Continuity and Change in Morocco and Tunisia
by
Milton Alan Turner

The Maghreb, المغربmeaning "the Sunset" in Arabic, is the collective term used to refer to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia– the western edge of the Arab world. North Africa is a region that has long existed on the fringe of two worlds: ancient and modern, Christian and Muslim, Oriental and Occidental. A reflection of its dual personality is the diversity of academic departments which house the study of this area. It can be found in Middle Eastern Studies, African Studies and even some Western European Studies and French Departments while never quite fitting in any of them. During the summer of 1993, I was one of sixteen fortunate educators awarded a Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar Abroad to study and travel there.

Each year, the US Department of Education announces approximately a dozen Fulbright summer programs in countries around the world to promote international understanding. Elementary, secondary, and post-secondary teachers of Social Studies or subjects in the Humanities are eligible. The sixteen participants selected are upon their return required to submit a project showing how the travel and lecture portions of the seminar will be incorporated into their teaching. Most seminars are administered directly through the Department of Education and its counterparts in the host countries. Our group was fortunate to have the aid of AMIDEAST, a non-profit international organization, which handled the logistics of the travel, lodging, and academic conferences of the program and sponsored a pre-departure orientation in Washington, DC.

This year's group consisted of mainly university and junior college educators in fields as varied as History, African Literature, Geography, Public Health, Art and Art History, Environmental Design, International Relations, Business, Anthropology, and Foreign Languages. I was the only secondary teacher in the current group.

The seminar *Continuity and Change in Morocco and Tunisia* attracted me for two reasons. First, the Maghreb represents a major component of my third and fourth year French courses. Since our Modern Languages Department adopted a proficiency-based curriculum five years ago (emphasizing what the student can *do* with the language, as opposed to what he may conceptually *know* about it), one of our goals has been to devote more time to international studies. French is spoken by an estimated 220 million speakers, only 55 million of whom live in France. Traditionally, the histories, literatures, and cultures of nearly 3/4 of French speakers have been ignored. (A similar argument has been made against some English Departments around the world which focus on works from England and neglect nations such as the United States, Nigeria, South Africa, and St. Lucia even though they have produced Nobel Prize winning anglophone writers, such as Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, and Derek Walcott.) The third year course is built around a tour of French speaking regions in Africa, the Caribbean, and North America and the fourth year courses further develop this theme by comparing the customs of the *Métropole* (European France) with those of six francophone cultures.

My second reason was personal. As a Black American (not *African*-American), I am naturally drawn to struggles of identity. Many Arabs view Maghrebis as Europeans while Europeans see them as Arabs. They live in the years 1414 and 1993 simultaneously. They inhabit the African continent, but use the term *Africa* to describe the sub-Saharan regions. In Morocco, at least as much of the population is Berber (the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa) as Arab. While Maghrebis are accustomed and open to foreigners, non-Maghrebis are often confused and uncomfortable with the "contradictions" they perceive. By examining a culture in certain respects analogous to my own, I hoped to arrive at a deeper understanding of myself.

What follows, therefore, is something less than a scholarly examination of the region, but something more than a travelogue. It is my attempt to internalize and re-organize the overwhelming array of information, sensations, and emotions hurled at me during the five week sojourn. I experienced no great epiphany during the trip and yet I do not doubt that in many ways I was forever changed. These alterations, to be sure, are subtle and slow— visible only upon close inspection. This resulting reflection runs the risk of being as nebulous and paradoxical a creature as the land it describes.

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Morocco (whose name in Arabic is actually المغرب *al Maghreb*) is a country marked by its hospitality and diversity. Due to its strategic location (bordering both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean) and varied climes, Morocco has been a favorite destination since Antiquity. «*Soyez les bienvenus!*» ('Welcome!') is heard as often as السلام *"as-salaamu"* ('hello'). It is not uncommon to meet someone in a سوق *souk* (market) or *café* and receive an invitation to share tea (a very sweet mint variety served in a glass, never a cup) or a meal of *couscous* or *tajine*.

One afternoon, I took the train from Rabat to Mohammedia (a city just outside of الدار البيضاء Casablanca) to visit the family of a Moroccan friend now living in the States. Although they had been informed of my arrival, I had

been unable to contact them by phone and get directions. Since this was the only free time I was to have while in the area, I decided to take my chances that someone would be home and try to find it on my own.

Upon arriving at the train station, I hailed a cab and gave the address my friend had written to the driver. He informed me that there were *two* streets in Mohammedia with that name. They were at opposite ends of the city.

«Do you know which of the two it is?» he asked me. I had no idea. «In that case,» he continued, «we'll try the one by the post office since it's the closest.»

After driving a couple of blocks, he turned to me and said, «Let me see that address again.» He handed it back to me and commented, «This name sounds familiar. Do you know if their father is a veteran?»

«I don't know,» I replied. «Two of the sons live in the United States, but I don't know much about the rest of the family.»

«One of the other cabbies grew up with a family of that name. They live on the *Ancien Souk* over by the Ocean. I'm pretty sure it's the same family.» He immediately made a U-turn and headed in the opposite direction. «Isn't there a phone number with that address?»

I gave him the strip of paper again adding, «I tried calling them earlier, but I kept getting a repeating tone. I think the line was busy.» I could not be sure. I did not know how a Moroccan busy signal was supposed to sound.

«This number is wrong. It begins with a "32." There are "31s" and a "33s," but no "32s." Plus, it should have six digits instead of five. If we see a phone before we get there, try and call again using 312... or 332..., okay?»

Five blocks down the road, we spotted a row of pay phones. He pulled over to the curb and kept the motor running. «Do you need any change?» he offered. I thanked him as I pulled out two one-*dirham* coins. He walked me over to the phones and dialed the 312...variation for me. An operator announced in French and Arabic that it was not a working number. He then tried the 332... version. We heard a longer and deeper tone than the one that sounded on my previous attempts. «It's busy,» he informed me. «At least someone is home. We'll go there, and if it isn't the right one, we'll try the other.»

We climbed back into the cab and drove another two miles. He pointed out the houses on the right. «This is the street. It should be one of these.» He pulled to the curb and in French asked a woman in traditional dress if she knew the W... family. She pointed to the third house. Number 17, the same as my sheet of paper. «*La voilà*!»

"شوكراً *Shokran* ('Thank you')," I told him as I got out of the car. «How much do I owe you?»

«Five *dirhams*,» he replied. Approximately fifty cents. The cost of an average cab ride. About one half or one fourth the price I would have expected to pay for all of our riding and his time. I gave him double his price– two five-*dirham* notes.

He took one of the bills and refused the second. «No, that's not necessary. We are good people here. I was just trying to help. *Soyez le bienvenu!*»

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Moroccans, while sometimes disagreeing with or resenting the actions and policies of *America*, hold a great fondness and fascination for *Americans*. (Morocco was the first country to recognize the sovereignty of the United States, a fact which they will proudly and oft repeat.) In fact, they are fond of comparing their nation to California due to the similarities in size (even without the Western Sahara, which they view as Moroccan territory), terrain (long coastline along the Ocean to the west, mountains in the central regions and desert in the east and south), climate (temperate to infernal), and vegetation (oranges, palm trees).

After a morning of lectures and tours of several مدرسات *madrasas* (Qur'anic schools) within a مدينة *medina* (the inhabited section within the old city walls), J..., a professor of Art History, M..., an anthropologist, and R..., a professor of Architecture and Interior Design wanted to spend a couple of hours in the *souk* during our afternoon break. Although two of the group could read French, none were proficient in speaking it. And we were in the Arab world, after all. It was not wise for *any* group of three Western women, no matter how competent, to wander through a *souk*. They preferred to have a male present. So they asked if I would tag along with them instead of returning directly to the hotel. I accepted.

Literally hundreds of shops line the labyrinth of tiny streets barely six feet wide. Your American concept of proxemics is quickly lost. After several

minutes of trying to maintain a safe distance of three feet from the closest person, you give in to the eventuality that you will be touched. Constantly. Endlessly. There are just too many people. There is no other way. Here, distance is no longer a shield. It is an obstacle, a nuisance, a luxury most cannot and many chose not to afford. They take comfort in proximity. It is common for friends to hold hands or lock arms as they walk, regardless of their sex.

Next, your sense of place is attacked. Each street seems to turn back into itself. Many look the same without ever being quite the same. Men are clad in European business suits and shoes, or traditional جلبات *djellabahs* with بابوج *babouches* and caps, or any combination in between. Older women tend to wear long dresses and veils, but many younger women are dressed in latest Parisian *chic* fashion. Conversations can be overheard in at least a half dozen languages.

Finally, your sense of time is gone. Many of the *ruelles* and alleys are covered to protect you from the harsh North African sun. You alternate between sunlight and darkness, day and night. Two young men riding a moped nearly knock you over as they pass by. Your path is blocked by a Mercedes driving through a path too narrow for it to ever get through. (It makes it.) You are barely on your way again when you are forced to yield to a boy collecting empty coke bottles on mule's back while listening to his Walkman. Somewhere in the background, you hear a موذن *muezzin*, calling the faithful to prayer, slowly drowned out by the rhythmic pleas of Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson.

Soyez les bienvenus!

After much sightseeing, browsing, and bartering, we made our way out of the *souk* and headed toward the modern city. J... and M... decided to go into one last shop. After the last hour and a half's practice, they felt confident enough in their French to bargain on their own. R... and I waited outside where I struck up a conversation with the shopkeeper next door. Before I realized it, another half hour had passed and J... and M... were pulling me away to get to our next conference on time.

"What was that all about?" J... asked. "It must have been *some* conversation!"

"He thought that we were French. He earned his BA and MA in France, so we were talking about that and, later, about the US."

"French?" R... added, "I would have guessed that he thought you were African."

I laughed. "What made you think that?"

"Everyone seems to be calling out to you."

"Everyone seems to be calling out to *you*, too!"

"Yes, because we're women. With you it's different." We all stood out. But it was also true that I stood out more than most. By Moroccan standards, at six foot two and two hundred plus pounds, I was just a tad short of Goliath. I was at least ten years younger than the other participants and I was the only Black. "They kept saying to you, 'Hey Black man! Hey, brother!' I figured they thought you were one of them." I laughed until I remembered R... spoke neither French nor Arabic.

"What language were they speaking when you heard that?" I asked her as diplomatically as I could.

"English," R... responded matter-of-factly.

"Well, if they *really* thought I was Maghrebi or African, they would have spoken to me in Berber, or Arabic, or Wolof, or Peul, or even French. But not *English*. They used English, because they knew I was *American*."

"So *that* was why you never answered them back!" J... exclaimed smiling. Few details escaped her eye. Or ear.

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Moroccan history is filled with periods of occupation or conquest by the Phoenicians, Romans, Berbers (or *Amezigh*), Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Spanish, and French. The Islamic world has viewed Morocco as playing a key role in nationalist movements not only because of this long history of foreign contact, but also because it was the only Arab state not occupied by the Ottoman Empire. The modern kingdom gained its independence in 1956 after 44 years as a French protectorate Its population consists mainly of Arabs and Berbers with fewer than 1% Europeans or Sub-Saharan Africans. Census figures claim the proportion to be 60% Arab and 40% Berber, but most believe it is closer to 60% Berber and 40% Arab (one cannot *officially* admit that a *minority* population is in fact a *majority*).

Added to this ethnic mixture is an astonishingly rich linguistic diversity. Many acquire Berber in the home, Arabic in the towns, and French (or Spanish in the North) in the schools. "Arabic" itself is an exercise in

multilingualism. Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, dates from the 5th through 7th centuries. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), a mixture of Classical structure with modern vocabulary and style dating from the mid-nineteenth century, is used in formal writing and news broadcasts. A simplified version of MSA, Formal Spoken Arabic, is the *lingua franca* of the Islamic world since many spoken varieties of the language are not mutually intelligible. Middle Moroccan Arabic is an intermediate form used in schools and on Moroccan television and radio programs. The native spoken variety is called Moroccan Arabic.

To better understand the situation, imagine speaking American English at home, using BBC English (or Received Pronunciation) with fellow Clevelanders in school and at work, watching ***World News Tonight*** or reading ***USA Today*** in Dutch, writing to a friend or colleague in California in Chaucerian Middle English, and reading your favorite novel or the Bible in Old English. Then, on top of this, add the use of French for clients at work, at the post office or other government offices, and in all classes (especially sciences) from fourth grade until the end of college.

Not surprisingly, Moroccans have developed code-switching into a high art. Conversations, ostensively in Formal Spoken Arabic, are peppered with words and expressions in French, Berber, Spanish, and Moroccan Arabic, often within the same sentence. Some have asserted that code-switching was a sign of incompetence or laziness in a language, but modern sociolinguistic research reveals the contrary. Code-switching exhibits a high level of linguistic sophistication and, like all aspects of language, follows a specific set of complex rules. For example, speakers will only code-switch in languages understandable to their immediate and intended audience. They are not demonstrating a loss for words within a language, but rather availing themselves of all linguistic resources at their and the listener's disposal.

While visiting the W... family in Mohammedia, I spoke in French, Spanish, and English with my friend's sisters and in French with a little Arabic to their mother. The daughters spoke mainly in French, with some Arabic and Spanish to each other, but mostly Berber with some Arabic and French to their mother. No one ever used Berber when speaking to me, the daughters never used Spanish or English when speaking to their mother. She spoke to me in Arabic only when her French gave out and at which point she normally resorted to telling one of the daughters in Berber what she wished for them to translate for me into French. Multilingualism is one of the facts of life in the Maghreb.

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Every Tuesday morning, vendors from throughout the region arrive in the town of Khemisset for the weekly *souk*. The parking lot surrounding the marketplace exemplifies Morocco. Brand new sedans and tour buses are parked alongside old trucks, horses and mules. The "parking lot" itself is merely a large area of red dust surrounding the five gates leading into the *souk*.

Entering the gates was entering another world. It was no longer 1993 (Gregorian) nor 1414 (Islamic). It could have easily been five hundred years earlier. Other than the gates themselves and a building in the center reserved for rug merchants, nothing in the *souk* was permanent. "Stalls" were constructed with scrap wood, old crates, burlap sacks, tattered rugs and discarded newspaper. Following the traditional layout of Islamic cities, like vendors set up shop together. We passed the booksellers first, then clothing vendors, followed by a "housewares" section. Here we found the few clues that reminded us that we still, in principle, existed in the 20th century: plastic pails lying next to woven baskets, rubber sandals and T-shirts covered with images of Michael Jordan and Patrick Ewing hawked along with *djellabahs* and bolts of cloth. Further down, women sat on rugs and sold blocks of unground salt and spices. Just beyond, barbers chairs were lined under makeshift tents where men waited for shaves and haircuts done with scissors and shears.

After having spent nearly two weeks in Rabat, we were surprised to see that only the men (and very few of them) were dressed in Western garb. The women were all veiled. We were quite out of place here, despite the large crowds. We broke into smaller groups hoping to attract less attention. It did not work. Several groups of young boys followed us practicing their meager French. «*Bonjour, Madame! Bonjour, Monsieur! Donnez-moi cinq dirhams, s'il vous plaît!*» ('Good morning, ma'am. Good morning, sir. Please give me five *dirhams*!') We had been warned not to give anything to the children. Within minutes, the word would be spread throughout the *souk* and the waves of begging

children would never end. There were enough following us as it was. It was difficult not to oblige them at first. But we soon grew tired of the relentless pleas, the constant pulling of any garment or limb they could reach. An expression from our introductory Arabic session resurfaced in our minds. إمشي *"Mshi!"* ('Go away!') The young boys looked at us perplexedly for a moment, then resumed their assault. We assumed we had used the wrong word or mispronounced it badly. Eventually, some older gentlemen grabbed them and demonstrated the most effective use of *"mshi"*. They punctuated each syllable with a blow to the back of the children's heads.

At the furthest edge of the *souk*, we discovered what someone euphemistically referred to as "the Food Court." Under the same burlap tents, lamb, beef, chicken, and *merguez* (a spicy beef sausage) were cooked over wood and coal grills. The heavy black smoke made it impossible to identify many of the foods offered. We wanted to sit and rest, but our eyes were stinging too badly here. We found a larger tent around the corner where Moroccan tea was served. The elderly matron, with henna painted hands and Berber tattoos across her face, made it clear, in any language, that in order to stay, we had to purchase a pot. Only one of us was brave enough to drink from it. She said it was very sweet, but among the best tea she had tasted here. It took two weeks to make her ill. In Rabat, a glass of tea would have cost five to ten *dirhams.* Our matron was delighted at receiving two *dirhams* for the entire pot.

The same group of boys that had followed us earlier was waiting around our tour bus. Several of us yelled *"Mshi!"* in the gruffest voices we could manage, punctuating our screams with exaggerated arm movements. It worked this time. After five minutes, the young gang dispersed. I was thankful I did not have to hit any of them.

As the bus pulled away, we exchanged stories. Two bags were slashed with razors and one boy was caught with his hand in J...'s skirt pocket searching for money. Nothing was actually stolen, but for many, the romanticism of the trip was lost. It is estimated that 90% of tourists never return to Morocco because of incidents like these. One of the stories, however, illustrated why the 10% return.

J... bargained a vendor down to five *dirhams* for a scarf. After paying the man with a ten *dirham* note, the vendor ignored her. She protested in French that he still owed her five *dirhams* change. Almost ready to give up, she heard the neighboring women vendors take up her cause. They verbally bombarded him until he could no longer conduct his business. When their male counterparts joined in, the vendor gave J... her proper change. «We are honest people,» one of the other men said once order was restored. «But it is because of people like him that tourists are afraid to come. That is what they remember.» I vowed to remember the balance.

In all the excitement and storytelling, we had neglected to take a head count at Khemisset. It was forty-five minutes later, during a photo stop at a cork forest, that we noticed we were one person short. G..., an easy going, but hardy Californian was not on the bus. His roommate was sick at not having noticed. G... had always been on time, usually one of the first to board. If we returned to Khemisset, an hour and a half would have passed since our original departure. G... was male and spoke good French. Our escorts were certain he would not have waited and could make his way back alone. ان شاء الله *In sha'allah* ('God willing.') It was market day and transportation back to Rabat would be abundant. We left without him. He rejoined us four hours later. He managed to find a bus heading for the capital. The fare was 10 *dirhams*. A little more than a dollar.

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A common scene from the tour bus window was a group of women working in the fields under the hot sun, while the men sat drinking and talking in the shade. Several of the Fulbright fellows were working on projects that centered on women's roles in Islam. The Western image is often of veiled women and polygamist men. It was pointed out to us that polygamy in the Arab world predates Islam and that the religion legalized and limited it to protect women. We were also informed that in the Prophet Mohammed's time, men and women were "equal" and that the veil is a custom which comes later. Islam places the family above all and the mother is at the center of the family. Therefore, in their minds, women hold the most venerated place of all. Some argued that this place is equivalent to enslavement. Because of the enormous interest in these matters, one of the most eagerly awaited conferences of the program was a meeting with author Leila Abouzeid.

Ms. Abouzeid's ***Year of the Elephant*** was introduced as the first

novel published in Arabic by a female writer. In spite of her competence in French and English, Ms. Abouzeid deliberately chose Arabic as her language of expression. Although there is a growing body of francophone Moroccan writers (most notably Tahar Ben Jalloun whose ***La Nuit sacrée*** [***The Sacred Night***] won France's coveted *Prix Goncourt* in 1988), she feared the loss of an Arabic language literature. Her earlier career as an Arabic journalist was her personal attempt to maintain the language. Indeed, one of the themes of her novel is the predominance of French language and culture among the Moroccan intellectual *élite*.

Ms. Abouzeid took pride in her work presenting the first opportunity to hear a *woman's* perspective in Islam, particularly for males. In what many considered her most shocking statement, she denounced Western "feminism" as a movement based on Occidental ideals that have little to do with the Islamic and Third Worlds. She criticized Western feminism for its secular nature. She was first and foremost a *Muslim* and then a *woman*. She added that most women's movements in Islam react against the invasion of Western ideas and ideals. In Arabic, the term *feminism* is a borrowing or a calque. *Liberation* is the native term used.

Many of our group were furious after the lecture. Some thought that Ms. Abouzeid was not radical enough. A minority argued that she is the first and *only* female voice in Arabic literature, and she should not be expected to fight everyone's battles. The others still insisted that she would have to abandon her Islamic slant. Islam and feminism obviously did not mix. I realized we were guilty of the same crimes of which Ms. Abouzeid complained.

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During the protectorate, the French initiated the practice of forbidding non-Muslims to enter mosques. This tradition has lasted even after independence, although it does not apply to ruins or mosques under construction. For this reason, our escorts were able to arrange a guided tour of the Grand Mosque of Hassan II in Casablanca.

Morocco is a constitutional Islamic monarchy. King Hassan II, whose family claims to be descended from the Prophet, is not only the Head of State but also Protector of the Faith. In honor of his sixtieth birthday, he planned the construction of what was to be the greatest mosque in the Arab world. Using a quote from the Qur'an stating that God's kingdom was to be over the sea, the Grand Mosque was built on the Atlantic coast giving the illusion of floating on water. From the pinnacle of the minaret, a laser beam pointing in the direction of Mecca will be seen from over 30 kilometers away. Glass bottomed fountains in the prayer hall give views to the ablution rooms and Turkish and Moroccan baths below. The ceiling is retractable to allow for indoor and outdoor ceremonies. A new boulevard is being constructed to lead directly into the mosque and surrounding square making them the focal points of Morocco's largest city. A viewing level, complete with shops, has been built along the roof to allow non-Muslims a chance to visit the mosque without actually entering it. Hassan II turned sixty-two in July. The mosque was most recently scheduled for completion in August.

The only McDonalds in North Africa recently opened along the main coastal road within view of the mosque.

Soyez les bienvenus!

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Homestays of two days were arranged for us. Due to the limited number of families available (particularly for the majority of our group who spoke no French or Arabic), some people were paired in homestays. We were given a few tips on what to expect and how to behave shortly before our families arrived to pick us up.

First, we had to keep in mind that we were guests and, as such, we were in a position of honor in Moroccan society. We were also teachers or professors, a profession held in the highest esteem. No matter how limited a family's means might be, they would feel obliged to offer the best. Food and drink would be plentiful and offered regularly. We had to allow their Moroccan hospitality to shine. We were expected to try everything within healthy limits. Early or quick refusals would be insulting.

Secondly, we were asked to moderate our expectations. Our organizer explained that faithful Muslims put themselves completely in God's hands. Allah would provide and protect as necessary. This accounted for the frequent use of the expression

ان شاء الله *in sha'allah*. Most Americans felt the need to *do* something when entertaining guests or being entertained, for example, going to movies or sightseeing. Moroccans were happy *being*. They tend to sit contentedly in silence or in conversation. If asked what they would prefer to do, they would answer that they were already doing it. Many found this revelation amusing. For me, it turned out to be one of the most difficult lessons to learn. As Americans, *doing* comes naturally. *Being* requires great effort and control. Culture is hard to overcome.

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The unthinkable became a reality. We were to spend an afternoon in a Berber village. A guest lecturer, an American who has spent much of his twenty years in Morocco among the Berbers, arranged for us to have lunch with a family in the village of Douar Arguersioul, and attend a traditional ceremony in Imlil.

Both villages were located in the Middle Atlas mountains outside of Marrakesh. Our bus driver could (or would) not carry us the entire journey. We took the bus to town a few miles away. The remaining portions were to be completed by taxis and hiking. To return, we would pile into the back of pickup truck from Imlil back to the bus. The five mile taxi journey took a half an hour through mountainous paths barely wide enough for two cars. To the right was the side of the mountain, to the left, the cliff. Several boulders blocked the road allowing safe passage for only one vehicle. Any oncoming cars would have to make room. On two occasions, our driver had to back a wheel over the edge in order to create enough room for other traffic to pass. I was told that I remained incredibly calm. That was not true. I had merely given in to the situation. We would safely arrive at our destination, or we would crash, that was all there was to it. ان شاء الله *In sha'allah.*

Our taxis safely dropped us off at a spot a half mile away from the village. Or rather a half mile straight *down* from the village. It took another half an hour to weave our away along the side of the mountain to reach A...'s home.

We were greeted at the door by A... and his father. After removing our shoes, we were invited into the living room for lunch. The room was typical of the Moroccan style. Couches lined the walls of the room leaving a great central space covered with rugs. This is where Moroccans sat, talked, ate, and simply *were*. After we were seated, tables were brought in for the meal. We began with large pots of Moroccan tea. Next, a whole cooked lamb was set at each table. We were each instructed to form a pile of salt and of curry in front of us. Large circular loaves of warm, fresh bread were passed and shared around the table. According to Moroccan custom, each person serves himself from the portion of the dish facing him. The best or meatiest sections are therefore placed in front of the head of the family or the guest of honor. Using a portion of the bread to protect our fingers from the heat, we pulled off strips of lamb with our right hands (the left is reserved for other uses) and dipped the meat into our piles of salt and curry before eating it. We ate our fill not realizing it was just the appetizer. A platter of *couscous* followed. Again, we used the same technique to eat the vegetables and chicken piled atop the grain. A... demonstrated how to roll the *couscous* into a ball (using only the right hand) and flicked it into his mouth with his thumb. I copied his motions, but merely succeeded in filling my lap with grain. Now bloated, we were aghast to see a third course of *tajine* carried out. Most took only a polite sampling of the stew before rolling away from the table.

Following a much needed *sieste*, A... invited us to see the kitchen. It was only at that moment that I realized that no women had ever come into the room. A... and his father had brought in all the dishes. In order to reach the kitchen, we exited from the first floor, climbed the path alongside the house, and re-entered from the third floor. The opening more closely resembled the mouth of a cave than a door. I had to bend to nearly half of my height to walk in after which I could never straighten my back to more than three-quarters of its length. We could not breath from the smoke. There were no tools or appliances I could identify. The only light was a raging fire in one of the walls. Women moved as shadows appearing and disappearing back into the murky haze never showing their faces. I did not want to imagine how long it had taken them to prepare a meal of this size for twenty people. Sickened, I pushed my way out of the "kitchen" considering for the first time in my life the benefits of bulimia.

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There are no such things as lines in North Africa. People push their way through until they reach their destination. The privileged (or the supremely

cocky) simply walk to the head. Our escorts spent nearly three hours checking in last year's group at the airport. There were only sixteen people but dozens more cut in front of them. In order to facilitate our passage from Morocco to Tunisia, they developed a "flying wedge."

Everyone received a position and assignment. Nine of us formed an exterior diamond shielding the remaining seven inside. Those on the edges were to block anyone trying to penetrate the wedge. Those on the inside were to move the luggage, passports and tickets forward. As one member was cleared, the next moved in behind and the wedge collapsed into itself. I was given the rear point, the last man through.

In less than a half an hour, we successfully checked in. During this time, our escorts tracked two customs agents who would "expedite" the formalities. We walked through passport control unimpeded. They brought us to a private lounge where we were served coffee and tea as we awaited departure. A final taste of Moroccan hospitality for the "Fulbright Scholars."

While waiting, our escorts explained that they had observed our execution of the "flying wedge" from the security level above. Perfect. Exactly as diagramed.

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Tunisia's homogeneity provided a strong contrast to Morocco's diversity. Slightly larger than the state of Georgia, Tunisia is the smallest of the Maghrebi countries with an area of 164,149 square kilometers (63,378 square miles) compared to Morocco's 446,550 square kilometers (172,413 square miles) excluding the Western Sahara or 710,850 square kilometers (274,116 square miles) including it. Accordingly, its population is only a little more than eight million as opposed to Morocco's twenty five million. Tunisians are nearly 99% Arab with fewer than 1% Berber. Despite having been a French protectorate for a much longer period than Morocco (from 1881 to 1956), Tunisia emerged as a much stronger economic power. While in Morocco, the distance between the rich and poor is staggering and extreme, in Tunisia there is a large middle class with relatively small upper and lower classes. There was not the constant begging in the streets we had seen in Morocco. The average Tunisian annual income was under $1,300 compared to $500 estimated per capita in Morocco. 62% of Tunisians are literate as opposed to 35% of Moroccans.

Le Code du Statut Personnel (Personal Status Code) or المدونة *Moudawana* gave Tunisia bragging rights for the highest status of women in the Arab world. Originally passed in 1956 by former President Bourguiba, it abolished polygamy entirely, called for the free choice of spouses, guaranteed equal access to education and created a minimum age of marriage (17 for women and 20 for men). In 1992, current President Ben Ali reinforced the code by declaring an annual national Women's Day (August 13), legislating breast feeding hours for mothers in the work force, and instituting a social insurance system featuring an alimony fund. A family would receive payments for the first three children directly from the State. The government would then concern itself with collecting from the former husband, thus protecting the children from hardships due to negligent fathers. Women in Tunisia currently represent 50% of the total population, 52% of the work force, 33% of the teaching staff, 25% of the lawyers, and 14% of the city council seats.

Despite these outward signs of prosperity, we felt a sinister air of apprehension. If Morocco represented the Western extreme of the Arab/Islamic world, then Tunisia could be said to represent the front lines. It seemed very aware of its position between the military power of its Eastern neighbor Libya, and the political uncertainty in its Western neighbor Algeria. Police are everywhere. Some claim it is due to President Ben Ali's concern (obsession?) with the possible threat of growing Islamist (Fundamentalist) movements. We could not shake the feeling that we were being closely examined and, like our host country, thought we needed to keep looking over our shoulders.

‡

After meeting prominent authors, touring the construction of the Grand Mosque, and even spending a day in two Berber villages, we wondered what miracle the Tunisian staff would have to pull off to top Morocco. We only had to wait three days.

The day after our arrival, we were invited to two receptions given by the State Department, USIS, USAID, the Peace Corps, and AMIDEAST. We were greeted by the American ambassador to Tunisia and introduced to prominent

journalists, analysts, and scholars. But a small entry in our schedules preoccupied us: a meeting with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The conference was originally marked as tentative. Upon arriving in Tunis, we were told that the *rendezvous* had been confirmed. But what did that mean? A lecture from a press secretary? War stories from a former terrorist? A few joked that we might even meet "the man" himself, Yassir Arafat. The PLO is headquartered in Tunis and Mr. Arafat's wife is Tunisian. The outrageousness of the dream made it all the more attractive.

To be on the safe side, we were asked to dress as formally as possible. Naturally, all of my clothes, except a few t-shirts and two pairs of jeans, were in the hotel laundry and would not be returned for two days. I took it as a sure sign that our dream was too lofty. If I were to meet the president of the PLO, surely my laundry would have come back in time!

The appointment was set to take place in a hotel conference room on the evening of July 12. During dinner that evening, we were informed by our escorts that the locale had been switched to another hotel. Shortly thereafter, we received another change of schedule. A PLO representative would meet us at the hotel to lead us to an undisclosed location. We were asked to arrange for transportation in a single vehicle. Our escort was getting visibly excited. But we dared not think *it* yet.

The sixteen of us crammed into a mini bus with a dozen high school students studying in Tunisia on a Kerr Foundation program. The lead car steered us through a maze of streets for more than half an hour. Our escorts were Americans who had been teaching in Tunisia under the Fulbright program for the past three years. One of them, P..., had grown up in Carthage and had spent a good part of his life in North Africa. "This is *it!*" he let out as the head car pulled to a stop. "We're no more than five minutes away from the hotel. They just drove us in circles, presumably to lose any tails. They wouldn't go through all this trouble unless we were going to meet *the man!*"

The driver of the car pointed us to the proper building, a small unassuming office or house. (In the Maghreb, I could never tell the difference.) We walked up the stairs to the second floor entrance. Men in Italian suits, some acknowledging us, others doing their best to look disinterested, lined the path. They made no efforts to conceal the obvious bulges under their left arms nor did they stop or question any of us. We were finally led into a conference room with a large table in the center and extra chairs lined against the walls. Tea, coffee, and pastries were served as we sat down. A photographer loaded and adjusted his video camera.

A gentleman who introduced himself as the PLO's equivalent of a Cultural Minister greeted us. He apologized for the change in plans and the delay, but he explained that the President was going to give the opening address for a Youth Conference taking place here in Tunis in the morning and...

The President? I thought. *Oh my God! This is really happening!*

After laying down basic ground rules (we could take pictures and record the proceedings), he returned to the adjoining office. A few minutes later from the same doorway, emerged the figure of none other than Yassir Arafat.

He made his way through the room personally greeting and shaking hands with everyone. After several minutes of applause and photo flashes, he seated himself at the head of the table. During the next hour and a half, he spoke in calm eloquent English about UN resolution 242 (calling for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory) and peace. Two characteristics struck me the most about him: The first was his bearing. Mr. Arafat, despite the well known attire, did not come across as the terrorist as he is often portrayed, but rather as a very knowledgeable, polished, shrewd politician. Following his speech, he made himself available to the group to sign autographs, pose for pictures and engage in small talk for an additional half an hour. The second was that he was much shorter than I had imagined.

Even though thoroughly excited at receiving such a rare opportunity, our group began referring to Mr. Arafat as a political dinosaur– undoubtedly a significant and important personage, but someone who had outlived his time or usefulness. Only several weeks later did we learn with the rest of the world of the secret negotiations that were so nearly complete at that time. Of the entire evening's events, his opening remarks stand out most prominently in my mind. He explained why he decided to speak to our group. As educators and students, we have unparalleled opportunities and responsibilities for change. He wanted to make a simple request. "To help with the peace process."

It is our turn now. All of us.

‡

One of the final sights of the tour was a visit to the National Museum of Carthage. It had been created as an attempt to generate greater interest in the rich history uncovered in the numerous archaeological sites. (Tunisia was previously known as *Africa* and *Ifriqiya*.) Exhibits are organized according to different periods: Phoenician, Roman, Punic, Arab, Ottoman, French, and Modern. An American Fulbrighter, who had spent years getting the Museum started, expressed fatigue and despair at the lack of interest evidenced. "Many people, including academics, do not consider much of this to be *their* history. For them, history does not begin until the arrival of the Arabs in the sixth century. What a tragedy!" I could not help thinking about those Americans who only count their history from the fifteenth century forward.

On the bus after leaving the museum, R... expressed an interest in visiting a few more museums. B..., a burly Business professor, expressed the most vehement and eloquent dissenting opinion.

"*Mshi* with that noise, R...! I've done enough *souk*ing, and *medina*ing, and *madrasa*ing to last me a lifetime. Visit *another* museum? No *shokran* ."

I smiled. The purpose of the Fulbright commission had, if only in a small way, been fulfilled. There is hope for us yet.

ان شاء الله *In sha'allah.*