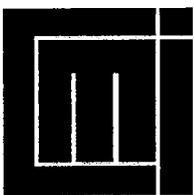


Negotiating the “In-between”

Modernizing Practices and Identities in Post-colonial Tunisia

Marit Tjomsland

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Summary:

The study focuses on the Tunisian post-colonial process of modernization and its effects on Tunisians of different generations, gender, and educational backgrounds. Interviews with illiterates as well as university graduates show that level of education contributes more to a modernization of individual preferences than both gender and generation. Gender is, however, the main determining factor for how educated “modernized” Tunisians experience and handle their intermediary positions between tradition and modernity.

Sammendrag:

Studiet fokuserer på den post-koloniale moderniseringsprosessen i Tunisia, og dens følger for tunisiere av ulike generasjoner, kjønn, og utdanningskategorier. Gjennom intervjuer med analfabeter så vel som universitetsutdannede blir det vist at utdanningsnivå bidrar mer til modernisering av individuelle preferanser enn både kjønn og alder. Kjønn er imidlertid bestemmende for hvordan utdannede, “moderniserte” tunisiere opplever og takler sin spesielle posisjon mellom tradisjon og modernitet.

Indexing terms:

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Contents

Preface	vi
1. Introduction	1
2. Historical background	4
2.1 The colonial period	4
2.2 The post-colonial period	6
2.2.1 The sixties	8
2.2.2 The seventies	9
2.2.3 The eighties	11
2.3 Regional differences	14
2.4 Summing up	16
3. Theoretical framework	18
3.1 Some fundamental principles of traditional North-African social organization	18
3.1.1 The kinship-group	19
3.1.2 The gendered society	20
3.1.3 Honour vs. shame	24
3.1.4 Some general characteristics of traditional North-African society	26
3.1.5 The meaning of identity	29
3.2 Theory of social reproduction and change	32
3.2.1 Habitus, structures, and practice	32
3.2.2 Social change	35
4. Methodological framework	39
4.1 Choice of approach	39
4.1.1 Characteristics of the life-course approach	40
4.2 The data-collection	43
4.2.1 Choice of sample	43
4.2.2 The structure of the interviews	45
4.2.3 The data-collection	47
5. Bled	49
5.1 The town	49
5.2 The Beldiyins	51
5.3 The informant-families	54

6.	Marriage as life-course phase and life-course event	58
6.1	Marriage as life-course phase	58
6.2	Marriage as life-course event	60
6.2.1	The celebration of traditional marriages in Bled	61
6.2.2	Alternatives to the traditional marriage-celebration	65
6.3	Trends of change in marriage-practices in Bled	66
7.	Marriage	73
7.1	The women	73
7.1.1	The experiences of the two eldest generations of women	73
7.1.2	The experiences of the women of the young generation	76
7.2	The men	80
7.2.1	The experiences of the two eldest generations of men	80
7.2.2	The experiences of the men of the young generation	83
7.3	Trends of change in marriage-practices among the informants	87
7.3.1	The women	87
7.3.2	The men	90
8.	Children	97
8.1	Number of pregnancies, and means of limiting them	97
8.1.1	The two eldest generations	97
8.1.2	The young generation	99
8.2	Attitudes towards reproduction	100
8.2.1	The two eldest generations	100
8.2.2	The young generation	103
8.3	Trends of change in reproductive practices	105
9.	Education	111
9.1	The two eldest generations of informants	112
9.1.1	Level of education	112
9.1.2	Experiences with illiteracy in adult life	113
9.2	Educational level of the young generation	116
9.2.1	The young women	117
9.2.2	The young men	119
9.3	Trends of change in educational practices	121

10. Occupation	127
10.1 The experiences of the two eldest generations	128
10.1.1 The women	128
10.1.2 The men	131
10.2 The experiences of the young generation	133
10.2.1 The women	134
10.2.2 The men	137
10.3 Trends of change in occupational lives	141
10.3.1 The informants without higher education	141
10.3.2 The informants with higher education	146
11. Relations to family, local community, and society	154
11.1 Family-relations	154
11.1.1 The Tejer-family	156
11.1.2 The cousins	158
11.1.3 The Muaddaf-family	159
11.1.4 The Falleah-family	163
11.2 Relations to the local community	164
11.2.1 The two eldest generations	164
11.2.2 The young generation	166
11.3 Relations to society and state	168
11.3.1 The two eldest generations	168
11.3.2 The young generation	171
11.4 Trends of change in relations to family, local community, and society	173
12. Identity	177
12.1 Honour	178
12.2 Individual freedom	182
12.3 Who are you?	185
13. Conclusion: Negotiating the “In-between”	190
13.1 Concluding remarks	196
Bibliography	199



Preface

Listen, my girl: Before it was not the same. We can not compare. Before it was a life, and now, it is another life.

This thesis is the evidence that I did not follow this advice of my eldest informant, Mustfa.

There have been times when I regretted ignoring his advice; times when I fully agreed with him that the project of comparing “before” and “now” and their implications for the lives of the Tunisians was indeed impossible.

Still, I evidently have not been able to give up the project — in between the moments of despair it just seemed too good an idea to be wasted. Whether it was worth the effort is up to the reader to decide.

A number of persons and institutions have in different ways made the work with the thesis possible, and should be mentioned as contributors to the completed product:

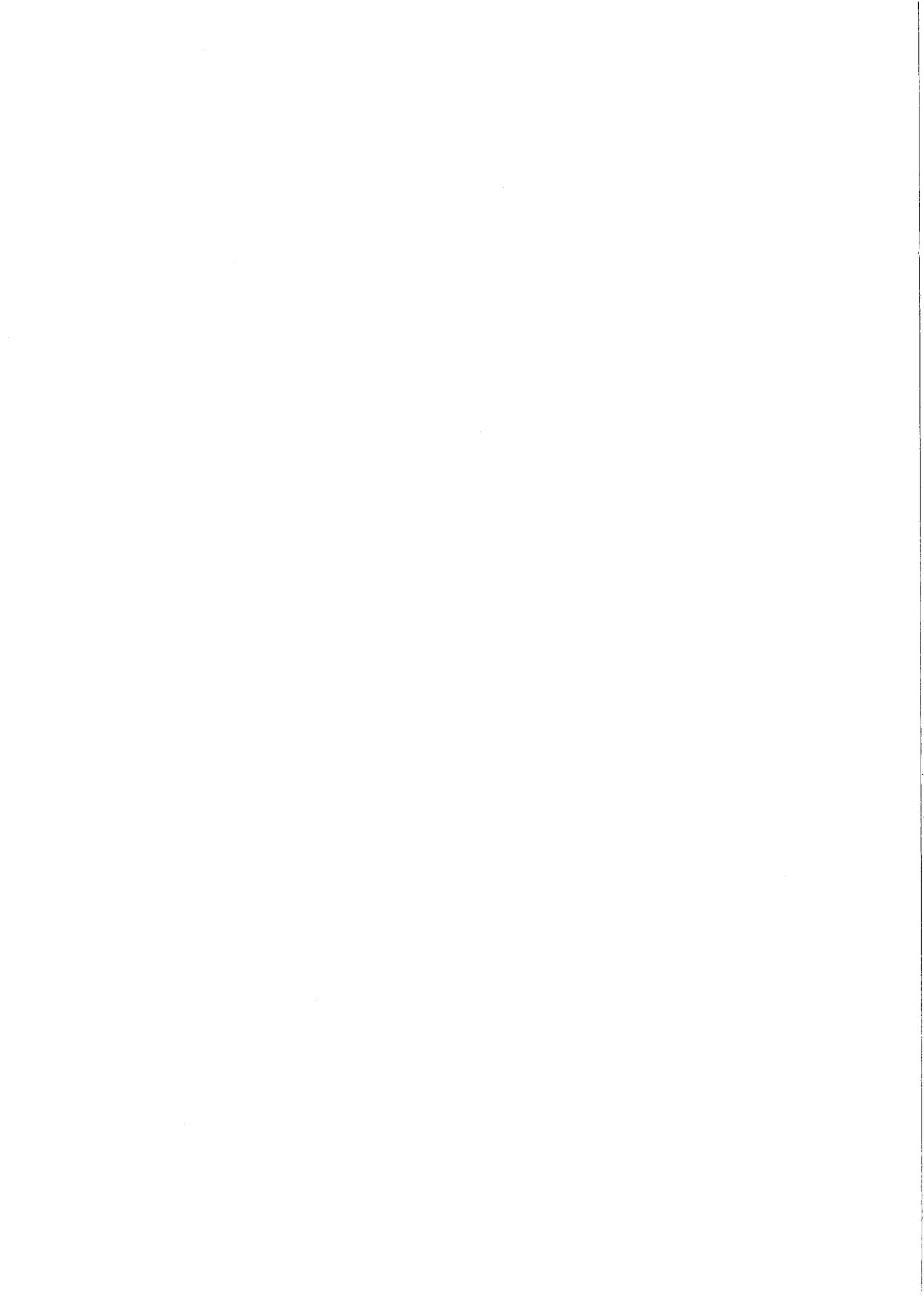
First of all, I would like to thank my informants, and all the others who assisted me during my fieldwork in Tunisia. Without their support, the project would have been impossible to realize.

I would furthermore like to thank my advisors at the Department of Sociology, Kristin Tornes and Olav Korsnes, for valuable guidance in my work with the thesis.

The Chr. Michelsen Institute has kindly provided me with working-conditions during the period I have been writing the thesis. I would particularly like to thank the staff at the CMI-programme “Gender Relations in a Comparative Perspective”: The researchers Tone Bleie and Gisela Geisler, as well as my fellow students connected to the programme, have been of tremendous help and inspiration.

I would also like to thank NAVF, who made the fieldwork economically possible, and the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, who provided me with a very fruitful stay at their library in Uppsala.

A particular thanks to my husband, who has always been an available source of both information and support throughout the period I have been working on the thesis.



1. Introduction

Situated in the heart of North Africa, Tunisia is geographically and culturally a part of the Arab World. Still, Tunisia is today in many ways a non-typical Arab country. Since independence in 1956, the state has undergone a thorough process of social structural change, that has been markedly inspired by Western liberal ideas of social organization. Central elements of the society have as a result been significantly changed. An increase in access to formal education, a growing geographical and social mobility, and a considerable success of the national population control programs, are among the factors that have changed the society in general, and the structures and functions of the family and the local community — cornerstones of Arab-Muslim social organization — in particular, since independence.

The objective of this study is to examine consequences of this post-colonial structural change for Tunisians who experience it in their daily lives. The basic point of departure is the assumption that such a thorough change in social structures will lead to changes in the lives of those who are exposed to it. In order to test this assumption, changes both in people's practice, thought, and also self-perception — or identity — will be objects of examination.

When dealing with identity in a Tunisian context, it is impossible to pass the country's Arab-Muslim inheritance entirely without mention. This cultural inheritance holds a significant position in the Tunisians' minds; recent political events have illustrated that in spite of Tunisia's post-colonial development away from a traditional Arab-Muslim society, people are still Arabs and Muslims to themselves, as well as Tunisians.

Over the last fifteen years, Tunisia has experienced the rise of a considerable Islamist movement. This movement reflects a general tendency of increasing religious fundamentalism that today characterizes most of the Arab World. The rise of fundamentalism in Tunisia should partly be understood as a reaction against the "Westernization" of the society, and thus as a search for a Muslim identity, after the long period of Western influence that first started with the colonization.

The Islamist revival is, however, a rather recent phenomenon that is significant within particular sections of the Tunisian population only. The

idea of an Arab Nation is another central factor of identification, that more than the Islamism characterizes the population in general. This idea has also a longer history among the Tunisians. Still, its influence is today as clear as ever: The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the following American presence in Saudi Arabia, took place during the field-work period of this study. People's reactions to these events were strong testimonies of the nature and intensity of the Arab identity, as it exists among the Tunisians today.

Both the Arab Nation and Islam are what one may call "trans-national" aspects of the Tunisians' identity. These aspects are significant for the majority of the Tunisians' self-understanding, and their existence should be kept in mind. The focus of this thesis is, however, on entirely other and more local levels. It focuses on social universes that traditionally have been of fundamental importance for both social life and identity-formation in Tunisia: The local community, and particularly the family-group.

Because of the significant importance of these social universes in the Tunisian society, they will be objects of considerable interest in this thesis. Firstly, they are the universes examined in the theoretical analysis of the social point of departure of the post-colonial social change. Secondly, they also constitute main arenas for the analysis of the Tunisians' social life today.

This study will thus deal with post-colonial social structural change as it appears in people's practices on the arenas of the local community and the family-group. In the same way it will examine the change in people's conceptions of the meaning and importance of their interaction on these arenas. It will also focus on identity as it is created, expressed, and changed in the spheres of these traditionally significant social arenas.

A central characteristic of the post-colonial social change is the decrease in the importance of these social universes in the lives of the Tunisians. Particularly for the post-colonial generations, there is a tendency of change away from the local community and the family-group as the fundamental social universes, towards an increased importance of new universes, that have appeared as consequences of the post-colonial structural change. This thesis will also examine the nature of this shift in social universes for the young generations, and its implications for their practices, and thoughts, and also for their sense of identity.

As this study has been conducted within clear limits both as to scope and time, limitations of the rather extensive theme presented above have been necessary.

Certain aspects of the post-colonial change in social structures have therefore, because of their large impact on social change in general and because of their particular relevance for the topics of interest to this study,

been chosen as representative of the general structural changes in Tunisia after independence. These aspects will be discussed in chapter two, as parts of the historical background for the study.

The family-group and the local community have already been presented as social arenas of fundamental importance for the traditional Tunisian social organization, and therefore as the social universes of examination in the theoretical analysis of the social point of departure of the post-colonial changes. This analysis will, as a part of the general theoretical framework of the thesis, be presented in chapter three.

Certain limitations and operationalizations have also been guiding the practical implementation of the study. Because the local social community figures as a main field of interest, it has been natural to concentrate the research around one such community. A small town, situated in the North-Eastern corner of Tunisia, has been chosen as the physical setting of the study.

The nature of the information required for the analysis has furthermore made me opt for data-collection based on extensive interviews with a rather limited number of informants. In addition, the fact that the main object of the study is to examine change over time has made a sample of informants based on several generations a reasonable choice. The fact that the nature and function of the family-group is a main field of interest has made me concentrate on informants of both genders, who mainly belong to the same families. The methodological approach to the study will be presented and discussed in chapter four.

The second part of the thesis contains presentations of the information about practices, thoughts and senses of identity provided by the individuals who appear as informants in the study. It furthermore contains discussions of this information, seen in relation to the principles of the traditional Tunisian social organization presented in chapter three, and the post-colonial changes in social structures presented in chapter two.

This second part of the thesis is organized according to main themes of the interviews, and treats topics like marriage, physical reproduction, formal education, occupation, and the informants' relations to the family-group, the local community, and the national-level society. Throughout the presentations and discussions, the focus is on changes in practices, ways of thinking, and senses of identity between the generations of Tunisians that the informants represent.

2. Historical background¹

2.1 The colonial period

When Tunisia formally declared its independence from France in 1956, the country was left with the enormous task of creating a nation state from the remains of the colonial rule. The preconditions for accomplishing this task were, however, in many ways more favourable in Tunisia than in other newly de-colonized North-African states. Several factors contributed to this favourable situation:

The type of colonization that Tunisia was exposed to, had relatively limited effects on the pre-colonial social organization of the country. First of all, Tunisia was colonized for a relatively short period of time, from 1882 to 1956. Secondly, Tunisia was never actually a colony; the country's formal status was that of a French protectorate. This distinction was furthermore not merely of a formal character, it also had significant practical effects: The plan for Tunisia was one of "private colonization" — the French state's interference was kept low, while private enterprises were encouraged to take whatever advantage they could of their country's control of the area. As this strategy for colonization turned out to be rather unsuccessful, the last period of the protectorate saw a considerable rise in formal interference from the colonial power; still, the French presence never constituted more than seven per cent of the total population, and the period of the protectorate had relatively limited effects on Tunisian social life.

Pre-colonial Tunisia had by the last half of the nineteenth century reached a relatively advanced stage of state-building; administrative control of the country through the transformation of the hinterlands, or *Bled al-Siba* — "Land of Insolence", into *Bled al-Makhzen* — "Government Land", had for some time been a concern for the central administration (Anderson, 1986). When France occupied the area in the early 1880's, it found a country equipped with relatively well-developed administrative structures.

¹ The data presented in this chapter are extracted from the following sources: Anderson L., 1986; Gallagher C.F., 1968; Hudson M.C., 1977; Anderson J.N.D., 1958; *Information Report*, 1988; Sutton K., 1980; Ferchiou S., 1989; Office National, 1989; Ministry of Culture and Information, 1989; Republique Tunisienne, 1962; Republique Tunisienne, 1977; Republique Tunisienne, 1984; Republique Tunisienne, 1987.

Probably as a consequence of France's low ambitions of formal involvement in Tunisia it based the colonial administration on these existing structures, rather than developing new ones particularly designed for the needs of the colonial power. As a result, the discontinuity caused by the introduction of the new rulers was moderate in large parts of the country; the existing power-structures of the provinces stayed largely unchanged. At the time of independence, Tunisia possessed a state administration that was well suited to the task of administrating an independent state. In this way, the colonial power continued the process of state-building started in pre-colonial Tunisia. Tunisia's colonial experience may therefore be characterized as moderate, and even to some degree constructive, if seen from a state-building point of view. (ibid.)

Another factor that facilitated the creation of a stable, post-colonial state, was the ethnical and religious homogeneity that characterizes Tunisian society. Unlike its neighbouring countries, Tunisia has no Berber population of any significance. More than ninety per cent of the inhabitants are Sunnite Muslims; the main religious minorities, Jews and Christians, only constitute a few per cent of the population. At independence, the formation of the new state was thus not complicated by ethnical or religious unrest and rivalry. Since Tunisia has a rather long history as a political unit, the definition of the new state as such created little controversy.

One of Tunisia's most significant assets at the time of independence was, however, the existence of a major, mass-based political party with more than thirty years of political experience; the Neo-Destourian Party.

Habib Bourgiba, the party's creator and leader, had recognized the importance of broad popular support; as a consequence, the Neo-Destourian Party's activities before independence were characterized by pragmatism rather than ideology. The party's actual ideological base — nationalistic, secular liberalism — was not a central feature of its practical policy, which aimed at including as many groups of the population as possible in the base of party sympathizers. The party approached this aim through the creation of a nationwide network of clientelist structures, based on provincial core party-members' practical support to the local population.

This practical, clientelist strategy turned out successfully for the Party. It furthermore had significant consequences for the national political situation at the time of independence: First of all, it resulted in a shift of provincial power from traditional patrons to patrons of the "modern" political and economic sectors, a development that came to facilitate significantly the implementation of the new post-colonial reforms. Secondly, it resulted in a general decentralization of power from the Capital, Tunis, to the provincial centres. Finally, the strategy's success

secured the Neo-Destourian party considerable legitimacy within most sections of the Tunisian population — a support that later became essential for the party's ability to consolidate the new post-colonial regime's position during the first crucial decade after the independence.

The national level of organizational structures in Tunisia escaped colonialism with a relative minimum of discontinuity. To an even larger extent, this was also the case for the social organization of the provincial local communities. The larger parts of the Tunisian population experienced rather moderate changes in their practical daily lives as a consequence of the colonization; the general tendency was one of stability. Major characteristics of the provincial life were thus preserved: Geographical and social mobility remained low, illiteracy remained high; agriculture remained the dominating sector of the economy. And local every-day social life continued until independence to be based on principles that had been dominant for centuries.

2.2 The post-colonial period

Tunisia gained independence in 1956. From the beginning, the Neo-Destourian Party stood out as the sole realistic candidate for the task of governing the new state, due to its broad popular support, its long political experience, and its extensive nation-wide clientelist network. In addition, the party's charismatic leader, Habib Bourgiba, personally played a central role for the legitimacy of the party. He enjoyed a considerable popularity within the Tunisian population; on his return from French detention in 1956, he was celebrated as the liberation personified and welcomed as the new Tunisia's Grand Father. When Tunisia became a republic in 1957, he was the evident candidate for the presidency — a position he was to hold for decades.

Once in power, the Neo-Destourian Party set out to realize its ambitious and controversial plans for Tunisia: Its transformation into a modern, secular nation state, based on a combination of a "modern" interpretation of Muslim principles and Western liberal ideas. The Party's interpretation of liberalism did not, however, include the democratic elements; until the eighties, Tunisia remained an authoritarian one-party state.

The new law of personal status introduced by the new regime in 1957 indicated the radical nature of the intended changes: As the first Arab state it prohibited both polygamy, and the Muslim law of divorce, or repudiation. Through the successful implementation of these and other changes in the civil legislation, the government took a significant step towards the secularization of the state while it consolidated the regime's position. More

than three decades later, Tunisia has still remained the Arab country that most diverges from the *Sharia* — the Islamic law — in legislation.

A regime's implementation of social reforms of such a fundamental character clearly requires both a considerable practical political power and a large extent of legitimacy. The Neo-Destourian government had both, as a result of the party's activities during the late colonial period.

The young state had a long way to go to reach the aim of a modern, "developed" nation, however: In 1953, less than 17 per cent of the children of primary school age were actually engaged in any formal kind of education — secondary schools were as good as non-existent. In 1956, only 15.3 per cent of the population were literate; 25.5 per cent of the men, and 4 per cent of the women. 39.8 per cent of the women between 15 and 19 years of age were married. The agricultural sector employed eight times as many people as the industrial sector, and 67 per cent of the population lived in rural areas.

The new regime's model for economic development was based on liberal principles, but with significant state involvement. The expansion of the state sector was thus from the beginning a task of high priority. From 1955 to 1960, the number of Muslim state employees rose from 12,000 to 80,000. This was partly a result of the replacement of French officials, partly of a general growth in the public sector. Official positions were to a large degree used as awards to party members; this expansion served to strengthen the clientelist system of the Neo-Destourian party. (Anderson, 1986)

Development of the educational sector was another area of high priority. Already by 1958, 38 per cent of the children of primary school-age were attending school; 56 per cent of the boys, and 20 per cent of the girls. The female participation may seem low; in a society where girls, until the independence, had lived in almost total confinement, it is actually quite remarkable, and points towards another of the regime's main priorities; the emancipation of women through their increased participation in all spheres of public life.

By 1960, Tunisia had passed the first crucial phase of consolidation; the country had a new constitution, rivalry both within and outside the ruling party had been settled, the regime was widely recognized as the legitimate rulers of the new state, and the first development programmes were already in place.

2.2.1 *The sixties*

The seriousness of the efforts directed toward true modernization, which involve freeing the whole society from the stagnant side of traditional life and the bonds of the past, emerges in all undertakings: the sweeping legal changes dealing with the family, the emancipation of women, new attitudes towards religion, very rapid educational progress, and moderation both in internal and social reconstruction and in foreign affairs. The most notable factor appears to have been the ability to combine change with stability in shifting dosages but without excess in any single direction (Gallagher 1968, p.8).

The sixties were to become the experimental period of Tunisia's post-colonial history. The Neo-Destourian party went through a significant radicalization early in the decade; the liberal principles were to a large extent replaced with socialist ones. One of the results of this political turn was a vast program of collectivization, initiated in 1964. Most sectors of economy were involved, but the consequences for the agricultural sector were particularly large.

The hopes for this decade were high: The government estimated an annual growth-rate of 6 per cent. Full primary school-enrolment was furthermore expected to be reached by 1966. This was also the decade of the first program of population control. In 1962, the Tunisian population had reached the number of 4,332,200, and in 1961, the average number of children per woman was 7.1. The ambition was to diminish the growth rate significantly through female sterilisation and distribution of contraceptives. In addition, the legal age of marriage for girls was risen from 15 to 17 in 1964 and free access to abortion for married women was granted in 1967.

These hopes were only partially met. The actual annual growth rate turned out to be 3.3 per cent — a highly respectable rate, compared to other African de-colonized countries, but still little more than half of the estimated growth. Full primary school enrolment was not achieved; by 1964, 92 per cent of the children had enroled, but as late as 1968, only 77 per cent of the children of primary school age were actually attending school — 94 per cent of the boys, and 59 per cent of the girls — which indicates a high rate of early drop-outs, particularly for girls. Still, the percentage of married women under twenty had dropped to 18.5 per cent. Again, compared to other countries in similar situations, the achievements were quite remarkable, but still insufficient to meet the expectations for the decade.

The population control program also turned out to be only partially successful. By 1968, one third of the target number of users of

contraceptives was reached, with the result that only 3.6 per cent of the married, fertile women used contraception. In addition, a significant reduction of infant mortality took place in the later years of the decade, as a result of the development of the health-sector — from 211.3 per thousand children less than five years of age in the period 1963-67, to 161.9 in the period 1968-72. This achievement to some degree came to counter-weight the total effect of the population control programme.

The program of collectivization furthermore proved to be a failure. It met considerable opposition among the population; in a society where private property, particularly farmland, had been the main base of wealth and status for centuries, people were less than happy to have to work what used to be their own land for modest wages. The fact that the proportion of the rural population by 1966 had decreased to 63 per cent may be seen in connection with the implementation of this program.

This resistance did not result in any significant organized political opposition, however; the Neo-Destourian Party — in the sixties called the Neo-Destourian Socialist Party — remained the only political alternative throughout the decade. The continued legitimacy of the regime combined with its firm repression of all organized political oppositional activity contributed to this lack of competitors on the political arena.

By the end of the sixties, the general failure of the socialist experiment to realize the aims set for the decade led to a turn in the regime's political line. The program of collectivization was called off, and the properties were returned to the previous owners. The Prime Minister in charge of it was arrested, Bourgiba declared his great disappointment in him, and claimed his innocence in the former's unpopular policies. He thereby established a position of his own that he was to keep for the rest of his presidency, as a king-like figure, above the practical policies of his regime.

2.2.2 The seventies

“Harmony, balance, cohesion, tolerance, contentment” — these are the words which spring to the mind of one who, having completed a long and difficult voyage through Arab politics, finally comes to rest in Tunisia (Hudson 1977, p.377).

The seventies saw a return to the liberal principles that initially had been the ideological base of the Neo-Destourian Party. The economy was opened to foreign investments and national private initiatives were encouraged. Development of the tourist sector became a main priority. The state

remained heavily involved in the economy, however; throughout the decade, its share of the total activity never fell below 50 per cent.

The turn away from socialism also implied a shift in the social policy of the government. The country's economy had proved unable to provide the intended rapid improvement of the living conditions for the whole population. The regime thus had to choose between a continued policy of general improvement, which implied a significant reduction of the desired pace of development, or a policy of economic growth based on liberal principles, which implied that concerns for the welfare of significant groups of the population had to be given up. The choice fell on the last strategy, and the new, liberal social policy came to benefit particularly the provincial entrepreneurs, that had been the core group of support for the Neo-Destourian Party from the beginning. The regime thus continued and broadened its former successful strategy of clientelism-based support into the seventies.

In spite of the significant policy shifts, the development of the social sectors of high priority continued to show rather stable results during this period. By 1975, 47.5 per cent of the Tunisian population lived in the urban areas of the country. The illiteracy had been reduced to 55 per cent of the population 42.3 per cent for men, and 67.9 per cent for women. Still, by 1976, the aim of full primary school enlistment was not yet achieved; only 42.9 per cent of the total number of enrolments were girls.

This disparity shows that there still were girls deprived of formal education. At the same time, however, the fact that girls accounted for 36.2 per cent of the secondary school enrolments, indicates that higher education also for girls had become a priority at least within some sections of the population by the mid-seventies.

Concerning population control, improvement continued to be modest. During the period from 1966 to 1975, the annual population growth-rate was 2.3 per cent a rather low rate, as compared to those of other North-African countries at the time. By 1973, the birth rate was down to 3.8 per cent, and the continued programmes of family planning had by 1975 led to a situation where 10 per cent of the married, fertile female population used contraception.

For the first half of the seventies, the results of the shift back to liberalism in economic policy were highly satisfactory. From 1970 to 1976 the Gross Domestic Product grew by nine per cent. At the same time, however, the economic differences within the population also grew. When the economy in 1977 faced the beginning of a period of decline that was to continue into the eighties, the result was significant political opposition to the regime. The trade unions were a major force in the opposition in

