, fishing, raising cattle, trade, handicraft, and developing more recently to include public service, specialist professions and tourism.

One must also remember that there is diversity even within these forms of subsistence. For example, even within agriculture there are differences in the forms of production related to the different types of crop, for example, wheat, fruit, vegetables or dates and so on depending on the availability of the water supply and the amount of irrigated water required by different produce. As a result, a variety of ethnic groups, religions and ways of life unfold in Djerba. Even within religious factions there exist social and cultural differences. Sunni, for example, can be separated into Arabic, Berber or those who speak both languages, and so can the Ibâd. Within a few miles of each Djerba village, ethnic differences are manifest, with each community being separate and offering different and particular cultural resonances.

In spite of such particular differences in cultural significances, there is sufficient significant congruity for a unified sense of what it means to be “Djerbian”, to be a person for whom a significant part of one’s personal identity is to be from Djerba, has emerged. Beyond the boundary of the island, Djerbians are generally regarded as migrant workers who are tightfisted, good at making money and loyal to each other before outsiders. For example, there are many Djerbian greengrocers in Tunis. And

(7) For the segregated structure of Arab/Berber and Sunni/Ibâd within the island, see Stablo. Rene, Les Djerbiens-Une Communaute Arabo-Berbere dans une l’ile de l’Afrique Francaise. Tunis 1941.
derisory folk-warnings like "Don't buy anything from a Djerbian greengrocer" are common. These insinuations suggest a general lack of trustworthiness and a meanness of act and spirit and they mingle with a commonly circulated opinion about the high prices supposedly charged by Djerbian merchants. Despite such opinions, successful Djerbian merchants and entrepreneurs, such as owners of hotels and importers and exporters in arts and crafts are often found.

While ethnic and religious groups within the island possess manners of life and styles of living that are particular, there are noticeable and deep continuities which underpin and provide common reference for their understanding. A significant practical embedding of their shared way of life originates in the structures in which they live which reveal a common way of dwelling in the type of building known as menzel which is common to the entire island. This structure has remained throughout Djerban history, passed on in that kind of understanding which is realised through those principles that are passed on often practically in families through all that they do and are and even today Djerba remains a series of different communities made up of extended family groups which each resides in a menzel. This kind of organisation is different to the atomised nuclear-family based forms of relation that characterise Western towns and cities and this may be a reason why, prior to the French colonial period, the only places referred to as towns on the island were the Jewish areas of Hára Sigéra and Hára Kebira. Hawmat-sūq, which means 'market place', is now the largest city in Djerba, and it only become classed as a town at the turn of the century. In the other areas, the towns of Midûn, el-Mai and Gelâla, markets take place regularly and various facilities and services are available but few people live in the town center and Jews, Arabs and Berbers alike, prefer to dwell in the residential premises, menzel, built on land that lies beyond the immediate vicinity of the town.

The word menzel refers to the site itself, while each extended family residence is called hosh. From outside the residence looks something like a square white fortress with towers protruding from each corner and they are often surrounded by an enclosure of cactus plants. This form originated in the fortresses of the Roman era, serving to protect the family from the invasions and wars that had plagued them since the 11th century. Once the heavy doors are opened and the gateway passed, one finds an inner courtyard where trees bare lemons and grapes and the bright colored flowers of hibiscus and bougainvillea bloom, surrounding interior rooms with the vibrant hues of the best Mediterranean summer. Traditionally, windows are located at each of the four corner towers of the building and these are positioned high enough to be beyond the reach of a person on horseback, and it is here that the head
husband and wife of each family sleep. Thick earthen walls keep the climate within each dwelling cool, despite the power of the rays of the sun and the stifling heat outside. An equally marked contrast exists between the stark exterior of the outside and, in the comfortable interior where, the carpets and furnishings are moderately and delicately placed. It is possible for up to six families to inhabit one menzel at any one time. Around the thick exterior wall, there are drainpipes and every drop of rain water, which is obviously precious in such a hot climate, is carefully collected underground, where each house has a space used for storage (faskiya). These underground water reserves are called 'sweet water' and are mainly for domestic use, but big farmers in the Midün area also have reserves for agricultural use, usually they build reservoirs in the middle of fields. Wells are considerably deep, and contain a pulley supported by two high pillars which operated by a donkey or camel. In recent years a motor powered system has replaced the use of animals. The water contained in the wells of Djerba has a high salt content.

*Menzel* are the basis for addresses, which makes clear the focal point of these abodes to the sense of life in these communities. Following independence, however, most leading families have moved to Tunis or other large cities, tenanting out their land in Djerba to become absentee landlords.

**II The Jewish Community and the Festival of el-Ghriba**

The Jewish Community in Djerba

Across the island the Jewish community is a group who has no connection to agriculture as a means of living. According to the chief Rabbi Perez Trabelsi, president of the grand synagogue in Djerba, there are currently around 200 families, about 850 Jews residing on the island.\(^{(8)}\) Before 1945 this number was 5,000, following the war of independence in 1967 and the implementation of socialist policies, a large part of the Jewish population emigrated to Israel or France. Of those remaining on the island, over four fifths are engaged in trade and in the production of precious metals, particularly silverware and the rest work in fabric manufacturing and dyeing or carpentry.

The Jewish population is concentrated in two main locations on the island Hára Sigēra and Hára Kebira, the only areas regarded as town before the colonial period. Hára itself means residential quarter in Arabic. Hára Kebira or 'big quarter' is a shopping district where various kinds of precious silverware, pottery and ceramics, as

\(^{(8)}\) Interview with Rabbi Perez Trabelsi, 28th April 1994, and 2nd May 1999 at el-Ghriba synagogue.
well as leather goods and textiles, are sold, and this area lies adjacent to Hawmat-sūq. It is here that over two thirds of Djerba's Jewish population resides. The remaining one third live in the area of Hāra Sigēra, or small quarter, situated midway between Gelāla and Hawmat-sūq. There has historically, always been competition between these two Hāras. Hāra Sigēra is symbolically connected with the East, while Hāra Kibira articulate derivation claims connecting them to the West. Until the administrative reforms following Tunisian independence, the communities created by the Djerba migrants belonged to two separate rabbīnic jurisdictions. The inhabitants of Hāra Kebīra insist that they are more modern than the people of Hāra Sigēra, while the latter claim their orthodoxy. The males of Hāra kebīra occasionally take their brides from Hara Sigēra, but the inverse rarely occurs, given the preoccupation with lineage. Even though relations between the inhabitants of the two villages are less than amicable, they are indispensable to one another. There exist complex relations of independence between the people of Hāra Kebīra and those of Hāra Sigēra. The synagogue el-Ghriba, which is controlled by Hāra Shigēra, is equally important for both people. The two communities are said to be the most ancient Jewish settlement in North Africa. Whilst there were once many different Jewish communities, many have dispersed over the last thirty years. An obvious question is thus why the Jewish communities in Djerba have remained and managed to maintain their cultural identity, despite the pressures that have compelled many to emigrate.

It is important that we turn and look at the festival and site that these communities share. They share the festival al-Ghriba. However, the location of the shrine is an important aspect of their practical significance. It is noticeable that the shrine rests beyond the boundaries of both communities, in the hinterland of their ambiguous relation, the very tenuousness of their subtle inter-dependence being mirrored by their shared belief and homage to a space beyond their place and a set of practices that they share beyond their differences of lineage and historicity.

The festival of el-Ghriba

In Arabic, the name el-ghriba means the stranger woman. The linguistic and cultural roots of the expression mean that, in this context, 'stranger' has connotations which involve a sense of triple existence: as an immigrant; as a marginal-personality and as a deity. Theoretically, every Arabic word is derived from a verb which has the

root of three consonants. In Arabic the word stranger, ghriba, is derived from the three consonants, gha/ra/ba. Originally, these three consonants had the following meanings, 'far away', 'strange' and 'marvel'. The nouns derived from the root of consonants could contain multiple meaning, which in this case were 'the one who came from far away'; 'the one who is strange' and 'the one with the ability to create miracles' and 'the one who is attractive'. Bearing in mind the etymological roots of the world, we can better understand the position of el-Griba in culture.

El-Ghriba synagogue is the central spiritual bond of the Jewish community in Djerba and the Jews of Djerba say that it is the home of all Jewish people throughout the world. The origins of el-Ghriba, like many aspects of ritual culture, are vague and explained by a number of semi-mythical explanations. The most popular and authentic explanation is that Nebuchadnezzar II of New Babylon, forced the Jews from the home, to become a migrant Diaspora who eventually settled on this island. From King Solomon's temple they carried with them the Torah. The story goes that on one day a woman walking along the island's shore came across a stone brick washed into the sand. She took it, immediately, to the rabbi and the stone was found to be part of Solomon's temple itself. People quickly agreed that a synagogue should be built on this land to symbolize the permanence of the Jewish religion, however a fierce debate ensued over the location of the site. It is said that on the second day of Passover, a sacred stone fell from the skies which when placed next to the stone, indicated the way to Jerusalem. It is on this place that el-Ghriba synagogue now stands and today the remains from Solomon's temple form a sacred place at the synagogue's foundation.\(^{10}\)

Folk legend provides a secular explanation. The legend says that a young and beautiful maiden left her place of birth and arrived on Djerba. The maiden, however, did not associate with the people of the island but spent her days immersed in prayer and meditation. Interestingly, the story does not depict the woman as being Jewish, Berber, or Greek. One day, the story goes, a heavy storm ravaged the island, and a bolt of lightning struck the place where the maiden lived. When the storm had passed, people cautiously approached the place where the maiden had lain, the immediate vicinity reduced to ashes and dust, though not, apparently, the woman's body which showed no sign of injury and which wore a feint, life-like, smile. Such un-worldly events were then taken as evidence of saintliness and her body was buried

\(^{10}\) Concerning the tales of el-Ghriba, see Tmarzizet, Kamel and Perez, Jaques.' Djerba Synagogue el Ghriba, Editions Carthacom, Tunis, 1993.
on the exact spot where the tragedy occurred. This place where her body still lies became known as el-Ghriba, meaning both 'miracle' and 'stranger'.

Once the gate under the arch is passed one enters the holy precincts. The grounds of el-Ghriba are shaped in, what is almost, a complete square, with a pathway running through the middle, on the right hand side of which lies a two story combined lodgings and assembly area (funduq) for visiting pilgrims and on the left is situated the synagogue itself. In the inner temple of the synagogue there is enshrined the torah which is believed to be the oldest of its kind in the world. Inside the holy precinct there is usually the tranquil quiet. In the entrance hall there are several benches, on which people sit reading holy scriptures in silence. Entering into the inner temple, separated by wooden partition, a stone benches lies around a brilliantly colored tile wall encircling the center altar and pulpit, and wafts away the scent from burning candles and the holy oil that pervades the air. Usually the sacred torah is safely sealed, and taken from the ark only during festival time. Before the German occupation of the Second World War, the temple used to store a large amount of precious gold coins accumulated from contributions made throughout the ages.

As the time of the festival approaches, the normal solemnity of the temple is replaced with an atmosphere of excitement. Though the Jewish community of Djerba celebrates a number of festivals throughout the year, el-Ghriba is the biggest and most important. Not only do Jews from Djerba and the Tunisian mainland participate in the festival, but they are joined from across the world by Djerbian Jews who have emigrated and return as pilgrims. Furthermore the State Governor, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the chief Rabbi from the Tunis synagogue visit the island. Since the Arab-Israeli Peace Settlement, Jews from Israel have also participated in the festival. The festival is also significant because it represents a rare opportunity for two hostile Jewish communities, Hâra Kebira and Hâra Sigêra, to meet. Furthermore, it is an opportunity for young women who, bound by tradition, seldom go outdoors to enter public space and meet prospective marriage partners.

The festival begins after Passover and continues for five days but it is the last two days that are the highlight of the festival in which the pilgrimage is held. The highlight of the celebrations is the festival floats, which are enveloped in donated

---

(11) Unfortunately, I have to notice that this synagogue was attacked by terrorist on 16th April 2002 and 20 tourists (mainly Germany) were killed. German government was reported that the attack was executed by the member of al-Qaida.
scarves and decorated on top with a crown. During the day throughout the festival period, the decorated tables of el-Ghriba are placed in the courtyard of the funduq, where an auction of the donated scarves takes place. The courtyard of the funduq is alive with the sound of bidding; with the shouting of applause as bids are won, and with the sounds of singers accompanied by 'ūd (Arabic lute) players and all of this is thronged with onlookers; with children running around from place to place, and with rows of stalls selling different kinds of clothes, sweets and fruit. Women shout out, contesting with money to be raised on a chair, the winner being lead around the outside of the grounds.

On the second floor of the funduq, there is a bar hall selling beer and bukha (fig spirits), a shish kebab restaurant and various stalls selling fried foods and the like. The whole place buzzes with crowds of people in festival dress enjoying the abundant food and beverages. The rooms on the first and second floor, facing the inner courtyard, are accommodated by visiting pilgrims from across the world. Naturally not only the funduq but hotels throughout the island have full occupancy rates during the festival period.

Into the synagogue flow constant streams of disciples. As the pilgrims enter the inner temple they give light to the central altar, and make an offering to the sacred stone of Solomon's shrine which is embedded in one section of the wall. Only women are allowed, however, to enter the cellar containing the sacred stone. Each of them places a boiled egg on which is written their wishes, especially concerning about to heal the sick child and to find a good husband. As evening falls, the table fully decorated by the donated scarves follow the rabbi from Tunis and other important visitors around the neighborhood who subsequently enter into the synagogue. In the inner temple which is packed with people, the rabbi and the Minister of the Interior perform speeches and the torah is read aloud. Finally at about 8 p.m. people begin to withdraw from the synagogue into the night in groups of twos and threes.

Despite the troubled history of these people and the historical enigma surrounding the ceremony, el-Ghriba's energy and excitement, to say nothing of the multiplicity of its religious and social significance, bringing together people separated both internationally and locally, show a community that is successfully transmitting its culture and belief cross generationally securing the conditions of its own perpetuation. The ceremony of el-Ghriba itself centers around the auction market, and is of a far more lively, entertaining and earthly existence than that which one initially expects. Furthermore, this festival exists as both an expression of the common Jewish experience of Diaspora, whilst originating in the peculiar context of Djerba and it's
unique narratives of locality and origin.

Some Ibádi Muslims, though they have never been to the festival themselves claim that in actual fact free sex takes place at the festival of el-Ghriba. It is interesting that many Muslims believe that the Jewish Ghriba festival itself was stolen from Muslim tradition. That is the reason why I started to investigate the belief of ghriba in Djerba. While I was working, I did find several beliefs that are the same as the Jewish Ghriba. I will introduce four of them. Three of these are from legend and one is part of living tradition.

III Stranger Women in Djerba

El-Fenigiya and the Arab

El-Fenigiya is the name of a saint as well as the name of an old olive tree, believed to be more than 2000 years old. This tree is situated at the edge of Menzel-Besrûr. The Besrûr family is one of the richest absentee Arab land owners in the Midûn district.

"People go there to escape the evil eye and get blessing (baraka) from the olive tree (zaitûna). It is said that a lady called el-Fenigiya used to sit under that tree. And her grave is located around 50 meters from the olive tree. El-Fenigiya was a sacred (sâliha) lady. She was an old lady with the power to cure (loka). People put a sick child under the tree and make a procession from her grave to the tree. After the procession, people put candles, incense and a small amount of money by the tree. The olive tree is called el-Fenigiya as well, and people believe that it has stood there since Phoenician times. People visit the tree not only from Menzel Besrûr but from all around the immediate vicinity. People do not seem to know where this woman came from; whether she was Arab or Berber, Phoenician or Greek but they call her el-Fenigiya."

Es-Salawtiya and Nomade

Es-Salawtiya is the name of a Mosque as well as a village whose population is around 70 families. People of es-Salawtiya are said to have immigrated to Djerba from Libya in the 16th Century. Their name originated from the female saint who created a miracle establishing their mosque.

---

(12) Interview with woman farmer named 'A‘îsha in Menzel-Besrûr 19th June, 1999.
(13) Based on the interview with Dr. Salawtiya, The Director of the Museum in Djerba. 20th June 1999.
“After people settled down in the district, they started to build their mosque which followed a long discussion among the people. Finally, they decided on the place and put a big stone pillar in the place of their choice but the next day people found that the pillar had moved to a place around 100 meters from that point where the mosque is built now. It is on the edge of the village. People built the mosque but found that the door would not open at all. So, people went to that old lady who lived near by but nobody knew where she came from, and asked her for the solution. She asked the village women to bake a special bread and ask men to gather in front of the mosque and broke the bread then sprinkled the bread crumbs around the mosque. Then the door was open for them.

Up till now people believe this miracle and usually young girls who want to find the destined marriage partner (maktūb) come to this mosque and to make wishes. They come not only from this village but from around this area. Then if their wish are fulfilled, they have to make a visit with festival meal (qasa’a).”

**Lilla Hadriya and Fishermen**

Hadriya is a small village which consists of about 100 families located on the northwest seashore of Djerba island. Hotels and other facilities are constructed along this coastline for tourism with four wheeled drive land-cruisers carrying a full load of tourists which occasionally disturb the quietness of the village.

The shrine to the Saint Lilla Hadriya is on the tip of the cape where there is now a hotel site. People still come to ask for many things at the shrine of the saint Hadriya, especially during the season for sardine (uzaf) fishermen come to pray for a rich haul.

“At the beginning of this season, fishermen gather in this place (ziyāra) bringing their lunch or supper to share it with fellow fishermen, because all the fishermen are one family. They make couscous for her with goat or sheep meat. Goat meat is better than sheep because they believe that she prefers it. We believed that she is a black saint who came form the north. The visiting day for the shrine is on Sunday. People make a wish (wa’ada) then if it is fulfilled we sacrifice a goat and bring with couscous with meat (qasa’a). Even now on Sunday in the summer time especially, people return to shrine, because their wish has been fulfilled.

(14) Interview with a shop-keeper in his 40’s in Hadriya village, 24th June 1999.
There is no descendant of Lilla Hadriya in Hadriya village nor is there a formal religious authority (wakil). Everybody takes care of her shrine and puts candles on it and makes a visit (ziyāra). All the families around here are charged with taking care of her shrine. Arab, Berber, Black, all people who come not only from this area but from all the areas of Djerba. They believe in her. Young girls make wish to help them find their destined husbands (makutūb). When their wishes are fulfilled they return to the shrine with qusa‘a (couscous with meat). Couples pay visits to her shrine before their wedding and people also ask her for a cure. Her shrine was broken as rough waves encroached on the seashore. Now the villagers are rebuilding it. All families in this area donated money for this purpose and cooperated in the rebuilding.”

Visiting Arifas
Lilla Nūra

Whilst I was searching for legends of the Stranger Women, I happen to be taken to the arifa (predictor) named Lilla Nūra. Lilla is an honorific title for a female, especially one for a sacred personality. Her personal history gives us a clear and vivid image of a ghriba, stranger woman. (15)

At the age of twelve, she visited to the shrine of saint Sidi Naser during the pilgrimage festival. People made tents and sacrificed lamb and invited each other to eat dinner, and make religious a meeting (hadra) till morning. At midnight, when people were praying, she saw the Saint Sidi Naser appear with bright lights. She became stiff and was possessed by him. She was crying and embraced him in her arms and kissed him.

The saint said to her, “My daughter, you will became a stranger and you will live with a poor man. But I will give you a power (hibba) from God, and I will give you this rosary to help you giving young girls the opportunity to find a destined husband and give you this incense for helping sick people and resolving people’s family problems. And everybody who comes to you with a good intention, not with a vicious intention, their problems will be solved.”

She have been for seven years in Djerba, when she came here her life circumstances were difficult, she lived in a deserted house and her husband was old and jobless. Once when she was sleeping she called Sidi Naser. He appeared and said “I have given you already my power, take it. Follow the right way.” She asked the

(15) Interview with Nura, 4th May 1999 in Djerba.
chief of mosque (mufit) if she could use her power. He replayed that God permits her to use it. After that many ladies visited her and asked her to use her power in order to find them destined husband, or to resolve their family problems. If somebody comes and asks for something and it comes true, he has to return to her or to any mosque in order to fulfill his promise with his meal. If he does not fulfill his promise, she said that as she could lift him up, so she could take him down badly!

Lilla Jalila

In Tunis, I also made interview with a woman who was famous for her prediction. I met her at the female meeting festival of Saint Manoubia Mosque. Her personal story also suggests us how arifa was born in the society.

Jalila was born in a poor peasant family. When she was 8 years old or so, she was leaving to Tunis, for working in a family. When she got trouble with this family she fled to Sidi Bousaid Mosque. But a man came with his mother and took her from there. After one year, when she was 15 years old she married him. Since then she has been lived in this poor district in Tunis. She was feeling always insecure. Around this time she has started to see the angels in the other world and noticed her special talent. She insisted that she has an angel husband and all of her children were named by him. Her actual husband died by stroke because he was always laughing at her.

In all her life she dealt like a man, and she insisted that when she fell into deha (lost herself) she was not a lady, a man was wearing her not female. It is not herself to speak, it was her inside spirit, he tells to people everything about their future. She also insisted that she had a talent of the space transference. She always has been attended festivals with men and has prayed with men as well as with women. She said that she had freedom to make anything as she had a special talent. Also she keeps helping her poor neighbors. But her daughters were always afraid of her because if somebody makes her cry, he will get misfortune.

IV Who are the Stranger Women?

Comparison of the case studies

So, what is common to these different stories? Who are these Stranger Women and what do they manifest? What is interesting and intriguing about these stories is that the 'miracles' seem to be ambiguous. In the Jewish el-Ghriba myth, the woman did

(16) Interview with Jalila, 4th July 1999 in Tunis.
nothing in her lifetime for the community, she healed no one, she was not a figure conferring great charity or wisdom, nor is it apparent that she fulfilled any clear role for the community and the miracle that is central to her special mythical status did not occur until the moment of her death. Here, we have what appears to be a myth surrounding issues of transition. We have already seen the position of the myth across different communities and boundaries and we have here, internal to the myth itself, the issue of transition within the realm of being, from life to death. Given the position of the myth across these different communities who are closely linked but disparate, with each possessing distinguishing forms of ethnicity and belief, there clearly arises an issue, within the island of speciation which the gives the myth its efficacy as belief. That is, the myth is riddled at many different levels with issues to do with transition and boundaries, which clearly are homologous to the context that has given the belief its life. It seems then, that the truth of the myth, of a transition involving practical being, what might be seen as inert for each being, the realm of practical existence that is inscribed in the unconsciousness of comportment and practical being, is significant to individuals living in a society and location in which that is an issue because of boundaries of ethnicity that raise issues of speciation that practical existence must mediate in spaces that the rituals involve like, for example, the bartering and trading of the festival. The stories of el-Fenigia and the black saint Lilla Hadriya share this similarity of theme, performing no miracles or apparently significant social role. In the case of es-Salaltiya, the central issue of resolution of difference is more explicit in that she re-integrated villagers who had split into two separate groups. Though all of them became saints after their death, their graveyard and humble dwelling places became sacred places that have become the object of religious practices and pilgrimage.

What kind of special characteristics have made them saints? To answer this, I carried out interviews with living predictors (arifa) as well as looking at historical documents concerned with biographical details of female saints. Gradually, I became aware of important aspects of the character of Stranger Women. Usually their character’s involved the reconciliation of extreme and sometimes contradictory characteristics, they were kind and gentle but also fervent and strong. Jalila in Tunis whom I interviewed, told me that she manifest male characteristics, as she put it she “wore” the male manner when she was possessed by the spirit. She insisted that she could go wherever she wanted, including space transference and could even pray with men in the mosque and nobody could intervene in her action.

The hagiography of Saint Om-ezZinn el-Bohla in the Jammalia district gives us a
typical example of such characters. (17) The story is based on the daughter of a shepherd who was naive (buhalâ) but had a talent for prediction. She went wherever she wanted to go, without recourse to convention. This antisocial behaviour annoyed her brother who tied her up in the house to control her. Whilst he was away from the house traveling in the desert his camel was seriously wounded in the desert, laving him dying in the desert, he saw the bright image of his sister coming towards him with a cup of water and she healed the camel. When he arrived home safely he found that Om-ezZinn was unbound but had not moved from the house. People saw this incident as verification of the miracle, and of her as a saint and she was then permitted to act as she wanted. Regarded as the second irrefutable saint next to the erudite Sufi holy woman es-Saida el-Manubia who occupies the first rank in the Tunisian feminine holiness hierarchy, Om-ezZinn represents a special category of "wise-foolish holy" (majadhibi) who are considered as the beloved of the God.

At the time, the end of the 17th century, in this district two warrior groups originally from Turkey fought each other. In the midst of the war only Om-ezZinn could meet the leaders and accuse them whenever she wanted. She then fought with them in order to protect the village people from violence and mediated the conflict.

Women saints thus have this Janus-like double aspect to their public face: kind and generous yet strong and courageous. It is also interesting to observe the difference between these women saints and the idea of the ‘maiden saint’; these women are not young, innocent women but middle aged and old experienced women who have assimilated sufficient social understanding to be wise. A further significant characteristic of these Stranger Women is that they are exempt from the general social conventions which delineate women’s position and thus these women can transgress boundaries, roles and territories, praying and studying with men and giving advice to men as well as mediating in conflicts between groups or within groups.

In Islamic saint biography, living in poverty, dreaming in bright light, emigrating to another place are all shared conditions for sainthood, and characteristic powers are space transference and rain-making along with powers of healing and prediction, possession of these powers is called baraka. Women gifted with powers of baraka, also tend to adopt forms of behaviour that are seen as antisocial and deviant. In female saint legends, we find that possession of powers and violation of social norms go hand in hand and even opposite sides of the same coin. Perhaps possession of

(17) About the hagiography of Om-ezZinn Jamaliya see, Jallul Berikhria. Manaqib al-Sâlihin fi ma Yurwa’an Om-ezZinen 1993.
unique competence brings with it the curse of perception that social estrangement is generally the group’s socially consecrated punishment for.

What kind of social needs produce this type of socially deviant female saint? Looking at the stories of Stranger Women in Djerba may suggest the answer. It is apparent, that the Djerba Stranger Women legends have the same basic thematic pattern. Firstly, the most characteristic point is that these Stranger Women are unidentified immigrants in the literal, legal sense, ‘aliens’. They are the proverbial strangers, free-floating, socially dislocated and thus un-known, drifters lacking distinct socially located speciation, drifters bereft of the conditions of social meaning that locate the known and trusted and thus figures who provoke an anxiety whose source is the metaphysical condition of everyday being we all take for granted as un-mysterious and thus these wandering figures provoke a mystery and awe that can only be resolved through mythical and ritualised consideration of strange powers and saintly virtues. No one knows their origin, they belong to no community. They are estranged from existing communities on the island and live in isolated locations. After their death their abodes have become sacred spaces, their shrines or huts, usually bordering menzel-communities or near the sea, are touched in local perception by the social grounds constituting both community and phenomena.

From the splendid el-Ghriba synagogue, to the simple olive tree of el-Fhenigiya’s shrine or Lilla Hadriya’s shrine on the sea shore, these sacred places all share common features in their construction. For example, there are two sacred points in each place, one being their graves and the other being their isolated dwellings. This twin orientation is marked in practical being through ritual prayers which through comportment link the two sacred points, people making a solitary procession, a solemn form of walking to pray at both points and light candles. In the case of es-Salawtiya, where there is no grave or dwelling, people make a procession between the mosque and the first point where the pillar was. These rituals are carried out in the hope of healing and or of preserving or developing human relationships.

Japanese Ethnology and the Theory of Stranger God

The key elements of el-Ghribas are shown on the right of Chart 1. The key-elements will immediately remind those familiar with Japanese ethnology of the theory of Marebito with which the Stranger Woman shares many aspects. In Japanese, Marebito means Stranger God. Why and how the Japanese concept of the Shinto-God, the Hachiman-Shrine and the Inari-Shrine and the same pattern of myth have spread throughout Japan has been one of the central issues in Japanese
The Themes of El-Ghriba

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unidentified maiden</th>
<th>Emigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drifted ashore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estranged from communities</th>
<th>Exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living in isolated location</td>
<td>Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing and predicting</td>
<td>Marginality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Miracles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Became saint after death</th>
<th>Sanctification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grave became the sacred place</td>
<td>Pilgrimage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making wishes for marriage</th>
<th>Efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healing for illness</td>
<td>Revitalization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethnological studies.

The origin of these gods has been contested by the famous ethnologists, Yanagita Kunio and Origuchi Shinobu. Yanagita has claimed that the origin of these gods rests within Japan, whilst Origuchi has searched for their origin outside Japan, and he has named them *Marebito* (Stranger God). Yanagita’s approach is criticized because he emphasized the myth of a monolithic origin for Japanese ethnic groups. He insisted that ethnological studies and their interpretation should be done mainly by Japanese scholars and European or American interpretations of Japanese culture should not be accepted easily. When fascism arose in Japan, his writings were called on in order to emphasize the monolithic origin of “Japaneseness”, based on the holy trinity of rice, village and belief in ancestor worship. The ease with which such ideas concerning origins have been used by the right in Japan during the fascist period has remained a historical lesson and recent ethnological and historical studies of Japan, have critically questioned the idea of a monolithic Japan and have focused on the ways in which Japanese religious concepts have been carried and disseminated.
However, from within the tradition of Japanese ethnology, Yanagita’s *Fujo-ko* (The theory of Shrine Mediums) and *Kebōzu-ko* (The theory of Haired Monks) are worth considering in relation to the Djerba Stranger Women.\(^{(18)}\)

Yanagita divided the Japanese Shrine medium into two types, a travelling medium and a settling medium, prioritising the importance of the former, the travelling medium. These mediums emigrated and were forced to travel widely because they were excluded from existing communities. When they did settle it was usually in a small hut located beyond the village border. These mediums chiefly made pronouncements of a predictive nature. Yanagita argued that it was travelling mediums who were significant agents in the spread of religious network across Japan. Interestingly, these mediums possessed a kind of cultural capital in that political authorities often had to take care to respect the pronouncements of these mediums because the power of their opinion among Japanese people was such that their predictions could produce gossip, rumor, and influence the reputation and standing of political and public figures. Yanagita suggested that these traveling mediums are related to the *Tennō* (Japanese Emperor) system which controlled the travelling artisans as well, while the Japanese warrior *Shōgun*-government directly controlled the peasants. He also suggested that in the process of settling these travelling people into the existing village system, forms of ethnic discrimination emerged in Japan, though he suddenly stopped investigating this problem, because it appeared to be related to the relation to *Tennō* system.

Recently, historians like Amino Yoshihiko, who has studied artisans’ documents in the Middle Age has provided analysis congruent with Yanagita’s suggestion. Amino has also provided evidence that during the 14th and the 15th centuries, especially during the Age of Civil wars in Japan, many travelling religious people as well as artisans moved freely and extensively around Japan. Amino has suggested that this period was one of transition from the loose *Tennō/Shōgun* dual political system to the village based monolithic feudal system in which *Tennō* quickly lost control of the people.\(^{(19)}\) Interestingly, Amino pointed out that it was under this solidly feudal system (Edo Bakufu), in the 17th century, that farmers rioted against the dominant social authority of their masters putting on their straw rain-coats and carrying wooden sticks, the symbol of travellers to demonstrate their condition with the suggestion of dislocation and marginality.


Marebito (Stranger God), was the symbol of revitalizing the village and its component lives as well as of destroying the existing order and they always came from outside the village border. In this sense we can summarize the role of Stranger Gods and their messenger shrine mediums as being situated at the transactional point between the cohesion of the village system and the disunion of the existing social order, at least in pre-Modern Japan.

A further example of religious mediums in Japan was the "Kebozu (Haired monks)" who were investigated by Yanagita as well. They are half-religious, half-profane monks originally called "Hijiri (the one who knows the omen of the days=predictor)". These two were immigrant from outside the communities that they lived around. They were regarded as having special qualities that made them uniquely competent in the organisation of funerals for villagers and praying for the dead. In this sense, we again find a common theme since they seem to be situated at the transactional point between different forms of being that their very marginality and difference is perceived to equip them to mediate. Again the issue seems to involve the negotiation of incorporated difference and corporeal significance. The difference in their bearing and being seems somehow to situate them as people uniquely placed to deal with the non-visible and super-natural, to interact with all of those mysteriously perceived phenomena that impact upon human communities.

However, such immigrant mediums were confined to the position of pollutants in the process of settling that followed the Middle Ages in Japan, and the exclusion of strangers became more common in village life. In Islamic society, the mobility of people has been more common and constant. Why has a more mobile Islamic society seemed to need Stranger Gods as well, and how do people use them? Are they, as Japanese Stranger God studies suggest, situated in some transactional point between social systems?

I would like to note, by way of aside, that there are differences between the Islamic attitude to the stranger and that of the Japanese attitude. Whilst the Islamic world's attitude seems to be structured around the issue of particularity / universality, the Japanese seems to perceive the stranger in terms of order / disorder. In relation to these questions, of course, I must turn and discuss Ernest Gellner's work and his famous theory of medium saints in Atras.

Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Medium Saints
The group of half-profane Japanese medium saints known as Kebōzu bear more than a posing resemblance to what Gellner described in his theory of medium saints
in Atlas. Gellner suggested that Islamic society was based on a dynamism that emerged from the rival tensions of two key groups. One group, the tribal society based on nomadism whose segmental lineage system can be seen as an adaptation to the exigencies of the environment in which they have been forced to adopt this pattern of life and the other an urban society owning facilities like the orthodox Islam Mosque and the central market whose life is based on commerce and manufacturing. Gellner suggests that it was Islam that has given an integrated meaning to these competing forms of life. Gellner has suggested that the most important social boundary in North Africa exists between the life-styles of the city based petty bourgeoisie and the peasants of the countryside. Typically, it is the peasantry who revere morally ambiguous saints and participate in profane-sacred festivals.

Gellner suggests that because the tribal segmental society lacked social mechanisms of inheritance to ensure smooth transference of leadership there exists a space and function that could be filled by a medium who could provide guidance to the group. If there was a political vacuum ethos who were outside the tribal system could act as mediums, and furthermore, if they could relate to the descendants of the prophets, their religious and political function as mediums were seen as ideal. However, Gellner point out that:

...their shrines were tied to a locality, to specific patterns of pilgrimage; a saint is linked to the performance of this or that service, the curing of this or that ailment. Their magic has a functional and territorial specificity. For a tribal society well-articulated in terms of clans and segments, they were for this very reason admirably suited; and they were also well adapted for mediation between such tribesmen and the towns.\(^{(20)}\)

Gellner goes on to say that these local saints were, as far as modern conditions were concerned, useless, and that they only had limited use for mobile, individualised uprooted populations. As a kind of symbol or emblem around which to constitute a commonality of belief around which a larger group, or even nation, might be constituted through the creation of a shared Anderson’s *Imagined Community*, they were also of extremely limited effectiveness.\(^{(21)}\) The kind of local fragmented experience and particularised practices that they practised “—ecstasies, rural festivals, the mingling of the profane and the sacred—are scarcely usable as a modern ideology or as a basis for national pride”. In contrast, the literacy-based culture of a reforming

---


Islam was of much greater effectiveness.\(^{(22)}\)

However, this conclusion does not seem to follow for all such societies. For example, in contemporary Magreb society, belief in local saints is not declining, indeed such belief has seemed to be able to embed itself within the changed structures of industrial society and it prevails even in urban areas of authentic Islam. There is a very important issue, here, in that Gellner’s work has been criticized as an example of what Said has characterised as Orientalism.

Talal Asad has developed a critique of Gellner based in many of the insights drawn from contemporary social theory. Asad is critical of textual interpretations of anthropology, particularly of that kind that derives its symbolic efficacy and institutional legitimacy from Anglophile trends in cultural criticism, the kind of ‘writing worlds’ and ‘life as text’ approaches to the claiming a recording of social reality. As Asad implies, these approaches involve a literate class bias that appropriates all forms of reality to that of the situated observing subject linguistically constituting the world of others through a medium they cannot, in principle, participate in: the pseudo-literary discourse of obfuscation and evasion so dear to liberal-arts academics. The problem, as Asad’s instinct reveal, is that Gellner unconsciously imputes to the problem what in fact belongs to the way that he looks at it, that is, he unconsciously represents the problem in ways that belong not to the problem but to the way that he comprehends the problem. We might suggest, that such errors arise from the scholastic situation in which anthropologists retire from the world in order to think it and do so without awareness of the difference that position institutes to that of agents or actors who are faced with an urgent reality that demands of them not thought but action and not discursive contemplation, transparantly rendered, but practical resolution. Returning to Gellner, Asad argues that Gellner’s construction of Berber culture never escapes and is thus bound by the inescapable Christian presumptions that structure his own ways of framing Berber belief. As Asad puts it:

...his too-fluent use of a religious vocabulary with strong, and perhaps, irrelevant Christian overtones must prompt doubts and questions at this point.\(^{(23)}\)

So, Gellner elides the Muslim concept of baraka to the Christian concept of grace. There is here an elision of different frames that is never circumvented by a knowing

---

\(^{(22)}\) Gellner, op. cit. P. 166.

situated experientially based examination of practice. Asad makes the observation that such elisions of linguistic codes always based in inescapable issues concerned with the inequalities that haunt language. That is, with issues concerned with, from where the power of language to name and be believed emerges, which is surely in the global patterns of power embedded in contemporary capitalism and its imperialist tendencies.\(^{(24)}\)

This is perhaps why it has often been ignored that Yanagita noticed this problem half a century earlier in Japan and his research institute was closed after the Second World War. He realised that the cultural anthropology then emerging mainly under American influence had pernicious undertones for subject peoples and an objectifying tendency toward Japanese ethnology. It is perhaps telling that Yanagita’s and Gellner’s context are totally opposite. Yanagita tried to contextualise Japanese ethnology in the society’s own terms using its own traditions and allowing those traditions to found and develop a distinctly Japanese form of ethnology. Gellner, on the other hand, as Asad contends, inescapably frames his understanding in terms of categories based in the Christian and capitalist West.

A question automatically arises, are these two theories of stranger saints too dated and to be of value? From the interpretations that we offer, can we really ascertain valuable insights and do they offer any insights of value to contemporary Islamic society?

Our next task then, seems to be that of taking what we can form these two analyses and forming something that can offer some insight into the phenomena of stranger saints. For Yanagita, medium saints are constituted from amidst situated transaction points, that is from amidst the dualities of order/disorder, profane/sacred—and Gellner’s medium saints are situated by the spatial coordinates and social taxonomies—urban/rural, periphery/center. These board categorisations are generally relevant to our understanding of the role of the stranger saints in the society. If we bear in mind the centrality of borders, symbolic and spatial, to communities, that is, that communities are often forged through an understanding of their distinctness, born of a capacity to recognise distinct differences, then we can appreciate the importance of the perception of the stranger to the experience of belonging that is the birth of community. This allows us to appreciate the importance of socially constituted understanding of otherness embodied in the stranger to an understanding of the character of a given society and the particular hue of its forms of association.

---

\(^{(24)}\) Asad, *op. cit.* p. 199.
V The Role of the Stranger Women

With these considerations now articulated we can again return to the central question with which we began, ‘What is the Stranger Women’s role in mobile Islamic societies?’. Authentic Islam does not admit to the existence any kind of saints, only prophets. Islam believes in a direct contract between the person and God, and, theoretically, no one intervenes between them. So, sanctification relates only to Islamic mysticism, particularly, Sufism which is not excluded from authentic Islam. Even if it is not quite authentic, Sufism is not heterodoxic or heretical in relation to authentic Islam. Gellner thus draw a parallel suggesting that Sufism is to authentic Islam what Puritanism is to Catholicism. There is a difference, however, in that Sufi sanctification has no strict rules in the way that Catholic Christian sanctification does with its sanctification through necessary conditions like martyrdom.

In comparison, sanctification of Islamic Sufi is based on people’s belief and living or dead can became saints. The most important conditions for sanctification are ‘miracle’ or baraka and ‘closeness to God’ or wali. So, unlike in the Christian tradition where sainthood depends upon the papal jurisdiction and acceptance, anyone might become a saint who is admitted by people as having generated a miracle and who has thus manifest their proximity to God. In other words, in Islamic society baraka is ubiquitous and unites the two Islamic traditions ubiquitousness of baraka unites the two different traditions.

We must remember that in the ‘miracles’ that are said to have been created by the Stranger Women in Djerba, nothing really happened, apart from incongruous and unexpected natural occurrences that people perceived as indications of baraka. This suggests something about the readiness of individuals to perceive unusual occurrences as instances of what we might call ‘magic’, that is as indications of saintliness which demand ritualised practices which partially constitute the belief they emerge from. Anyone with an anthropological sensitivity realises that collective perception emerges from the social grounds of collective belief which constitute the necessary perceptions that constitute any community. Furthermore, it does seem that such baraka, that is, what people are prepared to collectively accept as miracles, can only emerge from the social grounds of the collective perceptual schemes, practically realised and inscribed in the comportment that instantiates its own conditions of reproduction, through

which these people understand the human realm on an island in which this realm might easily become contested on the grounds of the otherness that is the necessary condition of these disparate communities’ life. The social role of saints is a way of accepting without violence difference and marginality. The allocation of sainthood seems to achieve, in a distinctly human way, the acceptance of racial and ethnic difference in a context where cooperation is central to each communities’ survival. When the community needs some kind of saint, then it somehow founds the saint they need because the conditions of its existence are already constituted in the need inscribed in the forms of perception collectively shared and publicly constituted through all the minute details of perceptible ‘teaching’ transmitted and acquired, body-to-body, by all of the everyday forms of being and ceremonious action that constitutes the absolute framework and condition of Djerbian life.

If baraka is composed by a social need then what is the social need in Djerba? The characteristics of the Stranger Women in Djerba can be summarized in the following three points.

1. Symbols of baraka include finding a husband and the social destiny that implies, the curing of children’s illness.
2. Their shrines are situated on borders or on the sea shore.
3. Rituals for saints create communities which seem to consolidate communities.

Given that the Jewish el-Ghriba festival exemplifies these characteristics what social needs can we recognise that they have? If we look at the Jewish community on Djerba it is clear that they are not at all homogenous but, as we have seen, divided into two competing groups, Hāra-kebira and Hāra-Sigēra. Each group has their own local as well as global relationships as well as competition for temporal power and symbolic rewards within each particular group. These two groups maintain a boundary between each other which they negotiate symbolically through the inscription of differences that each finds characteristic of itself and others. Yet each community has established forms of living and ways of being that are distinct to the locality in which they exist and each community is characterised by competition and distinction within its own boundaries. How, then, have these people maintained their characteristics as Djerbian Jewish, and how have they solved the tensions among them in this ecologically limited space?

**Transactional Point between Locality/Universality**

One suggestion is that the most plausible answer to this question is a system of segregated habitation of menzel-communities which cover the island. By citing
Djerba, however, I do not intend to advocate a theory of segregated habitation which claims that these conditions are necessary for different cultural groups to co-exist. The structure found on this island is not simply one of "segregation/isolation". Initially, each group seem isolated, and governed by prejudice and wariness about others but one must beware of concluding that each group is simply exclusive because the way in which they realise their relation to others is more ambiguous. Moreover, the segregated social structure which has secured the unique quality of each minority group in Djerba has not simply formed through isolation. Rather the truth of the forces that have shaped these distinct ethnicities are relational and formed through the existence of a myriad of connecting points. Significantly, in such a restricted natural environment, it is impossible for any community to reproduce itself through a life-style that is completely self-sufficient. Exposure to other groups in everyday life through trade and the flow of goods it ensures is the inescapable way of these lives and is also the condition for each group to reaffirm its own mode of living and affirmation of its own distinct characteristics. There is both affirmation of identity and understanding of difference.

Both the Jewish and Muslim communities of Djerba are too fragmented into small distinct communities to be considered strong communities in themselves. These small groups, each minorities, have in order to maintain their own ethos and beliefs segregated into disparate areas of the island. Each isolated and fragmented community has been forced to adopt a specialized way of living in order to adapt to the natural environment of their area. Such fragmented communities, whilst remaining isolated have been forced to maintain links with other communities and regions through trade in order to obtain both necessities and luxury goods. The *baraka* arises from this context and is way of accommodating to this mutual interdependence by facilitating an acceptance that is practically necessary but effaced among communities that are structurally inter-dependent.

Whilst el-Ghriba is a specially Jewish belief, the Muslim communities on the island also expect *baraka* from el-Ghriba. El-Ghriba synagogue is situated beyond the territory of both Jewish groups is treated as a sacred place by Jews and Muslims alike and el-Ghriba festival is one of the rare occasions when the different communities participate in open relations and mingle with each other, since Jews and Muslims alike can visit and sell their commodities in the auction place.

The Jewish example of el-Ghriba makes evident the necessity that structures this society. It manifests the constant intra/inter social relations implicit but not openly recognised among these different groups and we can detect the same underlying structure beneath the other Stranger Women, el-Fenigiya, Lilla Hadliya, es-Salawtiya.
Festivals always manifest an effort to renew the collective spirit of the community. It is precisely the ethnic complexity of the el-Ghriba festival—simultaneously Jewish and Djerbian—and the mixed connotations of the original Arabic gh/ra/ba, at once "strange" and "attractive" that manifests the contradictions of this underlining structure of interdependence through a closely negotiated competition and contestation that characterises island culture as an overall pattern of relations. The 'strangers' who undergo a publicly instituted sanitization befitting particular ritual acts, whilst being themselves rejected and outcast, experienced through their strangeness and otherness, fulfill a surface role of affirming the similarity of those who institute and consecrate that perception and in this way, beyond the social boundaries of the community a symbolic boundary is affirmed and in that strange space beyond their space, connections are forged and relations consolidated: resolutions are found to the interminable problem of interdependence and difference. (see Chart 2) (26) It is hardly surprising, then, that for this purpose, appropriate individuals for saintliness are those free of inscribed, easily identifiable social identities, and often women, free of the marks of public life, domestic and secret, mysterious and potent, individuals whose social position and vulnerability is liable always to lapse in dislocation, like the homeless of our own cities, who can disappear and reappear, socially that is, and who thus fit both the logic of this belief and are simultaneously amenable to the realisation of these beliefs. The stranger-maiden with no relation to any existing community fulfills a logic inscribed deep in this context. Stranger saints who embodied baraka are a consciously effaced way of securing a peaceful knowledge beyond conflict and it is telling that this is found in the immaterial world beyond the earthly sources of our deepest divisions. Perhaps for these kinds of reasons, baraka are authorized by authentic Islam, as well as Judaism, under the protection of Islam and festivals of the Stranger Women are a place where individual can commune with other members of the island through eating qasa 'a (festival meal). In short, the baraka, embodied by the Stranger Women manifests an act through which people entrust the revitalization and reproduction of their society, it embodies the desire for social and cultural reproduction through the mediating of personal dilemmas and aspirations. In this sense, we can say that the phenomena of the Stranger Women embody a practical logic that involves a complex of the social grounds from which it arises and yet that they mediate the boundaries that each

(26) In this sense, Chart 2 shows that el-Ghriba festival seems a typical example of the 'communitas' space which Victor Turner theorised.
individual life straddles between the particular and the universal as they are practically negotiated by all people’s in the horizons that they constitute.

**The Islamic Multi-Cultural Structure and Open System**

To what extent can we generalize this structure? It is said that the belief in the saints in the West Arab (Magrib) started with the popularization of Sufism introduced from the East Arab (Mashriq) in the 12th century. Contemporary researchers of Sufism emphasize the direct influence of Sufi tradition on Magrib practice, rather than having the belief being adopted within a distinctly localised manner or style. In Djerba I found the opposite phenomena. Under Islamic tradition, especially under the strong influence of the theologically stricter Khawârîjî’ sect, Islam easily assimilated local traditions. Gellner’s periphery/center dichotomy does not apply easily to this context because periphery/center relations are more fluid in the Islamic world. Rather, in Djerba, Islam’s universality has seemed able to ‘claim’ local contexts and be adopted to differing ways of life which it has seemed able to inform with its own specific resonances. In this sense, Islam appears to be a flexible religion and it appears all the more powerful for that since it is able to be appropriated by different people’s in different contexts without its religious value being diminished. As the cases of baraka demonstrate Islam has been able to assimilate indigenous religious traditions, and from the beginning its history shows that it has always embraced local pre-Islamic customs. Islam has seemed able to embrace socially contradictory aspects of cultural life and accept them rather than
setting them aside as antipathetic and thus it has overcome locality and managed to fashion the basis of a universal family that can accept and assimilate a diversity of groups.

This is evident in Islamic law. It emerges from the āda (local law) and sharia (Islamic Law) duality. The "Islamic" system which regulates the existence of various religious groups by universal legal principles is important in the construction of a balance that preserves multi-religious relations. For example, the autonomy of minority religious groups has, in most cases, been guaranteed by Islamic law without interference in the internal affairs of the community by authorities. The authorities intervene only when a dispute within, for example, the Jewish community could not be settled by the parties involved. Once a settlement had been reached in regard of an appeal to the Islamic court further debate would then ensue within the Jewish community over whether or not to comply. Law is, of course, only a principle, and the reality has always been that responses were reached according to the authority and conditions of the time. It can be said, however, at least in regard of pre-modern Islamic society that as a universal principle, the existence of Islamic law provided a preventative mechanism to avoid periodic persecutions and any genocidal impulses they might nurture.

The Middle East is a region in which the type of natural environment found condensed in Djerba stretches out on a far larger scale. It is therefore not generally suitable for the establishment of the kind of isolated self-sufficient agricultural system which made feudalism possible in Japan and Europe. Consequently, Islamic society developed through a commercial and trade system that developed through a network of connecting nodes across a vast cultural and economic sphere. This essentially pluralistic structure, however, is constituted from the midst of highly fragile, individual ecosystems. In this sense, the so called 'Islamic' multi-cultural system, such an important characteristic of Islamic civilisation does not take the form of a static 'mosaic society' in which fragmented groups coexist in isolation through a policy of protection based on religious tolerance. I would like to suggest that the essence of the Islamic multi-cultural system lies in the evolving of fluid relations formed pluralistically and on a multiple of levels between various communities which link different ecosystem whilst allowing localities to keep their distinct characteristics whilst relating, nevertheless, through the Islamic regal system.

Furthermore, this "Islamic" multi-cultural system is also the opposite of the contemporary nation-state system which developed out of 17th century Europe. The great shortcoming of the modern nation is the fact that the guarantee of these rights
is ensured only within the limits of the territorial state. This system fails to account for those who do not possess a country of their own or whose culture differs from the 'norm' of the territory in which they live. Within the present system, culturally different groups have ultimately been continuously subjected to either assimilation to the nation's citizenry or exclusion.

The system which originated in Europe eventually arrived in the Islamic world over a century later. The present Tunisian government is currently undertaking economic reforms while suppressing anti-government movements through an authoritarian regime backed by the military and police. Djerba is not exempt from this situation, and two problems result. Firstly, the destruction of the natural environment, especially water resources, due to tourism, and the worsening in disparities of wealth. As we have seen the island has developed from a variety of modes of living formed amidst a fragile ecosystem which have been the conditions for a fragmented and dislocated pluralistic structure. In the current state of affairs, as small tenant farmers increase, absentee landlords have become the norm and tourism progresses further, the environment of this extremely delicate arid climatic region is deteriorating rapidly, and we must recognise that changes to one part of the overall context will effect the others and that the chances of this balance being lost are extremely high. The nation-state system has accelerated this process, and the Islamic system is at the mercy of these powerful economic and social forces.

It is these conditions that continues to fuel Islamic fundamentalism. Advocates of this movement call for the realization of a more equal society through the redistribution of wealth. The substance of such demands, however, includes the implementation of Islamic socialism and the fostering of the people through increases in political consciousness. In this sense, Islamic fundamentalism is a form of nationalism, with a low level of tolerance of others born of conditions which are perceived as threatening them and their way of life.

If this fragile balance, socially mediated, between nature and the inhabitants of the island is lost, will the Djerbian Jewish community be expelled? Or will Tunisia adopt development policies in the way that neighboring Algeria has, policies which might well further worsen inequalities leading to a rise in support for Islamic fundamentalism which would threaten the religious leniency of traditional Djerba? It is perhaps possible that a system based around principles of regional integration or which tried to foster a more internationalist sensibility as the basis for sources of integration might be founded to revitalise the present balance. Whether policies can
be framed that might usher in a new period of co-existence, perhaps based on a
fusion of the principles of basic human rights, at the heart of the nation state system
and of the group autonomy formulated by the Islamic system, remains to be seen.
But certainly, given the forces shaping western European and North American
societies, let alone the problems facing the middle east, one thing is perhaps assured,
the path to the future, if it remains peaceful will not be smooth, and Islamic society
is likely to be wrenched into modernity in a way it may find as difficult to survive as
Christianity has but in this rests a good deal of all of our immediate futures.

References

Abdessalam ben Hamida. “La Situation Economique et Sociale à Djerba pendant le Premier
quart de Siecle de Protectorat”, in Actes du Colloque sur L’Histoire de Jerba (April 1982).


Asad, Talal. Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reason of power in Christianity and Islam,

Braudel, Fernand. Yumi Hamana (trns.), Chichuuikaisekai (The Mediterranean World),


Cohen, Mark R. Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages, Princeton University


Goitein, S. D. A. Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Community of the Arab World: as

Kisaichi, Masatoshi. Isuramuseija : kiseki, yogen, iyashinosekai (Saints in Islam : The World of
Miracle, Prediction and Healing), Kōdansha gendaishinsho, 1996.

Muhammad Abu Rās, Muhammad Marzūki (annotate). Mūnis al-Hibba : Ahabar Jerba,
Tunis, 1960.


