Reclaiming Good Food:

Striving for Normal Living in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

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Glossary

Translated from Tunisian unless noted otherwise

al-ḥamdūllah	praise be to God
al-budhūr al-qadīma	literally 'old seeds' that are passed down from the ancestors, the result of on-farm selection practices adapted to different ecological conditions over time
al-mdīna-l-ʿarbī	old town
baṭṭāl	unemployed
bināthom mzāya	this expression literally articulates that favours are flowing among two persons
dīnār	local currency
dkhal bi-l-ʾaktāf	literally 'he entered with a push of his shoulder'. This expression denotes and emphasises a clear abuse of power or authority, an illegitimate exploitation of one's social capital
dyārī	homemade processed food
gad gad	the 'straight' path of people following God's prescriptions
ḥayāt ʿādīyya	normal life
ḥbus (land)	an inalienable endowment which involves the donation of a land holding for charitable purposes under Islamic Law. It is connected to a religious or public foundation (such as a mosque, hospital, or school). Through this system, the *ḥbus* lands were rendered inalienable
ḥishma	modesty
ḥūma	neighbourhood
jabrī	uncivilised
khaddāma	workers, indexing manual labour
khīṭ	literally a thread through which to enter a new social network. A network of at least three nodes, *khīṭ* emphasises the idea that to get to something, to sort out troubles of whatever nature, one needs to activate and gain 'access' through a network of relations
khubza	bread
lābās ʿlīh	well-off person
maghshūsh	adulterated food
māklat al-ʿāda	day-to-day, normal, good food
mra ḥurra	literally a 'free/skilled woman'. It indexes the seniority of a woman in charge of managing and organising the

	labour of junior women, and the resources of the household
msākin	used to refer to people in a condition of weakness. A possible close translation could be ‘miserable’ or ‘vulnerable’, or ‘poor’ more generally. It is mostly used in Tunisia to denote somebody who cannot afford to fulfill their essential needs because they have been betrayed by an unfair life
musmār fī ḥīṭ	literally ‘a nail in the wall’, referring to a job in the public sector, once highly regarded as a secure source of income
mutwassaṭ	middle-class belonging
qdar	literally translatable as the respect conferred to all people (existential respect), but also widely associated with one’s accomplishments in life
rabbī yustur	God protects all people
ṣadaqa jāriya	the act of voluntarily making a long-term charitable contribution that continues to benefit someone other than yourself
ṣadqa	religious reference to the acts of generosity and mutual help among people, good deeds that are part of everyday life for a good Muslim
tunisianité (French)	hegemonic narratives surrounding Tunisian identity
wāḥid mi-l-ʿbād	one among people, often referred to working-class belonging
wrā al-blāyik	idiomatic expression used to index a place located beyond the street signs, ‘beyond civilisation’
ydabbrū fī rūshom	idiomatic expression used to describe a person’s relentless process of searching for new economic opportunities while juggling existing ones
yhizzū bʿaḍhum	literally, ‘picking each other up’. Mostly employed to express how people help each other financially (credit, loans, good support etc…), nevertheless it vernacularly merges the materiality component with an existential one. It indexes how people are moved to help each other to prevent one from falling ‘under the threshold’ of a normal, dignified existence
yijrī ʿlā al-khubza	the ‘race for bread’ or the race to make a living
yikhdim ʿla rūḥū	literally, working for oneself. It implies a certain degree of *autonomy* from impositions of authority, especially employers who may often be high-handed
yʿawnū bʿaḍhum	helping each other out
zakāt	a religious obligation through which people are

	compelled to give away part of their wealth for the sake of others
zawwālī	the poor, those who cannot afford a decent living
ʿayla	household or family
ʿarḍ	this word derives from the verb 'to expose'. As a noun, *'arḍ* indexes all that is exposed to others, inclusive of one's moral conduct, personality, and achievements in life
ʾarḍ	land
ʿarbī	indigenous products, stressing the locality of food
ʿādāt	habits
ʿādi	normal
ʿūla	annual food stock of (in particular) cereals, some vegetables, spices and oil – home processed
ʿayyāsh	getting by, those who work for a living, making just enough

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Abstract

This thesis is based on extensive ethnographic research with families in their busy lives around food in Zaghouan, a predominantly rural region in Northeast Tunisia. A decade after the revolution, it is a complex transitional time for the country. Observing people's struggles around producing, processing, trading, and consuming food led me to investigate how their mundane claims for normal lives (*ḥayāt ʿādīyya*) still echoed previous revolutionary claims for bread and dignity. Upholding food as an ethnographic locus of analysis, the thesis addresses the complexity of the relationship between the material and existential struggles for livelihoods around food matters and imaginaries of a life worth living. Specifically, the project argues that, especially among my low-income informants, normal living was often understood as living free from the threat of material deprivation, balancing one's family's wellbeing with the wider community's. Moral personhood was similarly constructed on the basis of care for one's family through honest and hard work, while also contributing to their social group and to the country more widely. Further, participating in my interlocutors' struggles around their food affairs revealed important insights concerning people's relations to each other and to their worlds. In their attempts to attain a normal life, I observed how people relied heavily on what I call 'networks of proximity' around food, supporting each other in times of need. Following the construction of such networks of proximity at different scales revealed 1) how my interlocutors' social reproduction strategies emerged from their ethical navigations, which blended personal interests and situated constraints with local systems of values and norms; and 2) the limited and partial reach of these networks. Embedded in local hierarchies and situated power configurations, such networks often failed to perform support, instead contributing to recreating existing hierarchies and re-positioning social actors in the same (unequal) positions they had attempted to move away from. My approach hence demonstrates the complexity surrounding change in a rural region, where social dynamics around food contributed to (re)constructing situated social spaces and people's positions within them: their families, their neighbourhoods, the food trade in town, smallholder farms, and the state. The thesis further argues that my interlocutors' claims, prompted by unstable relations with their worlds, pushed against dispossession and social political marginalisation across different scales, demanding full social inclusion that would enable them to live normal, good lives (*ḥayāt ʿādīyya*). Contributing significantly to the anthropology of food, the thesis, a partial account of post-revolutionary Tunisia at complex times, also contributes to the study of social transformation in the region following the Arab Spring. Further, attending with ethnographic rigour to the multiple 'social lives of food' allows me to add through individual chapters to anthropological discussions on several transversal themes: kinship and gender, food heritagisation, the economies of favours, masculinities and femininities, agro-ecological challenges in the region, and the productive work of care.

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Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Note on transliteration and translation

The transliteration of Tunisian words follows the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) conventions for Modern Standard Arabic, even though they do not fully render the complexity of Tunisian as a spoken language. As my proficiency in written Modern Standard Arabic is limited, I relied on the knowledge of my Tunisian instructor, Jamil Choura (MA), for transliteration purposes.

A note on my use of *Khāltī* (maternal aunt), *ʿAmm* (paternal uncle), and *Tātā* (auntie) throughout the thesis: these words are connected to the ways I relate to my memories of shared life while writing. I left these idiomatic expressions in the text to index particularly proximate relations with some of my informants. I also realised later how, through such use, I acknowledged the seniority of some of the people I mention in the thesis, as I do not use these terms to refer to informants of my own age with who, I built intimate connections.

Note on illustrations and pseudonyms

All photographs in this thesis were taken by the author unless explicitly stated otherwise. All the names are pseudonyms, except for my Tunisian instructor Jamil Choura who expressed his preference for being mentioned in the text.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Locating everyday 'normal, good' food

"Quando a casa tornerai, vienimi a trovar, io ti posso offrire il pane."
"When you return home, come visit me, I can offer you bread."
I Camillas, *La canzone del pane* (The bread song) (2022)

The material presented throughout this thesis is the result of extensive ethnographic fieldwork that took place in the north-eastern region of Zaghouan,[1] Tunisia between September 2017 and September 2019. The choice of topic - and consequently the field-site (a small, predominantly rural region between the Greater Tunis area and the interior of the country) - grew out of my previous work engaging with smallholder farmers and food matters in North Africa between 2012 and 2015 (see methodology section). In those years following the Arab Spring, I witnessed how, for my North African colleagues and friends, food became an essential medium through which they could reclaim fairer inclusion in their society. The language of food in particular, at the forefront of many waves of protest in the region, catalysed people towards action, contextualising and moralising people's struggles while challenging the 'supposedly neutral language of neoliberal economics' (Sutton et al. 2013:346).

Figure 1: On the left *el-khobza*, the baguette always present on Tunisian tables. On the right the *tābūna* bread, hand-baked with hard wheat flour and olive oil, more expensive than the common baguette

I maintained a hold on food as a privileged window onto social reality when in 2017 my research interests led me to Tunisia. Living among mostly low-income families in the town of Zaghouan for almost two years, it became clear to me how

[1] Specifically the town, capital of the region of the same name, and its rural outskirts.

food - and specifically *el-khobza*[2], the common bread always present on Tunisians' tables - still held a particular significance for the people I met. Emblematic of the Tunisian revolution which was sparked in 2011, bread symbolised the bare level of dignity for which many of my interlocutors still struggled on an everyday basis.

Upholding food (and in particular cereals including wheat and barley, both essential staple foods in the Tunisian diet) as an ethnographic locus of analysis, this project interrogates how revolutionary claims for bread and dignity were differently articulated in my informant's quests for normal lives *(ḥayāt ʿādīyya)* a decade after the revolution.

> It was already late March when I moved to Zaghouan, which I had finally selected as my main fieldwork site. During this initial stage of my inquiry, my first casual acquaintances - *'Amm* (uncle) Yusef, the well-connected local car dealer I relied on for logistical troubles; 'Amm Tariq, who sold fresh produce near my home; and 'Amm Kamal, the corner shop owner in my neighbourhood - became essential informants, shedding light on my assumptions and anxieties related to my fieldwork. In those early days, I struggled to explain my research interests to the people I spoke to. In my attempt to dissipate my interlocutors' puzzled looks, I kept repeating that I was interested in knowing more about good Tunisian food: local food, indigenous varieties of cereals, vegetables and fruit. 'Look Sara, if you are interested in *biological* food, *naturelle* and all that, you are not searching in the right place', 'Amm Yusef burst out one day. 'Out there you have the countryside, but it is a hard life. The fields I have in the countryside, they are good to go to for a rest at the weekends, but they won't survive alone [economically]. It is *this*,' he said, banging his hands on the counter of his car appliance shop, 'that gives me and my family a good life'. As I left his shop (quite unsettled about my research skills), I knew I had to keep searching. ʿAmm Tariq, the man who sold vegetables near my house, understood my research interests with a different nuance, as he knew that I wanted to know more about '*traditional'* and *'handmade food'*. Despite sharing my passion for the old ways of food-making, one day, as we discussed my research purposes with his wife, he candidly admitted that the old ways of doing things were difficult to manage at the present time. *Tātā* (auntie) Amira, his wife, agreed: elaborate methods for traditional food preparation took on a secondary importance today, as a girl needs to study to get

[2] Baked with subsidised soft wheat flours, *khobza* (the baguette, a legacy of French colonialist times) was considered 'a common, everyday' bread, while the traditional *ṭābūna* bread, hand-baked with hard wheat flour and olive oil, had become more expensive, and was a festive food.

a good job and to secure a good life. Finally, there was a conversation with ʿAmm Kamal, the local corner shop owner, who connected my questions about food quality and people's interest in eating well with their monthly income. 'Of course, nowadays everybody knows that homemade food is so much better, but you have to realise that the majority of people in town struggle to buy food at the end of the month'.

This final conversation definitely set aside my fixation with 'indigenous food', which had been the focus of my previous work with smallholder farmers. It instead opened my senses to the different social spaces in which '*ʿādi*' (normal, everyday) food was produced – in the courtyards of private homes, in milling workshops, on a smallholder's farm, or purchased as a finished product in a store for household consumption. It was in fact by exploring the intimate experiences related to *everyday* food that I was able to engage with what mattered to my informants and which granted me access to their social, political, and moral imaginaries (Naguib 2015; Sutton et al. 2013). Observing food as a process [3] (Graeber 2001; Naguib 2015) made visible my informants' social relations, contextualised their ethical ruminations, and guided their mundane (though political) choices. Hence, it was by following the everyday social lives of food in particular that those early conversations with my interlocutors were filled with deep meaning, revealing much about people, the relations among them, and with the world (Naguib 2015), sketching the contours of what it means to have a normal, good life. ʿAmm Tariq and Tātā Amira suggested that social change was a matter of fact. However, grappling with my field notes, I asked myself: how were people's struggles differently enmeshed in material, cultural and social change?

This thesis addresses this question by surveying across different scales (the family, the neighbourhood, food networks in town, the smallholder farm, the inclusive food network) the tensions and ambiguities constellating my informants' navigations of social reproduction, an expression I borrow from Narotzky to condense people's everyday material and existential struggles for normal, good lives around food issues (Narotzky 1997; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). The work especially builds on the scholarship of Tunisia (Ayeb 2011, 2017; Ayeb and Bush 2019; Ayeb and Zemni 2015; Hibou 2006, 2011b, 2017; Meddeb 2011, 2012; Pontiggia 2017, 2018; Zemni 2016, 2021). This literature discusses the different daily strategies, including

[3] Graeber's work on the concept of value invites us to look at 'objects as processes, as defined by their potentials, and society as constituted primarily by actions' (2001:52)

economic tactics (patching together different streams of income, stretching one's working time, relying on credit to cover the household budget) and relational modalities (relying on one's connections and social networks to access resources) which a large section of the Tunisian population rely upon to strive for social reproduction. While partially concurring with this scholarship, which observes how the everyday strategies through which Tunisians navigate 'survival economies'[4] (Meddeb 2011) often contribute to the perpetuation of inequality and existing hierarchies in contemporary Tunisia, my material also pushes such analysis forward.

Exposing the social economic dynamics and the ethical dilemmas underlying my interlocutors' core battles, my material shows how people's quotidian struggles to live normal lives went beyond matters of material sufficiency or accumulation. My informants' everyday food transactions revealed how people's navigations for social reproduction were in fact also the object of ethical reflections and the subject of others' moral scrutiny, indexing how propriety and social and existential acknowledgement were significant matters in their lives. Especially among my low-income informants, distinguishing a dignified rural producer from a greedy one, or differentiating a helpful state representative from an uncaring one, the food transactions and the relations they materialised were often suggestive of how a righteous life should balance one's appetite with a consideration for the lives of others.

While investigating the tensions and ambiguities inherent in struggles for social reproduction around food matters, each chapter of this thesis will hence show how specific morality trajectories and their everyday ethical negotiations were entangled at different scales with power structures, informing and (re)producing social spaces (the family, the neighbourhood, the farm, the town, the state) and people's positions within them. Thus, by exploring the underlying moralities and social dynamics constellating people's struggles for social reproduction, this thesis reveals much of my interlocutors' ideas about what is a life worth living. Simultaneously, social relations around food contributed to revealing different ideas about what a man and a woman ought to be in contemporary Tunisia.

[4] As we will see in the next section 'survival economies' were the products of historical sedimented dynamics of socio-spatial marginalization of a specific part of country favouring another (Ayeb and Bush 2019, also see discussion in the next section).

In the remainder of this Introduction I frame my interlocutors' struggles for social reproduction around food in the context of their quest for dignity ('living normal lives') and bread, advanced through the Tunisian revolution in 2011. The digression below hence will account for the different historical conjunctions through which processes of social marginalisation continue to constrain a section of the Tunisian population's social reproduction battles. Addressing how food provides a unique angle through which to explore social-economic life in post-revolutionary Tunisia, the Introduction then moves to frame the material theoretically by locating the accounts detailed throughout the six main chapters within the relevant food literature in anthropology. In turn, this scholarship questions the inherent moral relationship between food (food provisioning or food as a means of social reproduction) and a life worth living. The second part will situate the research in time and place, locating the region and town where I conducted my ethnographic exploration. Methodological reflections will close this Introductory chapter.

Figure 2: Tunisia. Source (Barbour et. Al. 2022)

1. The dignity of everyday bread: a revolution from the margins

In early 2011, Tunisians stormed the streets of the major cities across the country waving baguettes, re-claiming that 'materiality of morality' (Englund 2008) indispensable to conducting a dignified existence. Forcefully demonstrating the separation between the '1 percent from the 99 percent' (Sutton et al. 2013:347), bread became the emblem of the subsequent protests that shook the whole MENA region in an unprecedented challenge to the different autocratic regimes. What follows will provide a basis for comprehending the revolutionary events of 2011 in Tunisia, framing them within the wider historical global conjunctions that constrained much of the economies and agricultural policies of the countries in the region since decolonisation.

Much of the analyses and debates over the Arab Spring events in the region begin by locating them within the history of upheavals across the region (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Bush and Martiniello 2017; Sadiki 2000), connecting 'endogenous political debates and power struggles' (Patel and McMichael 2009:11) with global constraints. Examining the previous manifestations of discontent in the region during the years of the so-called '*intifadat al-khubz*' (bread riots) (Egypt in 1977; Morocco and Tunisia in 1984; Sudan in 1985; Algeria in 1988; Jordan in 1989; and Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Morocco and Tunisia in 2008-9), analyses revealed how these protests did not revolve only around the 'price or accessibility of staple foods' (Bush and Martiniello 2017:200; Sadiki 2000). Across the region, in fact, the mounting opposition toward the austerity measures adopted from the late 1970s was not only levelled on economic grounds, but also often framed morally (Sadiki 2000). Deteriorating living conditions due to the progressive removal of publicly subsidised services (education, health care, subsidised food, state commitment to secure employment), coupled with the increasing concentration of wealth and resources among the elites, had in fact been framed as impinging on 'the moral and social fabric of society' (Sadiki 2000:77). Similarly, the more recent 2008-2009 food riots,[5]

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[5] Explaining the causes and conjunctions of the recent 2008-9 food riots, Bush and Maritiniello show how the contours of this crisis can be traced to the way 'market structures acted to cement relations of political power' (Bush and Martiniello 2017:196). Specifically, the end of the last century saw a deepening of the monopolisation and oligopolistic control of the food markets by agribusinesses, accompanied by the penetration of financial capital into the food sector. Financial speculation proved quite profitable for equity capital investors, while the volatility of food prices it caused was a matter of minor concern. The 2008-9 food crisis, however, hit the core of the neoliberal project on the current 'world-ecological regime' (Bush and Martiniello 2017:197), which for years had preached the increasing deregulation of land markets (to the detriment of redistributive land reforms), the

triggered by spiralling food and oil prices around the globe, erupted in the region following years ‘of privations, exclusions, humiliations and dispossessions, and also resistance’ (Ayeb and Bush 2019:55). Emphasising how we should insert ‘the extraordinary event back into the series of ordinary events, within which the extraordinary event explains itself’ (Bourdieu 1984:210), Ayeb and Bush’s analysis (2019) of the origin of regime change in both Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 argues for showing the continuity of the events that constellated years of political resistance and economic crises.

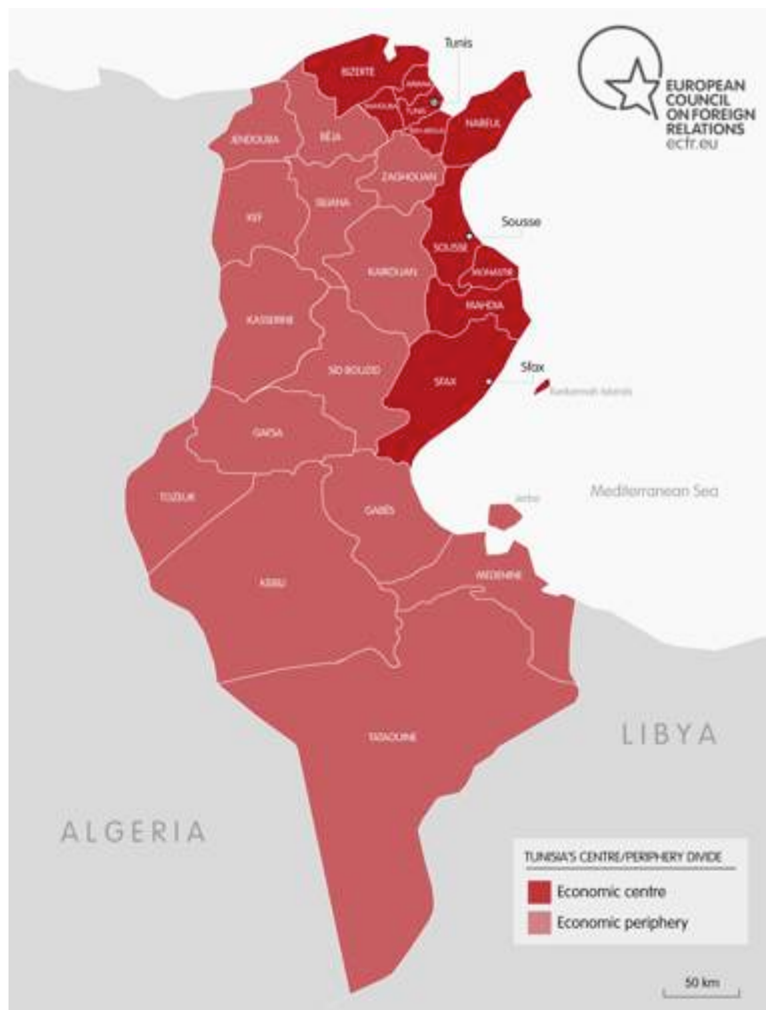

Figure 3: Tunisia's centre/periphery divide. Source (Meddeb 2017:3)

In Tunisia, years of despotic cronyism had turned the mundane struggles for social reproduction among a large part of population into an intolerable race for survival (Meddeb 2011). As a consequence of the resource-extractive nature of the economic policies implemented over the years, re-directing resources (both natural

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commodification of seeds, and the encouragement of agro-export cash crops in the context of food crop production.

and labour) from the interior of the country to mainly benefit the coastal regions, the social and economic marginalisation of part of the population came to overlap with their spatial and territorial marginalisation. What follows unpacks how multiple processes of socio-spatial marginalisation have unfolded at different scales throughout the post-independence era. Without claiming that a clear line can be drawn between different social groups and regions of the country, following a historical trajectory serves as a frame for more fully comprehending Tunisia's unbalanced internal development, which triggered the events of the Arab Spring.[6]

Much of the literature signals how such processes of social-economic differentiation began long before the country's independence (1956), continuing over the following decades. At the international level, the Tunisian Bourguibian[7] elite, anxious to assert the new independent Tunisia as a 'modern state with multiple internationals ties' (Charrad 2001:208), guided the transition of the country by negotiating with the former coloniser, and cementing the path of dependence with the northern shores of the Mediterranean.[8] Internally, attempting to consolidate his grip on the country and eradicating political dissent (especially rooted in the tribal Southern regions), Bourguiba's reformist base initiated a campaign promoting a common hegemonic vision of '*Tunisianité*' (or Tunisian identity) (Zemni 2016) as the centrepiece of ideological nation-building based on patriotic unity and political moderation. Despite his awareness of the socio-economic inequalities present in the country, Bourguiba rejected and denied any matters related to social stratification (Gherib 2012; Zemni 2016).

The advancement of the project of national unity was instead based on development plans directed at supporting mainly the newly industrialised and trade-oriented regions along the coasts. These regions, 'the useful Tunisia' (Bono et al. 2015:117), were the base of 'the ensemble of political and economic forces and the

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[6] Similar dynamics were also observed in Egypt, as the social and 'geographical' roots of the revolutionary processes are identified in 'isolated regions, the impoverished countryside, the popular layers, including peasants, the dispossessed and the abjected' (Moore 2010).

[7] Habib Bourguiba was the first elected (1957) president of Tunisia.

[8] Particularly revealing were the political and trade agreements agreed with the European Union (1962, 1995) in the aftermath of independence and which aimed to create markets for European subsidised products in North Africa. Lacking space in this brief historical review, I refer to Ayeb and Bush's (2019) Pontiggia's (2017) and Fetrin's (2018) works for a more in-depth discussion of the modern dynamics that have constructed Tunisia's economic and political dependence on the northern shores of the Mediterranean over the centuries.

alliances of different classes[9] that ruled Tunisia since the independence' (Zemni 2016:147) , and became the motor of national development toward which capital and resources accumulated. Bourguiba's political project instead relegated the inner regions of the country, which presented more complex and multi-layered systems of tribal alliances, to their role as an extractive basin of mineral and agricultural resources, as well as a source of the labour force, in a model that the Mexican sociologist Gonzalez has defined as 'internal colonialism' (1969).[10] National regional development schemes directed to these regions (1985, 1996) focused mainly on the creation of agricultural infrastructures, sustaining much of the precarious livelihood of the population through welfare schemes and protective employment policies (Feltrin 2018). Records of public investment over the years offer clear evidence of the different strategies enacted in different regions of the country: between 1962 and 2006, coastal regions received between 59% and 75% of total state investment (Pontiggia 2017:40).

The gap between regions widened in parallel with the privatisation of state-owned ventures[11] during the first few decades after independence. As conditional measures of the first structural adjustment plan in 1986, the first wave of privatisation moved interests based in the coastal regions to acquire state-owned companies across the whole country, creating visible relations of subordination of the local population, who were providing labour for newcomer investors. Similarly, the second wave of privatisation in 1995, including a restructuring of the banking and financial sector as well as the creation of offshore tax-free zones on the coast, attracted international investment that deepened the subaltern relations between the internal and the coastal regions (Pontiggia 2017). Further, the new rhetoric linked to international development funding agencies that promoted participatory local governance allowed

[9] It should be noted here that to consolidate the government's pledge of an alliance with the landed elite, the government avoided a major and radical land reform in early 1964 when the land previously owned by the French was nationalised by the state (later mainly rented or conceded to big landowners). The government ignored how more equal land redistribution could have improved farmers' production conditions and incomes (Ayeb and Bush 2019), thus transforming the face of Tunisian agriculture. Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis discuss in detail the subsequent agricultural policies since the country's independence.

[10] In these areas, infrastructures and investments were drastically reduced: a systematic depletion of natural resources - oil, gas, and water in agriculture - was directed to support development in the coastal regions (Feltrin 2016, 2018). Even the industrial sectors in internal areas - extractive mineral, gas – are currently more integrated with the economies of the coastal areas, where the raw material is redirected for processing (Ayeb 2011; Ayeb and Bush 2019).

[11] Also, as the result of the privatisation of state companies (219 SOEs between 1987 and 2010), the 'total public employment (the public administration plus the SOEs) declined from 41% of wage-earners in 1980 to no more than 32% of wage-earners in 2010' (Feltrin 2018:8), also see (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Gana 2012).

the state to retreat from providing services, while maintaining a central grip on local power dynamics through patronage and increased clientelism.[12] The polarisation of wealth and inequalities among different social groups in the country grew disproportionally in the 1990's. Not only were middle-class consumption needs severely frustrated, but people above the poverty line in particular, struggling with precarious employment, saw their access to basic commodities threatened by price increases. Coupled with the failure of national policies to re-integrate lost wage-work placements in other sectors, these developments meant that a large part of the population, especially in the most marginal areas of the country, had to find the means for social reproduction in the so-called 'informal sector', which in those years came to represent about the 38% of GDP[13] (Gana 2012).

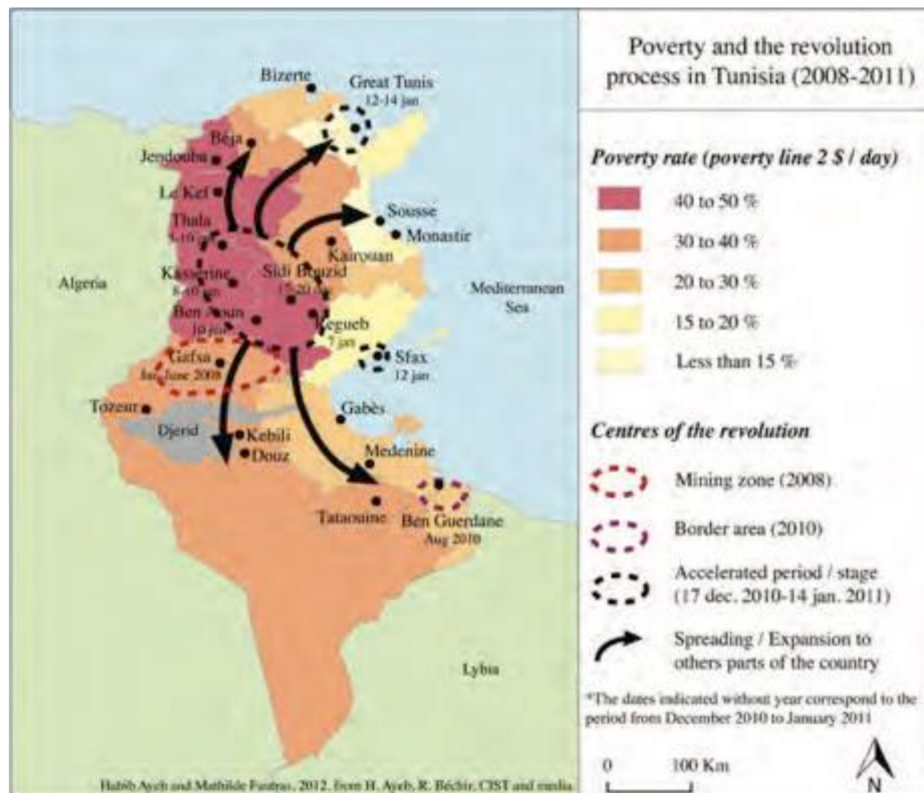

Figure 4: Regional poverty rate and the revolution process in Tunisia, 2008–2011. Source (Ayeb 2017:95)

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[12] As the literature highlights, across Tunisia inequality has become an instrument for the political subjection of the more vulnerable segments of society. Especially during Ben Ali's government, years of regional and social marginalisation became systemic and ingrained into the clientelistic management of public resources at the will of the president (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Feltrin 2018; Gana 2012).

[13] Despite noticeable variations in the incidence of informality across the MENA region, as different countries are different in terms of size, role of public sector, economic performance, and labour availability across the MENA region, the years following the contraction of salaried work as a result of structural adjustment programmes have seen an expansion of informality-related trends across the region (Pontiggia 2017; Ben Romdhane 2011). In Tunisia in 2012, 524,000 out of 616,000 businesses (85%) operated in the informal sector, while in 2001 37% of private-sector workers were operating in the informal workforce - increasing to 52% in the agricultural sector (Trabelsi 2013:10).

The global food crisis of 2007-2008 exacerbated the concentration of resources in the hands of a crony elite (Bush 2010; Bush and Martiniello 2017), leading to a series of strikes and riots that erupted across the country. The 2008 protests in the southern Tunisian mining town of Gafsa sparked in response to the restructuring of the Gafsa Phosphate Society, which led to noticeable job losses[14] and frustration over the fraudulent management of the company. These then escalated into wider protests against the high cost of living. Violent reactions from the police recalled the repression of earlier bread riots in 1984 when the government attempted to remove food subsidies as part of its liberalisation programme. Two years later, in 2010, more protests erupted in a town at the Libyan border in relation to the government's 'official decision' to close the border 'to control' illicit trafficking. Underlying that decision was instead the intention to control informal trade by sea,[15] incorporating it into one of the many activities of the Ben Ali entourage. Informal trade constituted the only viable source of income for thousands of families (Santini and Pontiggia 2019), and the border's closure curtailed livelihoods. These riots were again repressed in blood.

During the summer of the same year (2010), in the interior rural region of Sidi Bouzid, there were weeks of protests and sit-ins organised by smallholders. They were protesting against the differential treatment received by investors from outside the region, and they demanded access to resources and solutions for indebted farming families. These were similarly dispersed violently by the police (Ayeb, unpublished interviews and notes during fieldwork in Sidi Bouzid 2012, 2014 and 2017). Five months after those protest, Mohamed Bouaziz set himself on fire (Fautras 2015) due to humiliation as a result of a policewoman's confiscation of his vegetable cart. Bouaziz had been attempting to provide for his family by selling vegetables on the street after his extended family was dispossessed of the land they relied on for a living due to accumulated debts with the BNA (National Bank for Agriculture). A couple of months after Bouaziz's suicide, young people without hope for their own future and impoverished farmers rallied in his support across the region (Ayeb and Bush 2019). In an acceleration of the struggles and movements (Ayeb 2011; Narotzky and Besnier 2014), highlighted by the conjuncture of multiple processes through which crises had

[14] "From over 14,000 workers in the 1980s, CPG employment shrank to around 5,500 workers in the period 2007-8" (Ayeb and Bush 2019:61).
[15] Operating from Sfax on the northern coast directly to Tripoli.

emerged in time and space since 2008, protests spread from the inner regions of the country to eventually reach Tunis, in a massive demonstration on 14th January 2011.

Underlying the continuity of different social and political struggles of the past forty years was a yearning for better livelihoods and dignified lives (battling social marginalisation), sparked from the dispossessed internal regions (spatial marginalisation) and converging in the revolutionary moment. It is by connecting the social and the spatial through time (Ayeb and Zemni 2015) that it is possible to analyse the revolutionary processes as a case of 'class consciousness' that moved beyond the peasant world to merge the anger of the lower income rural and urban populations with the frustrations of the middle classes (Ayeb 2011, 2017; Ayeb and Bush 2019:55). The Tunisian revolution was without doubt a socio-spatial class revolution (Ayeb 2017; Ayeb and Zemni 2015) through which people fought for material and social inclusion.

My fieldwork living in Zaghouan more than six years after the revolution, observing food practises and the social networks they materialised, pointed to how earlier claims of jobs, land, and dignity expressed during the protests were similarly re-articulated in my interlocutors' everyday struggles for normal, good lives. At a later stage, placing food at the centre of my analysis thus became a lens illuminating people's social, moral, and political battles for social incorporation in times of major change. The theoretical framework discussed below hence departs from the abundant literature around food within anthropology, carving out a specific approach through which I explore my interlocutors' everyday struggles for social reproduction while they differently manage social change in rural Tunisia. Connecting the gendered and intimate level of home food provisioning with wider issues of food trading across different scales, everyday observations of distinct moments of the chain of production,[16] necessary to the analytical process, will bring my inquiry back to re-thinking those practices as part of the everyday struggles of the people and families I met for a life worth living.

[16] The chain of production includes cultivation, processing, distribution, consumption, and exchange.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Food as an ethnographic window

In 1992, Caplan began her lecture at Goldsmith's College by asserting that 'food is a good way of gaining an understanding of what anthropology is about' (Caplan 1994:1). Due to its unique capacity to create connections between mundane activities and the 'broader cultural patterns, hegemonic structures, and political economic processes, structuring experience in ways that can be logical, and outside of logic, in ways that are conscious, canonized, or beyond the realm of conscious', food is indeed important for anthropological inquiry (Holtzman 2009:373).

In the following, I provide a short review of the main anthropological bodies of literature concerning food. After introducing some of the seminal works that are directly relevant for my own material, I emphasise in particular the studies that uphold food practices as ethnographic objects of inquiry, reflecting and informing socio-economic patterns and relations across groups. I then move to the literature that investigates the relations among food and social bodies in the region.

Following the early pioneering work of Richards on diet, labour, and gender in Northern Rhodesia (1939), which masterfully shows social life through the many connections that relations around food manifest, the next prominent studies on food in anthropology date to the 1960s, informed mainly by structuralist theorists for whom food was 'good to think with' (Levi-Strauss 1968:87). Analysing food as a system of meanings, reconnecting eating patterns to cultural ones, and treating food as an analogy of meaningful language to be decoded, was seen as revealing the complex, 'unconscious attitudes of the society or societies under consideration' (Levi-Strauss 1968:87). Douglas's work, building on both Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, argued that not only what we choose to eat but also how we eat – the rituals and daily routines surrounding food – reflect cultural systems and delineate precise social orders (Douglas 1966; Douglas and Nicod 1974).

Many of these works were later critiqued for their inability to account for change and the power relationships involved in food production and exchange, and for failing to capture systems of social differentiation (Goody 1982; Mennell 1985; Mintz 1985). Goody's *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982), for example, challenges such scholarship by emphasising the importance of tracing connections between historical and material factors for the development of 'foodways' in different

societies. Mintz's (1985) pioneering work on sugar also highlights the importance of understanding the relationships between the cultural dimensions of sugar consumption with the history of the social relations between plantation owners, labourers, and traders: relations that made sugar a commodity available across the world.

Feminist scholars have similarly contributed to showing the intrinsic and often naturalised power dynamics and inequalities embedded in work around food. Most of these sociological works, with a special focus on women's domestic work in Europe and North America (Counihan 1999), demonstrate how, despite its centrality to family reproduction needs, such work is mostly devalued and invisible (Counihan 1999; DeVault 1991; Lupton 1996; Pine 2002). Other scholars have stressed instead how, in different contexts, women's relationships with food preparation speaks of the control of resources and people, and self-esteem (Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Inness 2001). A more recent body of literature has also explored the relation between food, eating, and care, mostly in the domestic setting (Abbots, Anna Lavis, and Attala 2015; Carsten 1995; Harbers, Mol, and Stollmeyer 2002; Janeja 2010). I will pick up some of the ideas from these literatures, in particular developing reflections around the centrality of food and care as practices that are inherently bounded together (Abbots, Anna Lavis, et al. 2015) to produce specific social spaces: the family (Chapters 1 and 2) and the neighbourhood (Chapter 3), and how they shape social networks around indigenous wheat production and sale (Chapters 5 and 6).

In the late 1980s, connected with the growing interest in emerging models of international trade, the expansion of food-as-commodity beyond national borders emerged as a privileged analytical object. While part of the debate in political economy/sociology/agrarian studies lingered on the best way to frame these changes as 'postfordist or new regimes of private global regulation' (Phillips 2006:39), many agreed on the centrality of international trade and its regulatory apparatus in guaranteeing the expansion of neoliberal corporate interests in food in various regions across the world. Although for some the shift simply denotes the emergence of a silent revolution (Schertz and Daft 1994); 'for many it was a threat or outright piracy' (Phillips 2006:39). In this context, Friedmann (1982) pivotal work on world food regimes provides important insights for mapping food-as-commodity trajectories, identifying the historical global emergence of standard agricultural practices, regulations, and agreements around the production, sourcing, and distribution of food. While powerful approaches have been developed to identify common trajectories and

to highlight how countries' food dependence on trade across the world intensified in the last 40-50 years, the major critique of this body of works revolves around its inability to capture the 'social life of things' outside the networks of power and meanings from which commodities originate (Appadurai 1986).

While challenging the mainstream understanding of globalisation as 'as a predominantly economic, hegemonic, or singular process', scholars have emphasised how local values and symbolic meanings re-localise food commodities along distribution lines and within consumption patterns (Phillips 2006:40). For example, the contested values attached to the production and consumption of tortillas (Lind and Barham 2004) are deeply related to the location where the exchanges originate. This is also the case for artisanal cheese in Northern Italy, appreciated internationally for its traditional yet highly standardised qualities (Grasseni 2014). In a way, as concepts travel across time and space and become re-contextualised in local frames of meaning, we can think of food as being 'de-territorialized by global projects, but at the same time being re-embedded in the local' once selected, purchased, and consumed (Phillips 2006:45). Thus, the relevant analytical move, Philips argues, is then constituted by the act of reconnecting the different levels of complexity which feed into each other, taking the relationship between the global and the local seriously, and making it central to the context of study.

Welcoming Graeber's invitation to think of 'objects as processes defined by their potential and society as constituted primarily by actions' (2001:52), we can then better follow food as a set of relations influenced by actions reverberating across the local and the global, observing how food preparation and consumption connect (or disconnect) people from different walks of life to their families, communities, their nation, and beyond (Naguib 2015). Along these lines, some recent literature in anthropology has focused on consumption practices in globalising food systems, looking at the specific mingling of knowledge and values activated while sourcing and preparing food (Caldwell 2002; Klein 2013; Miller 2012; Pratt 2007) and the lives of specific products (Paxson 2013; Trubek 2008; West 2008). More specifically, the works of Appadurai (Appadurai 1981, 1988), Fragner (1994), Goody (1982), and Klein (2007) have dedicated special attention to food and cooking in with the context of nationalism, or as claims to identity and belonging (Mintz and Du Bois 2002) .

Finally, compelling ethnographic works have recently engaged with food, taste, and flavours in relation to socio-political and economic change have inspired

the analysis of my material (Farquhar 2002; Graf 2016b; Naguib 2015; Sutton 2001, 2010; Weismantel 1991). In all of the above-cited work, the everyday sensorial experiences of flavour engage with people's perceptions of their own self-transformation in relation to broader social, economic, or political change. Farquhar's (2002) work focuses on experiences of flavour: the bitterness of ingested food in relation to the sour existential flavour relating to political and social events. While experiences of famine are still vivid in post-socialist China, evaluation of greediness and neediness continue to raise questions about the promises of a liberating modernity. Meanwhile, Weismantel's (1991) work among the people of Zumbagua, Ecuador engages with the terms associated with different categories of food, cooked and eaten, and the cultural knowledge to which they are related. Sutton's *Remembrance of Repasts* (2001) operationalises Csordas's claims of existence as experiences that locates 'the self as part of the world' (Caplan 1997:16). Suttons hence sees people's sensorial engagement with the taste of food on a Greek island as one of the constitutive experiences of the act of remembering – and, at the same time, of becoming an islander. Graf's refreshing investigation of food preparation in Morocco (2016b) constitutes a precious resource that guided my own understanding of the centrality of food as embodied knowledge in relation to ever-changing material and social milieus, illuminating the multiple and entangled practices and discourses in the region (Graf 2016b:33). Finally, greatly inspiring was Naguib's work on food and masculinities in Egypt (Naguib 2015), which was essential for my understanding of the potency of food as a part of personal and collective struggles for the 'transformation of social relationships, cultural practices and men's and women's roles' (Naguib 2015:16). Highlighting the complex and at times incongruent navigations of gender identities and other social allocations, Naguib's work guided my analysis to expose the everyday politics of food, making it the underlying focus of my material.

Locating people's struggles in a historical and material continuum - which influences people's reactions to their present dilemmas and informs their future aspirations - this thesis will detail how negotiations about what food to produce, process, or buy were often shaped by ambiguity and dilemmas surrounding situated agendas, commitments and worldviews. Though values and institutions limited the lives of the women and men I encountered, to understand how they acted required an attention to the everyday display of life. Men and women's food affairs hence offered

a privileged window for observing how people challenged or moulded their worlds 'with serious consequences for their lives' (Naguib 2015:19).

Further, as highlighted also by Lien and Nerlich (Lien and Nerlich 2004), contestations, dilemmas and controversies around food were also controversies about something else. There is a substantial body of literature on ethical consumption in the West, with food becoming a symbolic political contention through which one can imagine and experiment with a tangible 'alternative' political space (Grasseni 2014; Jackson 2010, 2014; Pratt and Luetchford 2014). Only a few recent contributions engage with a broader landscape (South and Central America, North Africa and the Middle East), in particular examining how global food projects might end up producing new forms of marginality and exclusion, undermining the capacity of local practices to secure food and livelihoods, or - on the contrary - support them (Aistara 2014; Carrier and Luetchford 2012; Durmelat 2019; Matta 2013, 2019; Meneley 2014; Phillips 2006). Building on this literature, and showing everyday food practices' multiple entanglements with people's social allocations – gender, class, age, lineage – I draw on food as a 'focal point for action and reflection' (Pratt and Luetchford 2014:1), illuminating my informants' socio-political realities and imaginaries. The material through the thesis will first investigate and discuss my interlocutors' construction of day-to-day "good, normal food" by examining food consumption, provisioning and processing at the level of the household and the local retailer. Exploration of such ordinary practices will be central in revealing how values such as frugality and commensality, taste, healthiness and locality of food, although always negotiated in the everyday, were identified by my informants as central common traits to good living. This in turn highlighted the intimate interconnections between existential and material concerns that food projects raise.

Further, by locating good, everyday food at the juncture of local and global, the second part of the study will discuss how farming families I worked with, involved in indigenous wheat[17] revitalization projects, found themselves similarly navigating competing regimes of values. The material will discuss how food

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[17] By labeling the varieties of wheat cultivated by my main farmer interlocutor as 'indigenous wheat or seeds', I refer to what is vernacularly called *'al-budhūr al-qadīma'* (literally 'old seeds') that are passed down from the ancestors, the result of on-farm selection practices adapted through time to different ecological conditions. The outcomes of this work are known as 'landraces': varieties that have evolved through on-farm management practices, which are adapted to local production conditions. Farmers' selection typically takes place at the population level rather than the varietal one, as farmers choose the best grain from the previous harvest to use as seed, resulting in landraces that have considerable genetic and phenotypic variation (Barnes 2016:92).

indigeneity, celebrated in many contemporary food networks across the globe, came to intersect with smallholders' aspirations, struggles and structural constraints. For years constituting the only viable path to ensure livelihoods on smallholders' farms, the "seeds of the ancestors" in my material will hence be reconsidered as "good food" when they offered farming families new opportunities to re-claim and live normal, honourable existences as socially acknowledged food producers.

In conclusion, following the everyday struggles of people who do not cross national and international borders in search of a better future but instead live their battles for normal, good lives around food ventures and/or food provisioning allows my material especially to disclose people's day-to-day ethical ruminations concerning their food affairs.

Observing how people manage existential and material issues around food in their lives began to reveal how such mundane engagements are influenced by and simultaneously re-shape their ideas about communities, town, land, and the proper/desirable ways to inhabit them. Contributing to filling a gap in the literature on food in North Africa and the Middle East (Graf 2016b; Naguib 2015) and certainly filling a substantial gap on ethnographies of Tunisia, [18] as in Naguib's case (2015), many of my low-income informants' food struggles were revealing of their core political and economic battles, of what they valued in their life, and what a life worth of living was made of (family, community acknowledgment, household economic autonomy, moderate possibility for consumption).

While food struggles made clear that values, worldviews, situated constraints and social allocations contributed to shaping the lives of the women and men that I met, it alone did not account for people's ethical and political evaluations of their reality, and for their decisions and actions. It is at this level of analysis that my project aims to contribute most strongly, showing the complexity of people's everyday ethical navigations around their food affairs, essential to their and their social groups' reproduction (existentially and materially conceived).

2.1.1. Food studies in the region

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[18] Recent works include Holmes-Eber (2003), Maffi (2003) and Pontiggia (2017).

Within anthropology, with the exception of Naguib's (2015), Newcomb's (2013) and Graf's (2016b) recent contributions - which have been a source of inspiration for my own inquiry - the regional literature on food is quite under-developed. Significant contributions from the social sciences converged in two edited volumes (Tapper and Zubaida 1994, 2000) tackling the relationship between nationalism and cuisine (Zubaida 2000), food and identity (Fragner 1994; Yamani 1994), and food and social change (Heine 2004; Maclagan 1994). The literature on the region has approached food and cooking from a historical perspective (El Mokri 2008), they are mentioned in ethnographies focusing on women (Kapchan 1996; Maher 1974; Newcomb 2009; Nicholas 2011), or in relation to exploring social life in farming households in times of change (Crawford 2008; Obeid 2019). Specific social science works on Tunisia, focusing mostly on the rural population's social reproduction strategies and dating from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, often provides only quick overviews of food provisioning in rural communities (Ferchiou 1991; Valensi 1985; Zghal 1967a, 1967b, 1980; Zussman 1992). More recent work highlighting change in a rural region in Northeast Tunisia was produced by King (2003), though with a more specific focus on the political economic trajectories undertaken by the Tunisian government prior to the 1990s and their effects on rural social organisation. Food is also marginally part of Holmes-Eber's description of social networks organised by Tunisian women as a strategy of negotiating daily life in a rapidly urbanising society (Holmes-Eber 2003). Food was the focus of a series of important ethnographic works on Tunisian culinary practices in the transition between modernity and tradition (Hamzaoui 2006, 2020, 2021).

More prolific and helpful for contextualising contemporary food discourses in relation to social change in Tunisia and North Africa are recent agrarian studies (Ajl 2018, 2020; Ayeb and Saad 2009; Bush 2010) and works grounded in the political economy approach (Ayeb 2011, 2017; Ayeb and Bush 2019; Gana 2008, 2012). In particular, these works highlight the inherent connections between years of state agricultural policies producing marginalisation of their own peasant populations and constructing the region as 'food insecure' in a context of political upheavals. Exploring issues around food heritagisation in the region (including Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon), other contributions discuss social justice, political agency, and environmental resilience as criteria through which people construct the goodness of local, but globally intertwined, food practices - along with flavour and 'skilled'

culinary practices (Durmelat 2019; Grasseni 2014; Howell 2003; Meneley 2014). By building on these different discourses around food in the region (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Durmelat 2019; Graf 2016b; Grasseni 2014; Howell 2003), this thesis broadens such approaches by showing the interconnections that food brings about, as reflected in my informants' ruminations about their social, political, and material forms of possibility (Naguib 2015). In turn, this multilayered approach, attending to the everyday lives of families involved in food matters (producing, processing, trading, or consuming food) and observing the inherent relations between food as a means of social reproduction and their claims for better inclusion in their society, reveals my informants' ideas about a life worth living, highlighting the potency of food as a window of investigation and the connections it allows the research to make.

2.1.2. Food, gender, family and personhood

Both Naguib's (2009, 2015) and Graf's (2016b) explorations of gender dynamics through food inspired my own understanding of food and eating as 'specific modes of relations between a person and the world' (Giard, De Certeau, and Mayol 1998:183). While topics such as family and gender in the Middle East and North Africa have been extensively covered (see for example Deeb and Winegar 2012), especially concerning the debate on patriarchy and power (Abu-Lughod 1989; Joseph 1993; Kandiyoti 1996; Mahmood 2005; Nelson 1974), the scholarship at the intersection of food and gender in the region includes only a few studies: Jansen (2001) on Algeria; Maclagan on Yemen (Maclagan 1994); Boe (2009) on Palestine; and Kanafani-Zahar (1997) on Lebanon. As observed by Graf (2016b), the domestic work of women in feeding their family and their communities is a topic often taken for granted. Contributing to filling this gap, Graf's works addresses gender and personhood among working class families in urban Morocco through the lens of cooking knowledge and its reproduction, necessarily entangled with social change. Exploring personhood as relational allows Graf to investigate gender and age-based dynamics of negotiation concerning everyday food preparation practices. Arguing that young wives and mothers often end up challenging seniors in their family in attempting to establish a conjugal household, Graf's observations indicate how, while realising a specific ideal of womanhood, they contribute to social change in their communities.

Naguib's work (2015) was very inspiring as it shaped my analysis of the food practices I observed as specific entry points into the social, cultural, and political lives of both the men and women that I met. It for instance guided my understanding of how both femininities and masculinities are, as products of time and components of identity (Naguib 2015), ambiguous projects always under construction and often contested. In other words, by looking at the lived experiences of men and women undertaking their food affairs, entangled with their social worlds (family, neighbourhood, food networks in town, state institutions, etc.), I observed how my informants learned to become men and women, and how they contended or moulded prescribed ideals throughout their life-path. My own findings (see Chapter 1) explore for example how through juggling food work and producing fresh food for the family, wage work, and their own interests, women in contemporary rural Tunisia construct notions of femininities by negotiating between different ideological projects and situated moral obligations - at the same time, moulding the contours of what counts as family. Similarly, Chapter 5 foregrounds reflections about manhood, discussing men's intimate battles with the socially sanctioned responsibility of providing for the wellbeing of their family while being sensitive to each family member's life path, and faithful to their own aspirations. Family, in my analysis, central to understanding relational personhood and connective identities (Carsten 1995; Englund 2008; Joseph 1994; Kondo 1990; Sacchi and Viazzo 2014; Strathern 1988), emerges as one of the most important welfare-provisioning institutions and the first site where logics of mutual support are manifested and acquired among its members.

My inquiry will depart from such intimate settings - from my neighbours' families - to observe how men and women acknowledge the potency of food in forging social ties in their lives, especially when providing food through hard work becomes central for defining one's moral personhood. In the next section, I explore bodies of work that will sustain the analysis of my informants' families' struggles for social reproduction.

2.1.3. Social reproduction around food: moral, social, and political entanglements

In the final stage of analysis, I recognised that my study could be partially situated as a contribution to the analysis of Tunisian social reproduction - defined by Narotzky as a 'movement through which a concrete historical social reality sets the conditions for its continuity and contains transformations within the limits of a

dominant logic' (Narotzky 1997:6), entailing 'the different scales in terms of which ordinary people evaluate the possibility and continuities, transformations or blockages' (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). However, in the earlier stages of my analysis, I used the term 'social reproduction' mainly to locate my informants' everyday struggles and negotiations around food matters. Thinking about social reproduction around food allowed me to consider the inherent moral, social, and political entanglements of the transactions I observed around food. This approach constantly pushed further my understanding of my informants' struggles around making a living through or for food, showing how calculative logics were but one among the elements on which people relied when framing their decisions. In this sense, I understood social reproduction as more encompassing than 'making a living or livelihoods' or as addressing the analytical necessity to overcome dualisms such as 'those between micro and macro, material and cultural perspectives and more generally between economy and society' (Narotzky 1997:6), and better suited to investigating people's multiple experiences and their understanding of a life worth living at a time of major changes.

Looking at ordinary people's struggles for social reproduction around food provisioning or production pushed my approach beyond framing the economy as 'embedded'. Theorists of the 'moral economy' have demonstrated how mutual obligations and moral concerns come together to render inequalities and exploitation acceptable, thus enabling social-economic differentiation (Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Scott 1977; Thompson 1971, 1993). Moving beyond this approach, I follow Sayer (2000), who highlights that although the moral dimensions have recently acquired relevance in understanding economic life, this risks framing the moral and the political as 'externally imposed[19] upon markets and other capitalist institutions, rather than also suffusing them and indeed being part of their preconditions' (Sayer 2000:84). Further, Laidlaw (2014) argues that labelling the 'economy' as moral flattens it as a functionalist project aimed uniquely at strengthening social cohesion, labelling values as moral because they are collectively sanctioned. He further argues that both Thompson's (1971) and Scott's (1977) works frame 'long-term values of

[19] Thompson (Thompson 1978) has previously articulated how "'ideology', 'values', 'feeling', the realm of social consciousness as well as that of moral consciousness are not some autonomous creations of the mind, are not imposed upon material necessary (that is 'production') social relations, but are themselves materially produced in the various contexts of human life and all of it joins in a 'distinctive class experience" (Narotzky 1997:174).

community and the short-term maximization of individual utility' (Laidlaw 2014:22) in oppositional terms, as if the two could not coexist, and jealousy and greed were not part of community life.

Earlier feminist approaches equally pioneered inquiries central to understanding the 'economy otherwise' (Narotzky and Besnier 2014:7) and I draw on these in my own use of 'care' as an ambiguous and fundamental element of social organisation (Thelen 2021). Examining the tensions between 'love and money' (Ferber and Nelson 1993; Zelizer 1997) such works highlight how care practices connect and charge social agents with different social responsibilities and obligations, articulating and addressing how social inequalities are encompassed in practices of care. I draw closely on such approaches, illuminating the social relations I observed around food in different spaces – within the household, in the neighbourhood, across informal food networks in town, on the farm, and also touching upon social networks differently inclusive of state actors – re-conceptualising care as an open-end process potentially transformative of (or rather potentially enabling the reproduction of) inequality[20] (Thelen 2021). Acquired in the first place through culturally specific socialisation patterns within the family, where mutual help is often taken for granted, care practices in the communities I lived in articulated and mediated between local moralities, highlighting people's ethical navigations and the construction of situated moral maps.

My inquiry, departing from everyday observations of people's struggles around issues of social reproduction, hence draws inspiration from the many works attentive to the 'ethical dimension of human life' (Laidlaw 2014:23), attempting to render intelligible the complexities of my informants' reflections and considerations, doubts and evaluations while busy with their food affairs. In other words, in each chapter, I look at social relations around food as the ways in which my informants constructed the world and lived in it (de L'Estoile 2014:62).

2.2. *Nʿīsh kīmā al-ʿbād al-kull* (I live, like all the people do): striving to live well in the aftermath of the revolution

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[20] Entangled with situated social allocations, care practices shape ideas of what constitutes need, who is identified as a provider, and who is entitled to receive care practices.

When I returned to Zaghouan for a brief visit to collect personal items two years after my fieldwork, I stopped by ʿAmm Kamal's corner store at the wrong time. It was midday, and people were buying sandwiches – bread and cheese, some with turkey – that ʿAmm Kamal and his son were assembling quickly on the spot. As his face brightened with a large smile when he recognised me, he continued serving people, until he could come quickly to my corner to share proper greetings. Although I had hoped to engage in a general chat about the state of things in the country, clients coming and going required his attention, and I just ventured to ask him about how the shop was doing. Honouring our previous conversations, ʿAmm Kamal wittily answered that the shop survived, and he was also alive. *'Nʿīsh kīmā al-ʿbād al-kull'* (I'm living like all people do) he said, while opening his arms and smiling obliquely, pointing to his clients, most of whom were workers on their lunch break. Instead of lamenting about the harsh socio-economic conjunctions of current times, ʿAmm Kamal pointed at how everything was flowing, and one needed to find a way to balance out its ups and downs.

Turning my attention to how my informants framed their daily affairs around food as a matter of living well despite structural constraints – whether it be deciding on a product's rightful price, claiming more land to cultivate, or attempting to establish significant relations with businesspeople to market natural beauty products – my material reflects upon how they constructed 'the good' in their lives (Robbins 2013). In support of my analysis, trying to get to the core of what made a normal, good life (and how my informants set limits for when life became unbearable) (de L'Estoile 2014), I have researched other studies in the region and beyond exploring how people manage to cope with radical uncertainty in the mundane, while encountering the lives of others (Al-Mohammad 2010, 2015a; Al-Mohammad and Peluso 2012; Bachelet 2019; de L'Estoile 2014; Montgomery 2013). These works suggest different ways of paying attention to how people's everyday ethical negotiations about matters of social reproduction in uncertain times are simultaneously attuned toward the lives of proximate people (Al-Mohammad 2015a). Often expressed through small acts of care and generosity (in my case, buying tuna cans in bulk for a neighbour's family who were struggling with expenses for an engagement party, driving off-road to reach an isolated household to bring fresh milk, delaying a rent payment, or offering good food at moderate prices), these very acts combined to sustain the very ground (Al-Mohammad 2015a) on which people have

been able to live with dignity, 'wit and appetite' (Naguib 2015:26), despite being surrounded by economic and political uncertainty.

The entanglements of different moral trajectories are further taken up by recent scholars (Deeb and Harb 2013b; Louw 2007; Marsden 2005; Maurer 2005; Schielke 2009b, 2012, 2015), noting to different degrees people's distinctive modes of engagement with Islam and their negotiations with social and political moral rubrics.[21] Marsden's work (2005) engages with such tensions, examining how people in Northern Pakistan critically contribute through intellectual ruminations, experiences, and creativity in their daily lives to the specific forms that 'Islamic tradition' takes in the region. Schielke's reflections acknowledge how people may want to cultivate pious dispositions (Mahmood 2005), while simultaneously engaging in other projects and yearning for other 'goods' (Schielke 2009a, 2009b, 2015). Deeb and Harb's work (Deeb and Harb 2013b, 2013a) explores the complex moral landscape navigated by Lebanese youth, in particular their interpretation of religious properness in relation to new forms of leisure. Maurer shows the ambiguous facets and continuous re-articulation and interpretation of Islamic finance, reflecting the multiple worlds his informants 'inhabit and construct' (Maurer 2005:57). My research partially engages with such scholarship, noting how caring for others was for some of my informants upheld by the obligation of 'caring for God' (see also Mittermaier 2013, 2019; Schaeublin 2019). In analysing their everyday social interactions around food provisioning, or food as a means of a households' social reproduction, this thesis especially considers my informants' ethical negotiations, in particular around the 'social obligations, propriety, hierarchy, manners and reciprocity' (Deeb and Harb 2013b:19) constellating their social worlds.

In a recent thought-provoking edited volume, Henig and Makovicky (2017a) critically re-examine the categories of 'favours' as a mode of action which has economic consequences, without being reducible in terms of a cost-benefit calculation. The volume's different contributions have influenced my own analysis, pushing me to look at how 'the economy itself is imagined, expressed, practiced, and cosmologically framed by different actors in the region' (Henig and Makovicky 2017b:4). Focusing on social interactions around food as localised dynamics I attempt

[21] Deeb and Harb use the term 'rubric' to denote 'the set of ideals and values that are revealed as well produced through discourses and actions in each of the major (moral) registers' (Deeb and Harb 2013b:19).

to capture not only their socio-political productive effects (Pontiggia 2017), but especially their 'modes of expressions', interrogating their 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek 2010) as essential aspects of action through which we engage reflectively on our own conduct and on the lives of others (see also Das 2012; Fassin 2011; Laidlaw 2014).

What emerged from observations of my informants' daily struggles for social reproduction through food was that their 'races for gaining everyday bread' (Meddeb 2011) were constantly constellated by ethical considerations about the modalities through which to attain it, often questioning how one ought to inhabit one's social space properly. While to get by with dignity or respect, my informants often had to rely on other people's favours, triggering connections, or negotiating access to resources or services, they made sense of such 'relational work'[22] and that of their families or neighbours by navigating situated social, political, and religious moral rubrics (Brković 2022; Deeb and Harb 2013b; Henig 2019; Mittermaier 2013; Schaeublin 2019). Tied to 'existential, emotional (as well as material) gains and losses' (Henig and Makovicky 2017b:8), my informants' social interactions around food constructed what I will call 'networks of proximity': networks through which one can access (or be denied) social, existential, and material support.

Sparked by reflections on the works of Pontiggia (2017, 2018), whose analysis introduces 'solidarity by proximity' to point to the different forms of negotiation practices, social relationships and personal ties on which Tunisian people rely to escape economic insecurity, I will use 'networks of proximity' throughout the thesis to instead examine the work of social networks and their underpinning logics based on mutual help and personal relatedness.

Foregrounded in Pontiggia's analysis to especially explore the everyday process of state formation through the lens of non-regulated economic activities (informality), the solidarity practices surveyed by the authors are made comprehensible by observing how both state institutions and people rely on similar negotiation logics to accumulate material and social capital. From there, Pontiggia argues how such practices – social acts at the base of 'the moral economy' in

[22] I first used the concept of 'relational work' in my analysis following Thelen et al.'s (2014) relational approach to studying the state. In the thesis, I employ the expression to denote how people invested in their social relations to construct viable paths that would enable them to secure better futures (see also Brković 2022; Lammer 2018; Pontiggia 2017; Thelen et al. 2014; Venkatesan 2010; Vetters 2014). Choosing the term *work* rather than *labour* allows me to convey the Marxist use-values of the word. As noted by Venkatesan, 'Work is something people enjoy for its own sake; it is its own worth. Labour, on the other hand, is integrated into an economic circuit. It is carried out for money and implies sacrifice and pain of a different order to that implied by work'(2010:S167).

contemporary Tunisia and simultaneously disciplining tools that affect 'not only the biographies, but also the subjectivity of the people' (2018:161) – contribute to perpetuating inequality and subordination especially among marginalised populations.

By witnessing the rich social lives of food and exploring the minutia of social interactions among people, the material presented throughout this study builds on and pushes forward Pontiggia's work. Locating my own reflections at the intersection of ethics, politics and economics, I will argue that by documenting my interlocutors' vulnerable lives around the preparation, sourcing, trading, and production of food, sustained by their 'relational work', new understandings can emerge. Focusing on networks' formations around food and noting the different intensity with which my informants relied on proximate people for mutual support will reveal the tensions, ambiguities and complexities characterizing people's efforts to attain a good, normal life. Seeking to avoid deterministic conclusions by flattening people's reasonings and concerns on 'the economic', my exploration of networks of proximity as chains of social relations will instead discuss how situated choices emerged from my interlocutors' ethical navigations, blending personal interests and constraints with different systems of values and norms. The focus on the development of these networks over time, even if partial, will otherwise open up people's evaluative work on their own and others' conduct, contributing to both construct and judge the economic and the political in their society.

Finally, drawing on different contributions that address people's ordinary struggles for a life worth living (Al-Mohammad 2015b; Henig and Makovicky 2017a; Jansen 2015; Jasarevic 2012; de L'Estoile 2014; Louw 2013; Obeid 2019; Reeves 2017; Robbins 2013; Steinmüller 2013; Vetters 2014), the chapters also highlight the different degrees of *success* of my informants' 'race for bread' (Meddeb 2011, 2012). Whereas ideas of a normal, good life [23] among my lower-income informants (often expressed by the tensions surrounding obtaining material sufficiency through hard work, allowing for one's moderate consumption, and caring for the wellbeing of proximate people), strongly informed my interlocutors' everyday struggles around food, their different social allocations also determined much of their projects' overall 'success'. Observing the formation of networks of proximity at different scales (the household, the neighbourhood, the farm, town food networks, the wheat trade

[23] Upon which proper personhood was also partially constructed.

networks) reveals how some actors were better situated to build on their relational work and to access needed resources. For others, located at the margins of local hierarchies, triggering connections and setting up deals through which to build a good, normal life was an arduous task (see Chapter 4).

Guided by the literature presented above and reverberating through food issues, delving into the 'social lives of food' in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, the thesis revolves around the following questions:

1. How are decisions around food production, preparation, and provisioning/distribution, observed at different scales (in households, in different neighbourhood food shops, on a smallholder farm, in a wheat food network) framed by my interlocutors? How are the ethical negotiations underlying such decisions differently shaped by people's previous experiences and by structural constraints?
2. What do these choices reveal about the ideas of what makes a desirable life and proper personhood in the aftermath of the revolution in a marginal rural region?
3. How do social actors evaluate their own and each other's social reproduction strategies (economic tactics and relational modalities), and what can they reveal about their imagining of the political and the economic? How do such strategies enmesh with social change in rural Tunisia, perpetuating inequalities or challenging them?

With a different emphasis, these questions intersect/sustain each chapter of my thesis. Each thesis chapter discusses how, at different scales, local moralities underlying the construction of networks of proximity, entangling with people's social positioning, shaped my interlocutors' horizon of possibilities (de L'Estoile 2014). Chapter 1 explores practices of food preparation and consumption at the level of the household, looking at how nurturing responsibilities construct ideas around family as the first social site where mutual help logics are negotiated and differently manipulated by family members. With food as a source of self-identification, many of my interlocutors also discussed their different understandings of femininity in contemporary Tunisia. Furthering these observations, Chapter 2 observes how 'good' Tunisian food is re-constituted by women sourcing local, fresh food and creolising

their cooking repertoire in the everyday. Demonstrating the quotidian process of the traditionalisation of Tunisian cuisine, and balancing out food preparation with other interests and commitments, it also reveals how women's decision-making is enmeshed with and furthers social change.

Through Chapter 3, by focusing on food provisioning and sale strategies in a town, I explore the construction of networks of proximity in a neighbourhood. Informed by ethical sensitivities toward each other in times of need, together with hard-working attitudes, caring practices constituted an essential facet of a good life in a precarious world, and delineated the contours of moral personhood in the neighbourhood. Chapter 4 complements the observations on care by observing food networks in the town. It shows how social allocations' specific configurations weighed heavily on my informants' capacity to trigger networks of proximity, and to build upon their material and social capital and aspire to better lives. In Chapter 5, following the main social events connected with seasonal wheat production on the Beit Ammar farm, the material details a smallholder household's struggles to maintain their land as a primary source of social reproduction through navigating the constraints, opportunities, local moralities, and multiple discourses offered by late capitalism around the sale of wheat. Finally, looking at the processes of 'indigenous' wheat heritagisation, Chapter 6 discusses how some of the Tunisian smallholders I worked with managed to participate in the global discourse around good food, advancing moral claims for how state-society relations should be re-deployed in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

The remainder of the Introduction will situate my interlocutors' life trajectories, framing the specific socio-economic milieus from where they struggle for better lives as products of historical dynamics sedimented in time and space. It will locate Zaghouan, the region where people I met negotiated different regimes of values and structural constraints, among the rural margins from where the revolution of 2011 was triggered.

3. Living in Zaghouan, '*amīrat al-nawm*' (the sleeping princess)

Covering a surface area of 2,768 square kilometres, and situated between 50 and 100 km southwest of Tunis, the region of Zaghouan sits between the great cereal plains of the North and the semiarid zone of the central regions, aligning with the

latter in terms of its bio-climate. The landscape alternates between mountains and fertile floodplains, punctuated by isolated hills. With a population of around 186,000 inhabitants (INS 2018), mostly concentrated in the main urban centres of Zaghouan and El Fahs, the region boasts a long 'sedimented history' (Reeves 2011) of people moving across the shores of the Mediterranean.

Figure 5: A view of Zaghouan

The traces of pre-historical settlements are found in rock paintings dating to 10,000 BC, as well as more recent ones (1,000 BC) in caves used to stock food. Phoenician inscriptions and artifacts have been found in different archaeological sites across the region, often buried under the later and ever-stratifying passages of Romans, Byzantines, and Andalusians, constructing the region as a place of 'ever-shifting conjunctures of trajectories' (Massey 2005:139) that continues to record the interactions of incomers with the native populations, in a bundle of 'thrown togetherness'(Massey 2005:151).

While each chapter in this thesis situates stories and events in the specific spaces where I conducted my observations, offering more contextual details and data on each specific locality, in the following I aim to offer a first preliminary picture of the town where I resided during the one and half years of my fieldwork. Some of my informants boasted that their family origins had been in the region's capital of Zaghouan for generations, while others had only recently settled in town from the surrounding countryside. Through their accounts, I aim to provide significant images of the social-material reality of a town in a rural region that is undergoing rapid transformation. Whether prompted by my request for information about the town's history or collected as a spontaneous reflection on the environment they inhabited, the past and the present were entangled in my informants' representations of space - imbued with and simultaneously constitutive of power dynamics. Revealing place as

conflictual arena (Massey 1994) invested with multiple meanings and values, the differently positioned accounts will attempt to elude a univocal understanding of a situated locality, illuminated instead by people's multiple and always partial experiences (Candea 2007).

Figure 6: Zaghouan town, at the foot of the Zaghouan mountain

When I asked Radia – a woman in her 70s and a long-time family friend of one of my intimate informants – about her family origin, she confirmed that she was *Zaghwāniyya zaghwāniyya*, the suffix '*-iyya*' marking a common belonging for those who could trace their family lineage to the town's foundation. Radia's current house, situated in one of the town's central neighbourhoods, *Ḥayy al-basātīn,* and connected to the main town's artery, was within walking distance of the most frequented mosque, and was composed of two separate apartments built on her mother's land. Her childhood house was located in the *Mdīna-l-ʿarbī*, the oldest part of the town, founded by different Muslim groups who had been banned from Spain around the seventeenth century. Radia told me that until the 1980s, most of the people from Zaghouan lived together in an enlarged family unit household[24] in the *Mdīna-l-ʿarbī*,

[24] Radia started drawing a little map for me of how the houses were built for the most part in the Old Town: one big room with a loft (*sidda*) where the parents slept, underneath which was the *bīt al-ʿūla / al-mūna* (space where the food reserve for the year - mostly dry couscous, spices, dried vegetables - were stored), and in the remaining space the kitchen (with a *bābūr* gas stove that also served as a heater in the winter and was brought into the internal courtyard in the summer). The living room/kitchen space was also where the children slept at night. Each

‘as people back then had little money’. What today constitutes the main street, constellated by various shops and businesses and all the neighbourhoods branching out from it, Radia told me, used to be all olives groves. The town then developed and modernised. Around the 1980s, the *Mdīna-l-ʿarbī* was painted in the typical white and blue colour common among the touristic sites across the country.

Figure 7: Old town with water flowing from the Zaghouan aqueduct

Figure 8**: Old town in its typical white and blue colours**

A drainage system was set up, hospitals and high schools were built, and the town started attracting more people from the countryside as new services and jobs appeared, including some manufacturing factories - especially in the neighbouring district of *Zriba*. Radia’s modernising vision of town, quite representative of the Zaghouan dwellers’ perception of the town’s time and place trajectories, was also

family would then decide when where, and how to add to this core setting, usually building an upper floor or buying land nearby to stay close.

surprising to me, as it discounted the town's relationship with the surrounding countryside. 'Of course we are not a rural town, we are urban dwellers – and people from the countryside look up to us, trying to imitate what we cook, how we dress, how we talk', Radia told me. Her understanding of the town-countryside relationship was quite dichotomous: people from town might own land, of course, but that was worked on by rural dwellers whose existence was to a large extent determined by their lack of resources (*nāqsīn barcha*) if compared to the culturally richer, more developed life in town. Laughing it off, Radia also openly admitted that people's attitude in town was a little *raciste (racist)*, which I would gloss as *classist*. Radia and many other of my town informants clearly delimited belonging, and ascribed different groups to specific spaces (urban and rural), according to sedimented ideologies and socio-cultural markers (Deeb 2006; Obeid 2019). Radia's reflection echoed earlier nation-building ideologies, rooted in discourses of modernity, progress, and betterment that perceived the rural areas of much of the country as stigmatised spaces in need of enlightenment[25] (see also Abu-Lughod 2009; Deeb 2006; Obeid 2019). Many of my farmer informants often recognised urban people's privileged position in terms of life opportunities and access to services, although they also observed how urban dwellers had lost the skills necessary to distinguish 'good food and good life' from a *maghshūsh* (contaminated) one. The town and countryside were, however, interconnected in many ways.

My specific transient positioning in between the town and the countryside allowed me to observe the ambiguities of such dichotomous constructions: while urban and rural dwellers reproduced the discourse on inhabiting 'two worlds' (Obeid 2019; Rigg 2014), they also shared common practices and similar ever-evolving social formations (family, sense of community, and mutual obligations informing these). As another informant remarked, 'the town eats [sustains itself economically] from the countryside'. People, food, and resources moved away or circulated in both directions. As they moved away, they often also returned: people visited their natal places during festivities, remittances were sent home, houses enlarged, and new olive trees transplanted. Rural dweller's lives were especially enmeshed with town life through their children, who accessed different lifestyles in town, often shaping their

[25] Meanwhile, over the years the state allocated a few resources to improve basic services and expand the socio-economic life-conditions of the rural population.

aspirations around urban modernities. Multiple trajectories and present experiences were hence entangled in constructing a place, ascribing meanings, and shaping identities.

When I returned to Tunisia in 2021 to retrieve some left-behind household items, Ola (who had looked after my child) and her family, who had recently moved to town from the countryside to settle into one of the buildings in the industrial neighbourhood, hosted me for most of my stay. One evening, while sitting on the front doorstep of the six-apartment building her family was renting in, she smiled and reflected out loud about her surroundings, looking at the nearby houses with displeasure. ‘I have the feeling that people in this part of town, our lives, all resemble our neighbourhood: half-painted houses, unfinished upper floors, nobody caring much about them. Look around here’, she said, indicating the piles of broken tiles and bricks lying on the street in an enclosed space between two houses that served as an open garage for their neighbour’s car. Ola’s family neighbourhood, known as the *Ḥayy al-būlīsiyya* (‘the police district’) was mostly inhabited by families who had moved there from elsewhere, as policemen’s families often moved as they changed their working posts. As I learned over time, each neighbourhood in town developed in conjunction with different migratory waves: regional migration from nearby rural areas and south-north internal migration. Of course the town held together multiple identities, throwing together and reflecting its inhabitants’ partial experiences and understandings of the world. Walking through other districts, one could infer their inhabitants’ social positioning: *Ḥayy bi-l-shīkh,* (‘the sheik district’) with detached, elegant two-storey houses; *Zone industrielle,* (‘the industrial area’) where most of the people working in local factories lived; and *Wād al-nsāʾ,* a green, quiet residential area closer to the foot of the mountain and the water spring.

Figure 9: On the right *hayy al-būlīsiyya, Ola's apartment doorstep from where we chatted in the evenings*; on the left *hayy al-basātīn* (the central neighbourhood in town)

Zaghouan, the capital of a predominantly rural region, was generally considered a quiet and safe area[26] in which one could live a good life with a family, if one was lucky enough to hold a decent job. In fact, because of its apparent 'economic immobility', the town was known as *ʾamīrat al-nawm,* or 'the sleeping princess', economically and politically marginal to the more industrious Sahel towns. 'Nothing is going on here, for better or for worse', my younger informants often lamented, upset at the lack of opportunities for the younger generation. 'There is no innovation, mechanics use the same technology my father's generation used to fix cars', one shop owner commented sourly on the subject of the socio-economic condition of the town, seeing the state as neglecting development. Despite the fact that Zaghouan and some of the neighbouring towns (El Fahs and Zriba) saw modest industrial development – mostly through the establishment of electrical, textile, jewellery, and stone quarry factories in the 1980s (Gana 1998; Hammami, Muslah, and Megdiche 2017) – since then, state investment had stalled. Certainly Zaghouan's geographical character as a fertile agricultural land in proximity to the capital made it easier for the central power

[26] At least until recent times. A few episodes of car robbery right before I left after fieldwork caused concern in town, as crime reached even calm Zaghouan. Interpreted as a sign of changing times connected to the worsening of the socio-economic situation across the whole country, my informants were quite shocked to hear about these. 'We never seen something like that before' I was told by my informants, discussing what had happened. 'We all knew each other in town, but now you don't know all of your neighbours'.

to treat the region as a pawn, exchanging land for political support[27] (see especially Chapters 5 and 6). Significant in this sense is the fact that as an independent administrative region[28] Zaghouan became autonomous only in the 1970s, remaining then quite marginal to the subsequent national development plans. Recent data offers a quite striking image of the social-geographic positioning of the region: an average poverty rate of 20%[29] against the nationwide rate of 15%; an illiteracy rate of 26% against the national average of 18%; and a rural poverty rate of 34 % (African Bank 2019). Whereas the unemployment rate stands at 16.9% (against 14.8% nationwide, African Bank 2019), it is the industrial sectors that employ much of the 'active' population at around 32%, followed by education and services at 30%, with agriculture at only 9% (National Institute of Statistics 2014). What these statistics fail to capture is how people in the region rely on informal activities either to complement their formal employment or to make a living. Chapter 4 will especially focus on this 'economy of shortage' milieu, exploring its inherent social and moral facets, and people's different ways of successfully navigating it.

By the end of my fieldwork, I started noticing some palpable movement in town myself. The main road connecting Zaghouan to Tunis had been newly paved, allowing faster travel to the capital. As there was an influx of newcomers who commuted to Tunis, some of my informants associated the road works with the town's modest urban expansion. Zaghouan was becoming appealing for people who owned a car and aspired to a less chaotic, greener place to live than Tunis. A few people from Saudi Arabia and Libya were investing in villas under construction. New cafes opened up in the outskirts of town, with green areas (previously absent) where it was possible to hang out as a family or as young couples.[30] There was even a proposal for a mini-amusement park in town, intended to entertain children and let the parents

[27] During the Ben Ali regime, Zaghouan was considered a loyal bastion, as its population was directly connected through patronage logics to Tunis and 'the president's families'.
[28] It was previously included the Greater Tunis area.
[29] My own observations, merging with statistical reporting, contribute to the definition of poverty mainly based on people's differential access to basic services (potable water in the house, education, health, means of transport, youth vocational centres, or training opportunities). I also include what could be described as social poverty: the lack of extensive and steady networks to rely on in case of dire need, families whose parents were divorced, etc. Hence, informants who had to pay rent (often rural migrants in town) and whose livelihoods could not rely on wage income became particularly vulnerable, as well as young men who fled the countryside for big coastal cities, cutting connections with their families.
[30] It was common to notice young couples in their late twenties hanging out in these new locations, but more often it was mothers with children, or entire families. Younger people would rather be seen in such places with a group of friends. Each cafe had a specific reputation, and my informants - as we will see - expressed their specific preferences by inhabiting or avoiding such spaces.

relax. Responding to the desire for new forms of leisure (Deeb and Harb 2013b), such developments were welcomed by some of my informants, eager to leave the house as the major site of socialisation, to dress up the children, and 'changing the air'. Others instead disliked those spaces, seeing them as improper venues for families to hang out. I also perceived a buzz around the possibility of capitalising on the lush countryside landscape and its traditional food, as a few of my informants came to me with appealing propositions for setting up eco-tourism projects, appealing to the urban dwellers wanting to escape the cities for the weekend. Was the sleeping beauty getting ready for a new awakening, I asked myself.

4. Positionality, access and methods

4.1. Arrival

> The nausea comes and goes. A ton of reorganising is left to do, since as usual I push back logistical tasks, drawing in my own mess. I feel comfortable with my Arabic, though: it is not perfect, but people open up on hearing me speak it. The produce vendor down the road offered us credit when we did not have enough cash on us, smirking at our husband-and-wife bickering on the public street. Nausea, I was saying. Every small body-stimulus is a reminder of my position in this world - precarious, exposed, fragile. In the night, I read *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and I cannot help but think about rationality, romanticism, and visions of the world. '*Divide et impera'*, is that the method I am applying as well to my work to survive? Divide, connect, conquer? Is that all? Is it just another science? My husband broke one of the curtains, now we have some light coming in. It is indecent how I end up loving inhabiting constrained places.

Before embarking on the path of a PhD, I had spent the previous two years of my life working with a smallholder farming community in an Egyptian village on the outskirts of Cairo. I planned my fieldwork around a place I was quite familiar with, imagining dealing with matters I had already partially identified during my previous years of work. The authoritarian drift and consequential crack-down on freedoms that took place in Egypt following the army coup in 2013 impeded my plans: they fell through, *in primis* worrying for the safety of the Egyptian friends I would have worked with. I then turned to Tunisia, where a complex transitional time, drenched in hope, had followed the revolutionary events of 2011. In the three months before arriving at my newly identified field site, I did all the studying and planning I could.

In October, I landed in Tunis, carrying with me another project in addition to my fieldwork: motherhood.

When I landed to stay in Tunis, where I had arranged for my language training to take place, I found myself in a new city, with almost an entirely new language. While people understood my broken Egyptian, I had a tough time understanding them. I still had no idea where my field site would be, as preliminary pre-fieldwork plans had not fallen into place. And I was about to become a mother. As I worked through my notes, I felt inadequate, overwhelmed, and fragile. Those generous six months of language training time that I was granted to switch from Egyptian to Tunisian Arabic literally saved my project, firstly allowing me to catch up with the language as I met a brilliant Tunisian tutor, Jamil.[31] That time further allowed me to connect better with a few of my project's central gatekeepers: first and foremost, Professor Ayeb, with his immense experience on rural issues in the MENA region and his colossal networks of connections throughout the country. I also met Rachid, the Gene Bank researcher, who at that early stage of my project was important in pointing to Zaghouan as a possible strategic place to resettle after the six months of language training. That early time also gave me time for some preliminary observations in the capital and for liaising with a group of young activists in the process of setting up what would become OSAE (*Observatoire de la Souveraineté Alimentaire et de l'Environnement)*. I participated in different initiatives they organised across Tunisia, developing an early understanding of the social geography of the country. That time also served to set up trips that helped me to identify rural realities and consider where I might relocate to for my field-site.[32]

Once I decided on Zaghouan, both my gatekeepers strongly suggested searching for a house in the town. This was because I had not yet developed decent relations with any family in the countryside, and it was suggested that a new-born would have been too much to handle while getting accustomed to my host's family rhythms and life. In the end, we found an apartment in one of the newly-built buildings at the edge of town. Half empty, the building hosted a few families of young

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[31] At a later stage in my research, Jamil also became someone with whom I discussed some of my findings and who guided me in understanding the socio-cultural nuances of my experiences.

[32] My choice of fieldwork locations was narrowed to two towns where Professor Ayeb set me up with some local contacts. Exploring both of them, both looked promising in terms of the study I wanted to conduct, but I decided to choose the one nearest to the capital since I planned to give birth in Tunis. Zaghouan, an hour and half from Tunis by car, was logistically more manageable than Jandouba, six hours or more west of the capital.

professionals who, like us, where not indigenous to Zaghouan, but had moved from other areas of Tunisia for work. A month later, the baby made his arrival in this world, the summer hit, and I went through the first months of maternity leave quite alone: my two major contacts in town, Jasmine and Kadri (with their two young children) had moved closer to their family in the south of the country for the summer break. When the heat allowed me to, I managed to explore the town and my neighbourhood with my new-born. During those long walks, I met my first informants in town (neighbourhood women producing sweets at home, shopkeepers, and supermarket attendants). Over those first months in town, I also met Youmna through OSAE. She was responsible for a rural association processing food and herbs for sale on the outskirts of Zaghouan. I also met her 19-year-old daughter Ola, who a few months later became my baby's carer once I formally resumed my fieldwork. From then on, Youmna and Ola, became more than intimate friends, participating in my family life as I relied on them as my 'mother and sister' in Tunisia. I describe their struggles to live good lives in detail in Chapter 4.

My own positionality, as a foreigner and a working mother in her mid-thirties, was hence shaped by the presence of my nuclear family. As being married and having children are both criteria affirming propriety and success in a woman's life-course, being accompanied by my family, my husband and new-born made me into a well-positioned and culturally intelligible woman in meaningful ways in Zaghouan. As a woman inhabiting a moderately relaxed patriarchal setting, motherhood, foreignness, and my research engagement granted me a lot of room to manoeuvre. My informants and acquaintances in town understood my research interests were leading me to interact with people in different settings, and my constant inquiring and moving around was, in time, not seen as improper. I have always tried to be sensitive to cultural and gender expectations and social norms: a proper dress code and some space and awareness of expected female performance allowed me to address all my work and daily life concerns with ease.

My specific positionality as a working mother also circumscribed my own inquiry in specific ways. As I mentioned at the beginning of the section, living with a rural family (as I had imagined) at the beginning of fieldwork was not an option. Constituting food relations in town as my privileged site of analysis, however, did not prevent me from growing significant relationships with two families in the countryside, each located half an hour from my own house. The frequent movements

from town to countryside and vice-versa allowed me to question in more depth the relations between rural and urban space, their mutual social constructions, as well as the tensions between spaces characterised by sharp economic and political inequalities.

In an attempt to 'arbitrarily select' (Candea 2007) my field, in the end I chose to participate significantly in the lives of the two below-described families in town, and another two in the countryside, honouring everyday sociality requirements and specific engagements over the years. I also observed the social lives of cereals in public spaces such as in a milling shop where I worked for several months. Following these relationships and their production of sociality over many months, I was unable to pursue some of the invitations I received from informants I met at a later stage of fieldwork, some of which might have been rather interesting leads to better understand the social geography of the town and region, I also did not manage to dedicate as much time to formal interviews as I wanted in town. However, as Candea reminds us (2007), the hard job is to attempt to contain different multiplicities inherent in any place (Marcus 1995).

4.2. Methods: the poor researcher

I only realised later on how much my family – and my son especially – were precious allies and entry points into the lives of proximate people, including some of my neighbours and my rural informants. Most of them perceived us as poor, lacking the essential resources needed to navigate life: extended relations. It was quite funny when, during my first Ramadan in Zaghouan, I asked Jasmine how they found poor people to donate alms to, as I had never seen anyone begging in the street in Zaghouan as I had in Tunis or any European capital. In response, she laughed at me: 'You are our poor, without family or any understanding of the place'. Then she added kindly, 'You know, there might be some university students who can't go back home for the festivities. They are staying at the student house, so we bring food over at times'. As in our case, most of the time people living in proximity knew about each other's conditions and helped each other out when they could, as I later came to understand.

In a new social setting, motherhood became a unique and inspiring experience through which I measured and evaluated my own assumptions on child-rearing, mitigating my anxieties and expectations moulded on my acquired cultural patterns.

Differently from Rignall (2013), my family often participated in social gatherings, and to some extent work-related engagements (for instance some of my expeditions into the countryside at the weekends or during religious festivities). People saw me struggling to provide decent food for my family, and so invited us over. They saw me tired and sleep deprived, so they listened to my laments and offered advice. Hence, I did not intentionally separate my working time from my family time, but rather I let local social life intersect with my family in many ways.

Figure 10: ***ʿId (*****Eid) at 'Amm Fathi's**

It was often tiring and overwhelming, and at times we had to fight to claim time for our family as a unit, but I personally found the dense sociality I was imbued in comforting, since it allowed me to draw permeable boundaries between myself as a woman, mother, and researcher. In particular, women informants who worked outside their household understood my struggles, as they similarly battled to juggle labour, family time, and securing proper lives. Organising my days, I did not leave the house at set times every day (see also Rignall 2013), but rather arranged visits week by week according to farming seasonality, food and social events in town, events in the neighbourhood, and of course specific appointments that were set up. Similarly to Naguib's inquiry (2015), discussions about food matters, eating, preparing food, and working on food processing allowed me to develop insights into my informants' personal experiences, their reflections, and their social lives at different scales.

As noted before, my own family's need for food brought me to develop early fieldwork relationships with some shopkeepers in my neighbourhood, and more in town more generally, then with women producing homemade food near my house. These spaces and relations became specific settings through which I was able to observe social life flowing during my first months in town. Through Farah, a gatekeeper in the community (who was responsible for a youth vocational centre in the outskirts of town and well-known in her neighbourhood), I was introduced to social life in 'my' neighbourhood. Over a span of a month, Farah presented me as a researcher wanting to learn more about traditional food practices in town to two of my main informants – *Khāltī* (aunt) Khadija and *ʿAmm* (uncle) Kamal (the corner shop owner) – plus several other food producers with whom I did not manage to build in-depth relationships. Khāltī Khadija's three daughters and their family's lives converged daily at their mother's house. Khāltī Khadija's home thus became a central site where I could observe the production of food and kin simultaneously, allowing me to participate to a certain degree in their extended family's social life in town. Youmna's fragile food businesses between the countryside and town demonstrated the importance of observing the constellations generated by social allocations in determining people's struggle for social reproduction.

Youmna was also my lead to *Tātā* (auntie) Samia's milling shop, as she knew Tātā Samia's moral integrity and had often stopped there to have her products milled. Through Tātā Samia's patient everyday work around food in the neighbourhood, my inquiry gained much insight into the kind of care expressed through mutual support practices and the moral trajectories inhabited and negotiated by people living in proximity: clients, neighbours, and shopkeepers. In the countryside, Dar al-ʿAmmār's household and his *duwwār (hamlet)* became a privileged site of observation for me, from which I came to understand smallholders' struggles and specifically their household's strenuous efforts to gain a life worth living with limited assets (land and water) and scarce consideration from the region's agricultural department. Introduced to them by Professor Ayeb, I was a witness to the extensive social networks they were busy building to enlarge their frame of opportunities (de L'Estoile 2014). ʿAmm Fathi, the head of the household, circumscribed my mobility clearly one day when I wanted to visit one of their relative's houses located in a different *duwwār* than that of his wife, saying that it was not proper for a young woman to move from house to house in the countryside. However, I participated in the salient events on his farm,

and I was invited to social life events across the area (weddings, religious festivities, meetings with state representatives, etc.). I developed intimacy with the family and visited them regularly, allowing me to understand how the sedimented political and economic history of the area intersected with the lives of many smallholders in the areas, who differently considered strategies for coping and overcoming the roughness characterising their own conditions of social reproduction.

Finally, Jasmine and Kadri's families – who I met at the beginning of my fieldwork through Kadri's cousin, who I had rented an Airbnb from for a week in Tunis – became precious informants. They generously opened up their own family life to us, sharing their aspirations and anxieties as a lower middle-class family struggling to maintain a good life that would enable them to grant good future opportunities for their daughters, while also providing their extended family with support in case of necessity. Out of my group of core informants – who could loosely be described as lower-income households[33] – Kadri and Jasmine represented an exception, being more well-off. With respect to their geographical origins, Kadri and Jasmine were also an exception: while my other informant's families had their origins in town or in the nearby countryside, Jasmine and Kadri's families were based in Tataouine, in the south of Tunisia. Jasmine and Kadri moved to Zaghouan, where Jasmine's own family had previously lived before and maintained some good relationships, due to its proximity to Tunis, expanding the family wholesale school materials business to the economic centre of the country. I only realised at a later stage of analysis that each family and their specific positioning provided a unique entry point through which I could observe different moments of the chain of food production and the political sociality around it (Narotzky 1997).

As I followed people's engagements around food affairs and in their struggles for making proper lives, as an apprentice mother, cook, and researcher (Ingold 2011), I was at the same time participating in their everyday community production: in corner shops while I observed and partially contributed to everyday caring transactions 'producing the neighbourhood'; while letting the children play together in my neighbours' courtyards as I observed and participated in family life and its negotiations; while buying gifts for social gatherings, birthday and engagement

[33] As Tātā Samia's was better off than Khāltī Khadija's, whose family life in turn was less precarious than Youmna's and *ʿAmm* Fathi's

parties, and religious holidays; and while organising days out at the beach with some of my informants or family weekends out in the countryside. I considered all of these activities as essential to establishing and maintaining significant relationships with my informants and for my own progressive understanding of their core concerns and sociality for my inquiry's sake, but also for my family's wellbeing. My informants came to care deeply about my family, as I came to care about theirs. Such social proximity and care have also allowed me to experience some of my informants' intimate worries and long-time struggles for their family's social reproduction, enabling me to 'know what goes without saying' (Henig and Makovicky 2017b:18), participating in their everyday strategising for "everyday bread" (Meddeb 2012), and partially in that of their neighbours and relatives. Finally, towards the end of my fieldwork, I managed to hold some formal interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture in the region, which allowed me to understand their perspectives on the future development of the region. The many casual encounters with people and friends of friends, the trips to visit Jasmine and Kadri's extended families in the South, another trip to visit a large landowner trading biological wheat on the coast, plus the many farmer's festivals I attended in the capital, all enriched and contributed to shaping my understanding of the social lives surrounding food.

Chapter 1: Navigating and producing social change: food preparation, families, and femininities in contemporary Tunisia

> I walked through our neighbourhood, passing the mosque, the *ḥammām* (Turkish bath), the high school, and a cluster of cafés, until I reached Khāltī Khadija's house. On my second visit to her place, she had called me over to show me how she baked *malsūqa* (a thin wheat dough bread used for appetizers) for the corner shop down the road. Once in the house, as I was photographing the old woman cutting the dough, she began to recount how she had started to bake *malsūqa* for the corner shop after she lost her husband, while still working at a textile factory outside Zaghouan. She did all she could to provide for her three daughters and one son – balancing shifts at the factory, managing the household, and selling the *malsūqa*. Back then she had baked *malsūqa* for the corner shops three times per day, but since she retired she would only bake 'a little bit', mostly in mornings.[34] Sipping the coffee her sister offered, I looked around the room. The wall cabinets where the flour sacks were stored also hosted big pots, pans, and kitchen utensils piled up on each other, revealing their frequent use.

Khāltī Khadija was proud of having me around, eager to talk about food matters for my project. Retired now, she mastered food preparations as the primary act of care for her household, which often included her two older daughters' nuclear families and, at times, mine as well. In the middle of the morning, after finishing the *malsūqa* and before starting to prepare lunch, she would sit on her doorstep in the sun, just enjoying the silence or talking to the neighbours, until one of her daughters would show up with one of her grandchildren. The busy life that she had lived before, nurturing the family while working at the local textile factory, baking for the corner shops early in the morning or late in the evenings, surely wore on her shoulders. She was a proud matriarch, though, her life now revolving mostly around her extended family. 'My daughters and their husbands come over to eat whenever they want, they got used to the fact that I'm always here and the food will be ready', Khāltī Khadija had remarked, in response to my inquisitive gaze lingering on the pots and pan in her open cabinet and the huge saucepot boiling on the stove. Many among the older

[34] During Ramadan, Khāltī Khadija returned to her previous routine of making *malsūqa* multiple times a day to make sure that the whole neighbourhood has fresh *malsūqa* to break their fast.

generations of cooks in Zaghouan expressed their everyday ethics of care through the foundational act of feeding their family. As Graeber emphasised, 'Value emerges in action; it is the process by which a person's invisible 'potency'—their capacity to act — is transformed into concrete, perceptible forms… One invests one's energies in those things one considers most important, or most meaningful' (Graeber 2001:45) . Similarly, for many of my Tunisian interlocutors who were women, making food for the family was central in enacting care. Symbolically and materially, as we will see later in this chapter, eating and consuming food prepared with care was a ritual that constituted the family as the primary social unit: reaffirming, asserting, claiming, and negotiating different members' positions within it.

The first part of this chapter explores how this kin-work - generating the family, especially among my low-income Tunisian informants - was also performed through gendered labour around food. I discuss how this labour was negotiated beyond the nuclear family, showing how kin-women redistributed and shared their commitments toward their families and reconciled them with other interests in their daily lives. I argue that such daily negotiations contribute to delimiting the contours of what counts as family in a peripheral Tunisian town. As we will see, in the attempt to articulate what people I met considered as family, I observed networks of 'diffuse, enduring solidarity' (Schneider 1980:116) and note how those were built especially among kin - but at times also extended to neighbours or friends (Rugh 1984; Sacchi and Viazzo 2014; Singerman 1995). I then move to observe how, enmeshed in the discursive construction of obligations, responsibilities, and mutual reciprocity among family members in the Arab world (Joseph 2005, 2018), womanhood was partially constructed by my informants' quotidian nurturing work, as they feed the family and attend to their preferences, and care for their wellbeing (Joseph 1993, 1994, 2005). By attending to food preparation 'as an experience (that) places the self as part of the world' (Caplan 1997:16), mothers and wives made sense of their being in such worlds. In Khāltī Khadija's case, as for many of the older generation of cooks, self-making emerged in their everyday engagement with food preparation. For generations, in fact, food-related skills have been central in constructing a 'proper' woman. Indexing seniority and authority within Tunisian households, a *mra ḥurra* (or 'free/skilled woman') was acknowledged for her food knowledge and her ability to manage and organise the labour of junior women, and the resources of the household.

The second section of the chapter then takes this observation forward, detailing how my women informants' reflections and their everyday choices concerning how to manage their 'nurturing work' questioned some aspects of the hegemonic narrative on femininity anchored to the discourse surrounding *tunisianité,* or 'Tunisian identity'. Constructed by the country's elites in the post-independence era (1956 forward) and based on values such as 'realism, rejection of any form of radicalism and moderation'(Zemni 2016:142), this discourse included as one of its crucial pillars a specific view of womanhood as 'educated, professional, emancipated, secular' (Debuysere 2016:205). The 2011 revolution, opening new spaces for social-political negotiation, contributed to challenging the broadly hegemonic narrative around '*tunisianité*, including the view of womanhood generated by a 'nationalist/feminist alliance of progressive men and women' (Maffi 2017:61). Bringing societal concerns previously disguised by the political alliances of urban elites and middle classes to the public arena, the events of 2011 foregrounded the nature of a highly conflict-ridden society and its class issues, offering a space where people could freely express their different orientations toward the central values guiding their experience of being women and men in their society. Following Naguib (2015)'s work, this chapter will discuss how my women informants from different walks of life specify ways to live femininity in everyday life, negotiating situated constraints on their ideals. The chapter hence foreground femininities as plural facets of identity (Naguib 2015) - as the results of situated power negotiations. Chapter 5, which discusses 'the male portion' (Naguib 2015:17), runs in parallel to this one, complementing it through a discussion of masculinities in contemporary Tunisia.

1. Caring for vulnerable bodies: crafting families in contemporary Tunisia

1.1. Performing family through nurturing work

One day, during the first few months of our acquaintance, while the children were playing in the house, I randomly commented to Khāltī Khadija that Waled (Nabil and Nadia's eldest son) looked like Nadia (Khāltī Khadija's second daughter). I was instantly shushed by Khāltī Khadija, who pushed me gently into the kitchen. She told me, 'Waled is born from Nabil's first marriage, I took in him when he was two months old, while I was still working and the girls were all in the house'. She told

me the story of how her late husband met Nabil, then a young police officer, through work, and they had become friends. Nabil would stop after work for an early dinner at Khāltī Khadija's house, and had become intimate with the whole family and especially with Khāltī Khadija, who became like a second mother to the young man. When a domestic accident took away Nabil's first wife and left him with a two-month-old son, he brought the infant to Khāltī Khadija instead of to his own biological mother. Khāltī Khadija took the infant in: 'He was so small, smaller than my arm, and I fed him everyday while dealing with everything else. My sister and the girls helped me of course, but God finally gave me a son'. When Nadia had finished high school, Nabil had proposed to her, transforming his idiomatic kinship through marriage. Long before her daughter's marriage to Nabil, though, by publicly accepting to feed and nurture the little Waled, Khāltī Khadija had already enacted kinship, transforming irreversibly the family's relationship with Waled and his father, who became fully incorporated into the logic of solidarities that upheld Khāltī Khadija's family.

As Lambek (2010) and Englund (2008) argue, kinship can be thought of through practice, constituted through public performative acts[35] such as naming, feeding, marrying, etc. In Waled's case, becoming 'a complete person' within a group' by sharing the same substance that fed other bodies in Khāltī Khadija's family (Carsten 1995:223; Weismantel 1995) showed that the boundaries between people and what they consume – food – or between people and the structures in which they live – houses – may be less clear than we tend to assume (Carsten 1995:225). Constituted through Khāltī Khadija's hard labour in feeding and nurturing, her family came to include first Nabil, and later on his son Waled. The materiality of kin-relations, in the present case in the form of food as a shared substance, was an especially tangible means through which mothers showed her commitment and capacity to meet their obligations as a care giver (Englund 2008). Feeding and eating hence generated and made visible relations, based on the feeding subject in the first place: the mother. Pushing it forward, the logic of nurturing within the household can also be understood by looking at the vulnerabilities of bodies as the starting vectors of relationships:

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[35] At least two other informants' families in Tunis constituted examples of how kinship was enacted through feeding and nurturing practices, and which later also developed and was formalised legally.

It's not that the world comes in through what we perceive through the holes in our otherwise impermeable body – eyes, mouth, ears, nose – but rather the vulnerabilities of the body more generally create social relations, speech, visual recognition, consuming and eating, and of course social and biological reproduction with childbirth' (Sykes 2021, personal correspondence).

An interesting point in this context was revealed by a joke made by another informant in response to my remarks to a young man who was unwilling to take on temporary employment in local factories, which would have allowed him to save money to become a minibus driver, a job he desired:

'Sara says first find a job, and then look for a girl. But she doesn't know that here it is the opposite. First one gets married, or finds a girl he likes, and then when he sees his little ones pulling his sleeves and crying for food, only then does he become a mature man.[36] It is then that he will find a job'.

This remark switched my perspective on the issue: by acting upon and responding to vulnerabilities of the body - feeding and providing - women and men generated their families and their selves.

Figure 11: Preforming the family through everyday food

1.2. Who counts as family? Stretching and cutting kin networks

While the entanglements between food and selfhood were attuned to culturally relevant ideas about family and people's positions within it,[37] they were also highly

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[36] Chapter 3 will offer a view of the 'male portion', looking at the ways that masculinities are also built largely on the responsibilities and obligations around providing for one's family.

[37] Among my informants in Zaghouan, but also in Tunisia more generally, in spite of different economic conditions and more or less/progressive or conservative stances on society, womanhood was certainly perceived in relational

influenced by historically stratified but also current economic, political, and situated conjunctures. This section explores how, in different ways, women and mothers in contemporary Tunisia attempt to craft what counted as family in relation to their roles as primary nurturing subjects, other commitments or interests they carried, the material and symbolic resources available to them, and their understanding of the 'ideal' kin-group.

'Ask her if she likes to cook', teased the husband of Amira, Khāltī Khadija's eldest daughter, as he passed through the kitchen while I was with her two older daughters talking about managing family duties, especially food preparations. '*ʿAni obligé* (I am obliged)', laughed Amira at her husband's observation, 'because of him and the kids'. A civil engineer in her early thirties with two daughters, Amira worked for the local region's engineering department on a variable part-time schedule. 'He wakes up in the middle of the night to smoke, sometimes 3 or 4 times per night', Amira said, referring to her husband. 'And it is not good for him to smoke with no food in his stomach. So I bake *yū-yū* (a fried dough pastry), so he has something he likes to go with his bad habit'. As a mother, hence constituted as a person in a particular relationship with her daughters and husband, Amira was responsive to cultural expectations concerning the proper display of care toward the kin group, which included food preparation. While the construction of women's selfhood was certainly woven with the fulfilment of familial duty within a cultural context that valued family above an individual[38] - and which privileged the desires of males and seniors within it (Joseph 2005),- I argue that Tunisian women and mothers actively moulded their own social and material resources to fulfil such obligations.

In her attempt to become this mature enactment of motherhood, keeping the boundaries between personal good and familial good intentionally blurred, Amira found time to cook, privileging her husband's and children's food preferences. However, when she could, she also relied on her extended family to relieve her from

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terms. Marriage constituted a central institution that transitioned girls to adulthood and maturity, and was a productive site of 'dutiful sons and daughters and responsible citizens' (Maffi 2017:70). Validating such a vision, Maffi's review of the family in contemporary Tunisia also highlights how unmarried individuals are in fact regarded as failures, or at least as incomplete persons (2017).

[38] The literature on relational personhood across the Middle East and North Africa (Joseph 1993, 1994, 2005) also illuminates the Tunisian context: families and their members came to understand their existence as entangled or connected with each other's. In a relationship, 'a person's boundaries are relatively fluid so that persons feel a part of significant others' (Joseph 1993:467).

her cooking chores.[39] Separate living arrangements were in fact only partially relevant when it concerned food preparation, as the special relationship between daughters and mothers was celebrated through everyday mutual support. Nadia, Khāltī Khadija's middle daughter, who at the time did not have an occupation outside the home, often spent the day at her mother's house sharing chores with the youngest sister and food preparation with her mother. Amira would join them after work, and benefited from the fresh nutritious food they had made to feed her daughters. At around 6:00 p.m. Amira and Nadia's respective husbands would also head over to Khāltī Khadija's house, snacking on leftovers or enjoying dinner together. Thus while the intense labour required by homemade food was socially valued and upheld as a central feature of a proper household, it was nevertheless not taken for granted. On the contrary, it was intentionally factored in and acted upon. Amira, synchronising kin-work with her own schedule, stretched solidarity relationships further beyond the conjugal family and managed to mould some of the hierarchies within it. Seniority was not always enacted through food: on the contrary, in Khāltī Khadija's household and others I frequented, elderly mothers or mothers-in-law were responsive to the aspirations of their daughters who were trying to juggle work, childcare, and family obligations.

As in Amira's case, the majority of the women I met in town, whether neighbours or friend of friends, engaged in some sort of generating activities either at home (such as producing homemade food for sale or selling second-hand clothes from their garages) or by working in local factories, shops, or as public or private employees, in this way contributing to their household social reproduction. When asked, they would take pride in claiming their role in both the household and the public sphere, defending the many obligations they were responsible for. '*Fī Zaghwān, el mra elli tshidd al-dar* (In Zaghouan, it is the women who holds up/together the household)', I was once told by my neighbour Farah, while snacking on a stew and a piece of *tājīn* (chicken quiche) at her place in the middle of the afternoon. Food leftovers were joyously abandoned on the table, the kitchen exploded with projects left halfway complete as every little space on the table or counters was occupied by journals, pots, utensils, and the like. 'The woman cooks, she might sell

[39] Amira's husband also cooked from time to time, when he was 'inspired' or if wanted to try out a new recipe. At these times, Amira happily left the kitchen space to him. However, I would argue that Amira's husband constituted a rather exceptional case in Zaghouan.

her specialty food, or work outside of the household. She manages family members, and sews for connections in town', she told me 'When do you find time to do all that?' I asked. At the time, Farah had a government job at a youth training centre, she had a sewing workshop in a room next to her house, she cooked for her 28-year-old son who was living with her, and she managed household chores. 'I wake up early, cook and go to work. I do some of the food preparation in the evenings or at the weekends and, for the rest, you see…I live as I want, the house is often messy, but I manage to do the things I care for.' Such a lively mess and the many projects that Farah undertook at the same time, coupled with an unusual capacity to schedule events later in her evenings, progressively hinted at a life unanchored from much of the usual familial obligations. As she later confirmed when I asked about her family ties, she answered, laughing at me and pointing to the house: 'What do you see around? I let go of some mess (her ex-husband) to make space to other!' For Youmna, another of my most intimate informants, it was a similar story:

> 'I said to myself, I would be better off without him, he was a terrible husband, unemployed but of no support with the kids. I had to raise them alone, be responsive toward his priorities, preparing food he liked instead of something good for the children, while working in a factory to support all of us. When I got divorced, I quit the factory and took on the work at the association, working on my passion – essential oils and distilled herbal water – which allowed me to take care of the children and the house as well.'

While Amira reached out and stretched her network of support beyond the conjugal family, Youmna and Farah cut some of their marital relationships,[40] in this way contributing to reflections on what counts as a family in the Arab world. As the primary social group upon which members rely for political and economic security, families 'emerge, stabilize, shift, reorganize, consolidate and transform repeatedly, [entangling with] economies, labour forces, political realities, market conditions, consumption patterns, population dynamics, social reforms, social movements, global transformations circulations of cultures, technology, and the like' (Joseph 2018:3). Situated at the intersection of variables such as age, gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, culture and power, families shape and are being shaped by such variables

[40] The Global Gender Gap report compared data at the start of the Arab Spring across the Maghreb, attesting the average number of children per woman at 1.9 for Tunisia, and the average age of marriage for women at 27. Concerning the divorce rate, Tunisia stands at 1.84 per 1000 inhabitants per year (Hammami et al. 2017).

(Joseph 2018). Hence, families are in some ways actively crafted. From my notes on another informant's family:

> Jasmine called me on Monday and kept me on the phone for at least 30 minutes, since she needed to vent out about her tiredness and the past week. Her mother-in-law had stayed over for a week, and expected to be served in everything. 'The most annoying thing of all is that she wanted to eat, she decided what and how, and I had to cook. And she eats a lot. She couldn't really see that I was busy with the girls, their school, etc. – she imposed herself because this is the Southern mentality. I did it for my husband, as I did not want to create problems, but thank God we don't live with them anymore, otherwise I would be her servant.' Before Jasmine convinced her husband Kadri to move to Zaghouan, as a necessity for the family business, she told me that in the early years of their marriage they never ate together as a conjugal family, since Kadri was always with his family at his parents' apartment, which was located below theirs. The first meal that they had together was in Zaghouan, seven years after their marriage. After moving to Zaghouan, Jasmine managed to establish herself as the lead cook in her own house, and not as a servant in another person's house, while offering her daughters a more progressive environment to grow up in, including better schools, sports activities, etc. While she couldn't curtail the family bonds, including the financial help that her husband gave to different members of his extended family, Jasmine at least managed to distance herself by 500 km. This allowed her the freedom to discuss money issues with her husband, and especially to manage her nuclear family as she thought better. When the COVID crisis hit Tunisia badly, however, Jasmine and Kadri were forced to move back to Tataouine: Kadri's business suffered from the widespread economic crisis, and they had to cut unnecessary expenses such as the apartment they rented in Zaghouan. Both Jasmine and Kadri wanted to be close to their extended families and elderly parents in difficult times.

Undoubtedly, the juridical reforms[41] promoted by the state after independence, coupled with spreading urbanisation, wider access to education, and economic transformations across the years have influenced and refashioned the 'institution of the Tunisian family' (Maffi 2017:62).These factors also changed the understanding that people have of the family, with marriage perceived more as a choice between two people as opposed to a family concern aimed at perpetuating the agnatic group's

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[41] The Personal Status code promulgated in 1956 just after the independence forbade polygamy, gave women the right to file for divorce, and required the consent of both spouses for marriage. The following year, in 1957, women were granted the right to vote and to stand as political candidates, as well as the right to work and to open saving accounts. In 1960, a programme of family planning was also legalised, including abortion (Debuysere 2016).

social reproduction. In line with many studies pointing at how, in recent years, the smaller and conjugal family has gained importance as a new ideal (Graf 2016b; Maffi 2017; Miller 2018; Newcomb 2009; Ben Salem 2009), Jasmine's case confirms how the conjugal family was often considered by young women as the ideal space from which to take charge over food and nurturing work, free from the age-based power relations that constitute multi-generational households.[42] However, this section has demonstrated that the extended family, expressed in mutual support through child rearing and common food preparation, is something that people rely on. Thus, at the ideational level at least (Yount and Rashad 2008), but I would also add at a quite material level, the extended family – in a whole range of structures and dynamics – remains important in contemporary Tunisia (Maffi 2017). In particular, it was the first social milieu where mutual help and logics of solidarity, vernacularly expressed as *yʿawnū bʿaḍhum*' (helping each other), were apprehended. While such logics of mutual help constructed the family's central role in welfare provision and safety nets, the following chapters will show how in the everyday, support practices among proximate people will move beyond the space of the family, constructing what I will call 'networks of proximity'.

Figure 12: Nadia's son's first birthday party

In conclusion, as shown by Khāltī Khadija's family and also by the developments in Jasmine and Kadri's, relations among a kin group elicited by contextual needs and expressed through acts of caring and nurturing, contribute much

[42] Although power hierarchies tended to be recreated within the smaller family unit: deference to the husband was often reproduced.

to crafting situated family's configurations in contemporary Tunisia. As Sacchi and Viazzo argue in their review on the family and the household across the Mediterranean area (2014), family does not necessitate essentialising definitions to be relevant to its members or larger groups: 'on the contrary, the combination of flexibility within a strong structure of expectations allows a manipulation of family to meet both old and new needs more effectively' (Rugh 1984:67).

2. Contested femininities and socio-cultural belonging in contemporary Tunisia

2.1. Contested femininities: juggling the woman's share

As seen in the section above, the delicate balancing of time pressures across the day, in particular ensuring flexible meals are available throughout the day, showed the importance of good food vis-à-vis women's familial duties. For many of my Tunisian informants – similarly to Venkatesan's reflections within a South Indian community – cooking, mainly performed by women, represented 'a necessary chore, although care is taken in preparing a meal' (2010:159). While frying a *brīk* (a filling appetizer made with egg, tuna, and *malsūqa* dough) during a late afternoon coffee visit, Rim – another neighbour of mine who managed a pastry business from a workshop in a room detached from her house – commented:

> 'Lunch is not as before, as work often takes over, so dinner is the time I cook for. But my son, daughter, or husband might come back for food at any time of the day, so I always have some leftovers from the previous dinner, accompanied by something fresh and quick to prepare.'

Proper women found time to cook, or support in handling proper cooking. Cutting or relying on kin networks were, as seen, some of the strategies through which women complied with the obligation to provide good food for the family while maintaining paid jobs or personal interests outside the household. While strategically organising and/or delegating, choosing what mattered in their day, my Tunisian informants hence contributed to affirming different understandings of womanhood in contemporary Tunisia. My observations around 'the female portion' (Naguib 2015) below, sparked by my interlocutors' reflections on their everyday workload, will show how ideals of womanhood in contemporary Tunisia are contested social constructions - ideational sites where modernist claims are entangled with contingent

political and economic constraints, situated social belonging, and people's past experiences.

Several authors have emphasised the social dimensions of personhood across North African and Middle Eastern societies, highlighting the fluid and situational character of such constructions, which at times attune selfhood to cultural expectations, and at times bargain with it (Geertz 1979; Hammoudi 1997; Rosen 1984). Joseph's findings remain central to my examination, as her work concerning the female subject in Lebanon (Joseph 1994, 1999, 2005) highlights the processuality of becoming, linked to experiential transformation of being in time. Punctuated by paradoxes and ambiguities, selves were simultaneously sculpted by cultural norms and everyday life events and practices. This especially speaks to my observations: on the one hand, in contemporary Tunisia, 'connectivity' – a central psychosocial dynamic – contributed significantly to shaping permeable selves 'woven with the ones of significant others' (Joseph 2005:84) within the patriarchal family.[43] In such a context, the cultural sense of responsibility and reciprocity informing relationships among family members succeeded (with women's active contribution) in reproducing the patriarchal family, in which the family is valued above the person. Women's attunement towards the family, especially towards the desires of male and senior family members, was in fact reproduced through lifelong experiential pedagogies. On the other hand, my informants' enactment of such values was highly negotiated, and at times contested (Maffi 2017; Moghadam 2005).

> 'I like them', commented Jasmine, while we sorted the leftovers from a winter dinner. 'They are poor, but they are proud, they stand up for themselves without complaining. And you know, Sara, most people in Zaghouan are like them. They are the average Zaghouanian family'. Jasmine's rather straightforward remark was directed at Khāltī Khadija's family. Her comment surprised me. They had quarrelled during dinner, she and Monia, one of the older women. They could not agree on what constituted the appropriate behaviour for a good mother. While finishing up the dinner preparations in the kitchen, I overheard the tone of the conversation heating up in the living room. Sparked by the routine questions they had exchanged about their family belonging, trying to find common threads that connected the respective families (extended

[43] While equality for 'all citizens as independent individuals' (Maffi 2017:63)is granted in the new constitution (2014), the same document also recognises 'the family as basic unit of society', bringing back the centrality of the kin group in determining each member's positions and their rights/duties within it. The family thus often constitutes 'symbolically, if not juridically and socially' (Maffi 2017:63) the site of production of different positioned selves.

> family, common friends, or business activities), Monia, Khāltī Khadija's sister, asked Jasmine what she did with her time. 'I'm a mother of two, that's enough, I think,' she stated. Caught in one of her blunt self-defensive statements, Jasmine continued to a rant about how women who are at home care better for their children and husbands. 'Look at Sara, for example,' she exclaimed. 'She ends up being so stressed out trying to do it all! She only has time for making baby food, she is feeding her husband baby food!' She continued by saying that she would never leave the house to go in search of work, especially if that meant working under someone else's direction.

Unpacking Jasmine's ideas about womanhood, different modernist ideals can be seen, demonstrated through her claims of her social position as a middle-class woman living a life free from worries or stress (Freeman 2012), mingled with her more conservative stances on conjugal relationships, informed by the principle of complementarity between husband and wife. As seen in the introduction, inserted within modern-oriented historical trajectories[44] of the country during post-independence was an attempt to normalise the elite discourse on '*la femme tunisienne*' (the ideal 'Tunisian woman') as educated, independent, middle class, and liberal. Jasmine's values-assemblage[45] and her overall experience as a woman and mother was quite emblematic of how modern-shaped ideologies revolving around representations of desirable femininities (middle-class, secular, educated, professional, supported by a progressive family code) co-existed with a 'patriarchal society founded on male privileges' (Debuysere 2016:212). In Tunisia, in fact, the progressive nature of state family law since the early years of national liberation and new educational opportunities (Moghadam 2005), while granting undeniable rights which women exercised in their favour and enabling social mobility aspirations, have led to less change in socio-cultural expectations about gender roles (Debuysere 2016; Moghadam 2005, 2017). In continuity within my own ethnographic findings and highlighting the opportunistic/convenient entanglement among the modernist valued autonomy of the individual and the patriarchal view of woman as an indispensable caregiver, the World Values surveys from 2010-2014 found that 69% of Tunisian women (and 78% of men) believed that 'if a mother works for pay her children will

[44] Accompanied by a progressive Personal Status Code and its subsequent reforms (1956, 1957, 1960), the discourse created around this hegemonic and ambiguous view of femininity has been re-constructed over the years, serving the struggles sustained by the Tunisian elites for power in different ways.

[45] Further, Jasmine's assertion of modernist middle-class belonging also highlighted the contempt towards people working under somebody else's direction, and as such factory jobs and manual work are looked down on as low-status occupations by the Tunisian elites.

suffer'. At the same time, 62% of women (and 50% of men) agreed that 'having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person' (Ben Hafaiedh 2013; Moghadam 2017). As shown in my findings and the statistics above, what has been created as a hegemonic ideal of femininity in Tunisia

> '…is an essentialist, metaphysical and above all problematic character. In fact, there has never been made a reference to the different conditions between urban and rural women, wealthy and poor women, educated and illiterate women...they are all lumped together under the same generic label… [epitomised by the] … *Bourguibist femme Tunisienne*' (Marzouki 1993:213–14).

Historically, increasing economic constraints delimited the different opportunities available to social actors from different walks of life. The end of the oil boom in the 1970s signalled the end of state intervention for many of the North African and Middle East economies as states including Tunisia turning toward liberalisation and privatisation policies. This lead to a process of the 'forced' entrance of women into the workforce (partially driven by a need for cheap unskilled labour), especially among lower middle-class and working-class families strangled by male unemployment or the reduced wages that followed austerity measures. Social and regional inequalities (especially in peripheral areas which lack infrastructure and strong education systems), an unequal inheritance law, and insufficient support structures for working mothers have hence contributed to affecting women's opportunities to join the workforce.[46] While for middle-class women, 'education, connections and family wealth' (Moghadam 2005) provide important support and a starting point to access jobs in the civil service or private businesses,[47] for working-class women[48] the situation remains dire, as they struggle with temporary contracts,

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[46] Despite figures that appear to show Tunisia as impressive in terms of female contribution to the total workforce – progressing from 8% in 1956 to 29% in 1975, and then again to 34% in 1984 (only non-agricultural activities were counted) - through a careful analysis, it is evident how the entrance of females into the workforce suffered from weak economic performance and a general high unemployment rate, which has kept the unemployment rate high for women (between 20% and 25%) across the whole North African region (Moghadam 2005).

[47] According to the ILO, only 24% of Tunisia's female labour force is occupied in 'professional fields', underlying a possible correlation with middle-class belonging. For the lower-middle class family, a woman's work was quite necessary, for the upper strata of the middle classes work was rather a choice, displaying modern identities and class belonging.

[48] Working-class women's income was often used to cover a family's basic necessities, especially in uncertain economic times, with men's unemployment widespread across all ages. By contrast, the middle-class women I met revealed that they were able to retain their own income and allocate it to personal projects, while the man's role as the main provider for the family stood.

low wages and no benefits, and ‘informal’ work[49] (see Chapter 4 for discussion around the intersection of informal work and social belonging).

Figure 13: The quarrelling night

In Monia’s and Khāltī Khadija’s cases, their construction of desirable womanhood was especially sustained by their social-economic positions and different life experiences. Since their youth, they had both worked long hours at nearby factories, integrating that with baking bread for the neighbourhood corner shop or selling home-made jewellery, while raising their children. In response to Jasmine’s comments, Monia snapped: ‘Work is good for a mother. It keeps her brain open to what is happening outside, and this benefits the whole family. She has more on her shoulders for sure, but it is for the best’. Like Khāltī Monia and Khāltī Khadija’s life experiences, by juggling cooking, their own interests, ‘kin-work’ (Papanek 1979), paid work, and childcare, many of my lower income informants in Zaghouan contributed to constructing a specific ideal/view on womanhood. Certainly, the level of weariness felt by some of the women I met, as they juggled familial obligations with paid work and, at times, some side-projects, indeed revealed the burdensome character of the entanglement between modernist ideals and the patriarchal-oriented society (Debuysere 2016; Moghadam 2005, 2017).

[49] More recent statistics from 2012 attest that 25% of Tunisian women participate in the workforce, compared to 17% for Algeria, 28% for Morocco, and 19% for Egypt. These low rates of employment are hence revealing of the high rate of female workers occupied in the ‘informal’ sector (tutoring, catering and homemade food, beauty services, handicrafts, house cleaning, etc.). In 2005, this made up 35% of the entire urban workforce. This is despite the dire disadvantages that this form of work precludes: pay is well below the minimum wage, and posts are not inclusive of social insurance, retirement schemes, or support for maternity leave (Moghadam 2017).

Despite the differences in both contexts, as Abu-Lughod reminds us, modernising ideologies are differently 'transmutated, widely disseminated, and grounded in people's lives through the socio-transformations of the last century' (Abu-Lughod 1998:244). Khāltī Monia and Jasmine's disagreement on the ideal situation for a mother and woman in reference to family duties instead shows how the entanglement of their life experiences with specific values' configurations are productive of different desirable femininities. My interlocutors' everyday interactions and their life choices showed the contested construction of what a woman is (or ought to be) in contemporary Tunisia, indexing the nature of a very conflict-ridden, stratified society.

2.2. Food consumption, class and propriety

My participation in the food social lives of my interlocutors also pointed to how highly stratified their society was. Food preparation itself – the way food was sourced, cooked, and presented – as well as rituals around it were quite revealing in this sense.

As described above, especially among my low-income informants, food preparations were arranged differently to fit demanding weekday schedules. As such, daily cooking did not always translate into elaborate dishes, as women weighed out the everyday constraints governing their decisions: their budget for the month, what food they already had at home, their own time constraints and their mood, the support from extended family. Nevertheless, the labour of care put into food preparation early in the morning or late in the evening marked the permanence of specific values: sharing generously with family and neighbours. Whenever someone appeared at the house during mealtimes, a plate or a spoon would be added. Tea, coffee, biscuits, and dates were also always available to honour an unexpected guest.

Food preparation tempos differed a little for women who, not pressured by the economic situation of their family, looked after their household as their central responsibility and site for self-identification. Some of the middle-class women I worked with enjoyed a more relaxed schedule around food preparation, and were able to value commensality by scheduling formal lunch or dinner invitations for friends or family members, marking a specific assertion of social class and identity (Crawford, Newcomb, and Dwyer 2013; Newcomb 2009).

Figure 14: Lunch at Jasmine's

Also, how dishes were presented were at times quite telling of people's social belonging. For instance, while the consumption of couscous[50] marked a common belonging across different socio-economic milieus, as most families celebrated Friday lunch with fish- or meat-based couscous, a different way of serving marked households' different entanglements with class or status display. Jasmine and some of the other middle-class families I was invited to dine with served couscous in individual dishes, paying attention to the presentation of each serving, including an abundant display of meat and vegetables. A more indulgent household budget allowed Jasmine to exhibit her family's generosity through meals. At the same time, this kind of presentation marked an attitude to *consume and display* food that stepped away from the more customary invitation to regulate one's appetite and show restraint while eating (Jansen 1997). More often, among working-class or conservative families, a new guest would be invited to join the meal by being provided with a spoon to take their share from the common couscous bowls. At times, an extra piece of meat would be moved in front of the new visitor for them to eat.

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[50] Rooted in the nomadic *Amazigh* traditions, and light and durable enough to travel across the Levant, the materiality of couscous exemplifies the composite multiplicity of North African societies. The small balls are assembled into a collective unit and amalgamated with different sauces and flavours to form infinite variations, each of them requiring unique ingredients and preparation procedures, according to regional specialties (Durmelat 2019).

Figure 15: Eating couscous from the same bowl

Sharing the ductile materiality of couscous from common bowls was a central experience that inferred the values constructing a proper community of eaters (Graf 2016b): commensality, frugality, and self-restraint.

'How many vegetables should I put in?' I asked Khāltī Khadija while she helped me to prepare couscous with octopus to celebrate my father-in-law's visit. '*shwayya shwayya mūsh barsha barsha'* (just a little, not a lot)', she responded, hinting at the *quffa* (basket) packed with vegetables I had just bought. 'You just need a little bit of everything'. She also shook her head again when she opened the bag carrying the octopus, selecting only two of the smaller ones and suggesting that the remainder be frozen for later use.

Figure 16: Only a little bit of everything!

In sharing many meals with low-income families, over time I started to notice how this moderate attitude towards eating during both ritual and festive events built

upon a parsimonious everyday approach to food consumption. Earlier in my fieldwork, I had noticed how the leading cook would take the tiniest bites of food. I thought this was because, occupied with serving others, she did not have time to feed herself properly. Later on, I began to realise that even men, especially in the countryside, would often consume their portions hastily, and then remove themselves from the table or step outside to smoke. Jansen interprets similar behaviours in the Jordanian community, where self-restraint relates not only to material conditions, but also generosity towards others:

> 'Abstinence from food was and is often inevitable under poor economic or ecological circumstances. This predicament, however, can be given a positive spin when abstinence is a virtue and an effect of willpower. Only strong characters can refuse food or drink when they are hungry or thirsty'(Jansen 1997:94).

Similarly, Ramadan etiquette was also quite stringent for my low-income informants both in town and in the countryside, seeming to be built into the above-mentioned everyday frugal approach to food: a constant exercise toward building a resistant and virtuous spirit, especially among the elderly. Both restraining from gulping down food in large quantities and the sequence of dishes one should follow while breaking the fast helped to reinforce moderate attitudes toward food consumption: the *bsīsa* drink and dates would replenish the lack of liquid and sugar in the body, a small bowl of soup with cereals would slowly fill the stomach, and then a small portion of a main course should conclude the meal. Indulgence would damage both the body and the spirit, and people who had difficulty accustoming themselves to such self-restraint – stuffing their plates for *ʾifṭār* (fast breaking meal) – would be loudly teased.

Such values, however, were not uncontested. Especially in the more affluent cities on the coast, new trends during Ramadan saw restaurants offering lavish buffets for *ʾifṭār*. While this form of feasting was shared by a few of the middle-upper class Zaghouanian households I met as a way to assert social status,[51] it was also socially

[51] Another food ritual through which class became particularly evident was the *mūlid* celebration (the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's birth). The meaning of the preparation of *ʿaṣīdat,* a traditional porridge of water and sorghum flour topped with butter and honey or sugar, claimed its origins as a frugal breakfast such the one Halima, the mother of the Prophet, ate before giving birth. Prepared in memory of the poverty in which the Prophet was born and as a sign of belonging to the Muslim community where modesty is a virtue, the current recipe is a much-developed version of the original one. The current preparation of the *ʿaṣīdat* for *mūlid* includes Aleppo pine nuts

criticised. Even slaughtering livestock for ritual events could be condemned as an act of excessive self-indulgence, as Kadri commented during a trip we took together: 'Many families cannot even afford to buy a lamb for *'ʿId al-ʾaḍḥa* (the Feast of Sacrifice that celebrates the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca). But others will indulge in slaughtering for any event. They do it to show off, so it loses its value'. A few months later, I witnessed what Kadri had described when an informant of mine, during a communal car ride, was asked where she bought the lamb for Eid. Unable to afford a full lamb, she simply replied with: '*Al-ḥamdūllah (thank God)*, my son and daughter are healthy, and we are together'. Silence descended in the car as we rode home together. Later, I discovered that they had been gifted a lamb by my informant's maternal uncle, who lived in Tunis. Hence, although festive days were celebrated with meals that would distinguish the ritual from the everyday (Campo and Campo 2015; Sutton 2001), among my low-income informants food preparation for ritual and festive celebrations was not excessively sumptuous.[52] Good food rather spoke of the central importance of relations sewn through commensality and of the valued labour of care put into preparing fresh, tasty, and healthy, but not lavish, food. Further, the prevalent frugality expressed through food among the majority of town dwellers (low-income families) suggested a wider attitude towards appetite and life in general

Ḥishma (modesty) was a value that permeated many aspects of life, and was embodied in the capacity to control oneself: not showing off or boasting about one's success in business or wealth, eating moderately once invited, avoiding attracting the attention of others, and in general maintaining a good reputation. Jasmine's sometimes boastful remarks about her family's wealth and means was the subject of sour gossip by Khāltī Khadija's daughters, and I was warned many times of her lack of modesty and sincerity of intentions, and her improper behaviour. She became their

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(*ʿaṣīdat al-zgūgū)*. First discovered as edible and hence collected by shepherds and mountain communities to feed themselves in times of food scarcity, they are currently a coveted and expensive foodstuff. These practices, spread throughout the nation, became a special assertion of the Tunisian bourgeoisie. As a result, in the days prior to the festivity, the price of these nuts would increase by 10 times or more, to the point that many of my lower-income informants, or farmers who lived near the mountains where the nuts were grown, could not afford them.

[52] Aside from the two largest festivals – *ʿid al-ʾaḍḥa*, which centred around the slaughter of livestock, and *'Id al-Fitr,* the fast-breaking feast marked by an abundance of baked sweets used for the exchange of gifts – other festivities were much more modest in their consumption. Usually, an extra appetizer and an assortment of sweets were simply added to the main dish, marking the specific festivity. *Rās al-ʿam* (the beginning of Islamic year) instead centered around a special couscous using the left shoulder of the ram sacrificed during *'Id al-Adha* and a green stew made from the dried leaves of *mlūkhiyya* (Jews' mallow) – the colour representing prosperity. Of course, as in the case of the *ʿaṣīdat al-zgūgū*, at times specific widespread food rituals around life-cycle events and religious occasions, while reaffirming existential memories and present identities, also marked specific assertions around class and status.

favourite target of criticism whenever I recounted something we had done together, inevitably something to be criticised was found in her behaviour. '*Al-ʿarḍ ma yitshrāsh bi-l-flūs* - 'an honourable self (reputation) cannot be bought with money' (Abu-Zahra 1974:123) - seemed to be a shared moral tenet in town, at least among my low-income informants and the acquaintances I met through them. Moral personhood, or '*'ard'*[53] (Abu-Zahra 1974), also gained through one's accomplishments in life and position in society (*qdar*[54]), hence represented a day-to-day evaluative tool for judging the behaviours of neighbours and friends. Friendship itself was built on a giving-asking relationship that should be undertaken in discreetly, maintaining self-respect in the transaction and without boasting of one's good doing (Abu-Zahra 1974). Thus, a person's honourability and good reputation *('ard)* was built on modest and proper behaviour.

Although observed through everyday practices around food consumption and provisioning, modesty and thriftiness constituted important markers of moral orientations in day-to-day sociality and propriety, but these also competed with modern-driven desires for leisure and food consumption outside the household. Younger people in particular enjoyed having coffee or tea in the new public spaces equipped to host families or couples. Khāltī Khadija's daughters often asked me, '*nḥawsū mʿa bʿaḍhnā*? (let's go out later?)' when we crossed paths in the neighbourhood.

While this would be an occasion to dress up and take the children 'out', mostly it was about chatting while enjoying and being part of (including being seen in) a social landscape different from one's household. It was about the display of leisure. Jasmine disapproved of this habit, as she believed that proper women should meet in someone's house for coffee and tea, and they should not indulge in displaying themselves in public more than necessary. Here it becomes clear how values of modesty and thriftiness as a marker of social belonging were also always situational, negotiated in the everyday, and differently entangled with people's aspirations for modernity.

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[53] This word derives from the verb 'to expose'. *ʿArḍ* as a noun indexes all that is exposed to others, inclusive of one's moral conduct, personality, and achievements in life (status).
[54] The word *qdar* means the respect that is granted to every human being. However, *qdar* also refers to a person's status or social positioning in their community, which entitles the person to receive adequate respect.

Figure 17: Going to the *hammam* (Turkish bath) and getting *harkous* (hand tattoos) with Khāltī Khadija's daughters

3. Conclusion

Months of participation in the social life of food among Zaghouanian households shaped this chapter's reflections on feeding and nurturing as a primary performative act. At the same time, it observed food preparation and consumption practices as markers of social belonging and day-to-day propriety.

The chapter discussed how, through caring about food preparation, my women informants contributed to defining the contours of what counts as family in contemporary Tunisia – the primary site where logics of mutual help among kin were exercised. While I observed food preparation as a central facet of my female interlocutors' nurturing work, I also noted that my informants' care for their family's wellbeing through food preparation was not the only site of self-identification. For most of my female interlocutors, a proper Zaghouanian mother managed to combine work outside the household or her own interests with maintaining the importance of her role in nurturing the family. Juggling nurturing work with paid employment and personal interests often increased the workload of women (which was re-distributed among female kin). This constituted a demonstration of how modernist aspirations and ideals, mingled with historically sedimented cultural norms and people's experiences, contributed to recreating plural and contested meanings of what it means to be a 'proper' woman and mother in contemporary Tunisia. Contingent constructions of different ideals of womanhood were hence revealed by my female

interlocutors' reflections and by their everyday attempts to balance life's hurdles, living well while caring for themselves and their families.

I also discussed how everyday practices around food preparation and consumption were often markers of social belonging: how people ate together and what they decided to consume and where was indexical of their (intentional or not) displaying of class, and negotiations concerning what constituted proper behaviour. Although a certain prevalence toward self-restraint and frugality around food consumption and display was widespread among my low-income interlocutors in town, this attitude also represented a general marker of morality and proper day-to-day behaviour, and at times such values conflicted with modernist yearnings for the consumption of ready-to-go food and a desire for leisure outside of the household.

The next chapter observes similar entanglements, emerging from my informants' reflections around food sourcing and preparation as practices in which tensions between continuity with the values of the past and a desire for social change are especially manifested.

Chapter 2: Normal, good food: food sourcing and preparation as processes of traditionalisation in between continuity and change

The previous chapter showed how food consumption and the preparation of family meals were relevant matters in my interlocutors' lives. These practices demonstrated the solidity of long-lasting values such as frugality, taste, and - most importantly - sharing with people one cared for (family, neighbours, colleagues, and friends). One of my closest informants, a young woman called Ola, emphasised this to me while she was telling me about a recent conversation with her then-boyfriend:

> 'It was the time we were talking about our families, when he asked what we usually eat, and I answered '*mḥammṣa* (a vegetable soup with a grain slightly thicker than couscous). Later on, he confessed that he started liking me right then, since I didn't brag about some fashionable food such as pizza or something like that, and I wasn't afraid to tell him how simple we eat most of the time.'

Mḥammṣa belongs to the category of pastas vernacularly referred to as '*maqrūna kadhdhāba* (pasta that tells lies), a dish that does not contain meat or chicken, and which deceives your belly by filling it quickly. The '*maqrūna kadhdhāba'* story revealed what a young woman such as Ola and her boyfriend aspired to be, and what kind of society they wanted to live in, indexing an idea of dignified but proper food that was simple but adequate (present on the table), and contributing to shaping discourses around social and material change in Tunisia more broadly. Like for the Zaghouanian women cooks finding ways to juggle food preparations with work, recreating and challenging hegemonic ideas of what it means to be a woman and a mother in contemporary Tunisia, for this young couple modesty was valued as desirable in terms of personhood.

This chapter will continue to discuss my interlocutors' engagements with everyday food preparation and sourcing as practices through which the tensions between values of the past and societal change were manifested. The material below will hence continue the conversation from the previous chapter by detailing how multiple orientations toward 'modernity' and 'tradition' surrounding food preparation

and provisioning were expressed by women's everyday situated choices and vis-à-vis taste preference, time constraints, economic availability, and also their own daily mood. Most of my young informants' choices concerning food preparation for their families, signalling women's situated processes of self-identification as versatile cooks, also contributed to the re-making of Tunisian culinary traditions in the everyday, constructing good food as the *māklat al-ʿāda* (day-to-day normal food): fresh and home-processed.

My interlocutors' daily choices regarding sourcing, despite manifesting their enmeshment with societal change, also revealed 'new continuities' with the values of the past. Moving to observing households' provisioning practices, the chapter will then reflect on vernacularly conceived food standards, indexed in Tunisian Arabic by the terms *dyārī* and *ʿarbī,* discursively constructed by distinguishing quality food products through their 'locality' (*ʿarbī*) or through acknowledging the cultural proximity of food processing practices (*dyārī*). Whilst demonstrating a transition from almost exclusively home-produced food to sourcing newly available industrial food beginning in the 1970, both the terms were discursively employed to criticise such a transition, contrasting proper good food – different in taste, smell, and nutritional value – with food coming from afar, that may be culturally foreign, and hence risky to consume. I also argue that although *ʿarbī* and *dyārī* products were indexical of an attachment to local identities and were markers of *authentic food,* in their everyday provisioning practices women did not rely on those markers as absolute standards of food quality, but rather sourced food also according to their time, situated taste-knowledge, and budgetary constraints.

Finally, while it was possible to note a widespread preference for ingredients processed at home, *dyārī* and especially *ʿarbī* food could also turn into coveted goods for people who could afford to pay for them. Inserted into a process of food heritagisation manifesting at different scales (nationally but also internationally), homemade and indigenous products from the region could potentially turn into commodities generating considerable economic value, especially when marketed in appropriate venues (food fairs, fashionable organic shops in the capital, an online website). While pastry workshops and food stores displaying those products flourished in more modest venues in town, some vendors also indulged in manipulating such values concerning authenticity in their favour.

1. Food traditions in the re-making: the everyday process of food traditionalisation of Tunisian cuisine

‘Cooking is the co-production of a cook, food and the immediate material and social environment. This co-production is necessarily temporal and attuned to material change’ (Graf 2016b). As seen in the previous chapter, shifting societal trajectories - such as women’s engagement in higher education or in multiple (work) commitments outside their household - were also reflected in everyday food practice choices, indexing local negotiations and the influence of national or global discourses. By looking at how some of my informants juggled everyday food choices through adapting recipes and creolising their food repertoire, this section addresses how Zaghouanian women thought of their own food making as a process of mirroring an ever-evolving present, and their own positioning in it.

Cuisine can be thought of as a pattern of common practices ‘driving its meaning from locality’- from the community of people who prepare and eat similar foods, organised through a set of shared knowledge, and through specific production and distribution systems (Graf 2016b; Mintz 1996). Such shared knowledge in Tunisia was especially marked by regional belonging of cooks and, in a sensuous way, by their inhabiting different social worlds (a neighbourhood, a market, a courtyard, a kitchen) from an early age. Prepared accordingly to ‘thriftiness’ and ‘health’, much of my lower-income informants’ food repertoire rotated around the many variations of the two categories of traditional Tunisian food: food *bi-l-mgharfa* (eaten with the spoon and accompanied by short-cut pasta varieties) and food *bi-l-khubz* (eaten with bread because it is sauce-based). Cereals, the main staple food for Tunisian families, were in fact an ever-present component of a meal.

‘*Shniyya al-mākla al-taqlīdiyya?’* (What is this traditional food?) ‘*Hadhī al-ḥayāt al-tūnsiyya’* (That’s just Tunisian life). Nadia provocatively cut off her sister Amira while the three of us were talking about Tunisian cuisine. As Amira started to answer my question about what constituted traditional food (and interpreting my broken Tunisian), Amira began to list a series of dishes that were ‘*taqlīdī’* (traditional), detailing some traditional food processing methods and their origins, when Nadia interrupted her. Conveying an idea of tradition not as an ‘object fixed in history but as a part of process of identity formation’ (Beyer and Finke 2019:31), and stressing that women like her negotiated food choices in the present, Nadia engaged

in an interpretative commentary of what constitutes food tradition. In their discussion of practices of traditionalisation in Central Asia, Beyer and Finke highlighted how, in different places, the central character of processes of traditionalisation can be identified in the communal recognition of practices or goods. Their inclusion within what constitutes the domain of tradition thus happens through a discussion leading to the group's endorsement (2019). Following their intuition - and observing how the process of negotiation becomes an important site of analysis in itself, indexical of how actors discuss and claim traditions, their stake in it, and how they make sense of continuity and change - Khāltī Khadija's house becomes an interesting site where what constitutes food tradition came to be discussed.

For her middle daughter, Nadia, traditional food was a living reality that was moulded according to everyday constraints. Far from being an imitation (*taqlīd*) of the past, the idea of everyday food was expressed through '*māklat al-ʿāda* (the normal food), or literally 'the food one returns to'. Nadia's words expressed how such a return to normal, good food happened in her cooking routine, something that I also observed happening many times at her mother's house when they cooked together. I later on understood that one of my linguistic errors had in fact sparked an interesting reflection on how food traditions were 'normalised' in the everyday as a result of constant adaptation. The Tunisian adjective I used, *taqlīd*, from the standard Arabic *qallid / yqallid* (to imitate), refers not to food, but rather to customs that one can locate in the past and that have little connection to everyday practices (i.e. to imitate the ancestors).[55] The word *ʿādāt (habits)* instead highlights the process of adhering to a past presented as 'age-old and long established' (Beyer and Finke 2019:313) through rendering tradition relevant to people in the present, and normalised through constant adaptation. More than a linguistic remark, though, and rather spurred by a reflection on her own food choices, Nadia added: 'I cook everything. One day I cook some modern stuff, the next day I feel uninspired and just put a pot on the stove and move on. Some other days I have time, and decide to treat my family to something more complex, maybe I have seen a new dish on Facebook, and I will try it.' Not only is cooking not a passive work of the *imitation of old traditions*, but it is rather a 'guided rediscovery' (Ingold 2011:115) as the cook adapts her sedimented knowledge

[55] One example is *ḥwāyij taqlīdiyya* – traditional clothes, worn almost exclusively during religious ceremonies or life-cycle celebratory events. The Tunisian state commemorates the tradition by institutionalising a *ḥwāyij taqlīdiyya* day, celebrated especially by children wearing traditional clothes at school parties.

to present constraints and opportunities (Barth 2002). As noted by Ingold, 'skills are not transmitted from generation to generation but are regrown in each, incorporated into the modus operandi of the developing human organism through training and experience in the performance of particular tasks' (Ingold 2011:5).

Figure 18: Nadia's food preparation for her son's birthday party

Figure 19: Nadia and Khāltī Khadija making traditional cookies

Attempting to create a list of traditional ingredients or dishes ascribed to a distinct past did not make sense in Nadia's experience, as her cooking choices mixed and matched between childhood experiences, cooking shows, exchanges with a neighbour, and her family's preferences. As Sutton argues, 'one doesn't cook by stopping what one is doing, rather one continues' (Sutton 2014:183): innovative ideas or values can be thought of 'in relation to habits, desires and (often unconscious) traditions' (Sutton 2014:41). Indeed, Nadia would consciously pick which traditional recipes she needed to practice, and which others she preferred to forget. After the *Al-ʿīd al-kbīr* holiday spent at her in-law's, for example, Nadia brought the head of the

ram to her mother's house to practice preparing a dish that she had experienced and engaged with in the past, but felt that she could not handle by herself. On the other hand, she refused to eat *gaddīd*[56] (sun-dried meat from the back of the lamb) and hence had not learned how to process it. As described by Sutton (Sutton 2014), 'existential memory works by linking in the present what to remember and what to forget'. Through this process of forgetting and remembering, women like Nadia and Amira actively engaged with defining and redefining *'māklat al-ʿāda'* in a process of the traditionalisation of Tunisian cuisine (Beyer and Finke 2019).

In addition, describing this process of constant adaptation of her cooking, Nadia – an energetic and quick-tempered young woman in her early thirties, staying at home with two children and bearing a third one at that time – identified herself among that eclectic category of Tunisian women who master tradition and at the same time engage in 'modernity'. In this context, modernity implies a 'time orientation (…) and entailing several different competing master narratives (…) and different cultural contextualization of the past-future contrast' (Therborn 2003:293). Here, re-considering identity as an analytic tool, as 'a category of practice and a category of analysis' made up of 'multiplicity, difference and intersectionality' (Sökefeld 2001:538), allows me to grasp both social actors' essentialist implications and their and/or social theorists' (de)constructivist arguments. Like her sister Amira, an established civil engineer who described cooking as a 'necessary chore' -thus marking her employment instead as an important site of self-identification - Nadia also asserted her own positioning (and vis-à-vis modernity) through her food practices. Her self-identification process highlights the coexistence of porous femininities (see Chapter 1), which emerge as multiple and not exclusive. Despite time constraints, many of the young women I worked with showed a preference for incorporating some novel food into everyday cooking – a cake, a pasta dish, a new soup recipe. Many women on their way home from the market or work stopped in at Leila's shop, which sold a mixture of handmade food and indigenous cereals, asking: 'Leila, what are you making for lunch? give me an idea'. Sitting inside her food shop which was equipped with a small gas stove, she was always working on a food project while waiting for customers: preserving artichokes and fresh tuna in oil, baking sweets, cooking *shurba* (soup) with the cereals she sold. As such, neighbours and clients would tap into her

[56] A type of dried meat stock that can be added to vegetable dishes, adding the taste of meat.

knowledge to get new ideas. She told me how she was adapting different cereals to what traditional recipes called for so as to vary the nutritional content, and she baked different kinds of bread by mixing different flours for the same reasons.

Revealing similar dynamics to what I describe above, different families in town negotiated what to remember and what to forget in terms of food traditions. Most of the Tunisian recipes that had been passed down from an earlier generation were adapted to current times: ingredients such as *sman* (clarified butter) were no longer added to staple food preparations such as rice or pasta. Good quality *sman* was difficult to source in town, and over time people lost their preference for it, especially among the youth. Instead, its now-acknowledged 'heavy taste' was entangled with arguments relating to what counts as 'good' in modern times, referring to better diets, calorie counts, fat contents, etc.

Time constraints among working mothers and convenience were some of the possible reasons for recipe transformations, such as choosing to use couscous that could be quickly steamed, shop-bought bread instead of homemade, and prepared cakes instead of more time-intensive traditional biscuits. Such food alterations were not socially criticised, but on the contrary were considered necessary, almost normalised adjustments to new life priorities. The freshness, taste, and healthiness of homemade meals were instead upheld as essential facets of what was considered proper food. As also highlighted in the previous chapter, working mothers would often attend to food preparation prior to leaving the house, dedicating extra time to it in the evening or early in the morning. Only purchasing street food for the family was looked down on. Cafés and local shops served sandwiches and omelettes, but in town small restaurants catering traditional Tunisian dishes were mostly frequented by male workers and bachelors in between work shifts. Eating out as a family was rather expensive for most lower-income households, and it was still a fairly new trend in town. It faced hostility especially from the older generation of cooks, who contrasted *māklat al-ʿāda* (normal, good food) with *māklat al-shāraʿ*or *el māklat taww* (street food or 'food of now'), which were disregarded as *khāyib* or bad food (not freshly prepared, and potentially unsafe because ingredients might have been not sourced properly). Middle-class families from the town would venture to eat out on special occasions in nearby coastal cities, but more as a one-time occurrence than a habit.

The return to the normal good food was hence built, adapted to current times, at the 'confluence of continuity and change', as ways 'to improve or hone one's ever-

growing knowledge, rather than to replace ways of knowing' (Graf 2016b:225) or in other words, 'a particular type of repetition without repetition' (Portisch 2010:S75). The dynamicity of the process highlights the never-ending movement intrinsic in the learning experience, and the constant adjustment of cooking practices to different socio-economic constraints and values negotiation, contributing to constructing what constitutes good food at a given moment in time, while also constituting sites for self-identification. As Mostowlansky (2017) argues, focusing on people's local projects in-the-making points to the processual character of modernity and people's interpretations, hierarchisations, and evaluations of its underlying projects.

As I describe below, many women in town invested in their food skills as Leila did, creating for themselves viable economic opportunities around the re-vitalisation of traditional food products for sale. Hence, in between continuity and change, it was possible to observe how the renewed interest in '*good, traditional'* ingredients was at times re-constituted into objects of material value. In this case, such enterprises acquired a new status, becoming attractive to young women with the means to develop a fashionable business. Especially for *bint ʿayla* (girls from good families) who were honouring a cook's aptitudes as a central trait of a Zaghouanian woman's identity, food businesses were a means that allowed them to earn some money to then reinvest into something else. When I asked a young woman in her early twenties (who was working at my neighbour's pastry workshop while finishing her higher education) about the process for making a fairly complex style of pastry, I was told that it was nothing special. In her eyes, such an ability was *ʿādī* (normal), a skill for a proper woman to have acquired at her age. Other young women were actively building on their cooking skills to raise money to open their own businesses or while they waited for a better job to materialise.

Summing up, a generalised attachment to normal (good) food (*māklat al-ʿāda*) in town – the normal one to which one returns in the everyday – was expressed by a vibrant ritual economy surrounding foodways, synchronising seasonality with everyday meal preparation or with religious festivities. Decision-making concerning cooking practices could not simply be rendered in terms of tradition or modernity: they reflected a deliberate balancing and evaluation of taste preferences, time, and economic availability (Graf 2016b; Sutton 2001, 2014). Even when a generational divide seemed to manifest through the different choices on what and how to cook - or in the aversion towards some food-related occupations - tradition and modernity were

not static and overarching ideas, but rather matters of perception, situated experiences, and knowledge (Graf 2016b). As means that substantiated worldviews, values around food making – quality and convenience, novelty and tradition, frugality and display, health and taste, autonomy and obligation, time efficiency and care – coexisted in tension with each other (Sutton 2014) and differently entangled with people's life projects. The next section will consider similar entanglements of the values around sourcing good quality food.

2. *ʿArbī* and *dyārī*: re-constructing quality standards through sourcing good food

> I sipped the coffee, pleasantly surprised by its taste, which reminded me of the Italian *caffé d'orzo* (barley coffee). As Khāltī Monia reached for a plastic container from high up, she inquired if I knew what I was drinking. 'We make our mixture at home', she said, showing me the contents of the container. 'We dry out orange peels and roast the chickpeas, then grind them all with spices and coffee beans'. Khāltī Khadija encouraged her sister to show me the other everyday ingredients stored under their marble counters, organised into categories: distilled flower waters,[57] spice mixtures, pulses, homemade pastas, preserved pickles. Khāltī Monia explained that she and Khāltī Khadija still processed most of the ingredients at home, the bulk of the work during the summer season when fresh foods can be easily dried for long-term preservation. 'In this way, we don't buy a lot from the supermarket, we spend little and we know what we are eating, but this is not common anymore. Women have children and they work outside as well, so they have less time. We still do this for our daughters, but who knows in the future.'

At Khāltī Khadija's house, as well as at the different households I visited, I often observed the different degrees of women's involvement in home food processing for the annual stocks in particular of cereals, some vegetables, and oil (*ʿūla*). At times constrained by the availability of space for such purposes, including the presence of a *bīt al-mūna* (a separate room in the household for food reserves) or rooftop balcony on which to dry food, only a few of the families I worked with in town would meticulously process most of the summer harvest at home according to what they described as the 'traditional way' of processing good food. As highlighted

[57] Popular flower waters in Tunisia are obtained through the distillation of geraniums (used for baking and in cosmetic products), orange flowers (to flavour coffee, and as a remedy for the digestive system, especially for colic in babies) and rosehip (a typical product of the Zaghouan region used in baking).

by Khāltī Monia, processing food at home was cheaper than running to the supermarket every day, and was also a guarantee of better nutritional value and taste. However, it also required time and knowledge, and many households resorted to 'purchase tradition' when they could. A wide selection of *dyārī* ingredients and *ʿarbī* products were available in some of the shops in town or could be ordered from women who processed and sold homemade food on demand. Many of my informants highlighted how the recent 'democratisation' of the internet and some state interventions have pushed Tunisians – and especially the urban population – to reconsider 'values of the past' in their food consumption habits, fostering a re-orientation toward *dyārī* ingredients and *ʿarbī* food. This was in contrast to the previous excitement around agro-industrial processed food beginning in the 1980s. In reality, during the years following the country's independence, 'modernist developmental narratives' – coupled with the liberalisation of the economy and its integration into a global food system – shaped many of the country's policies. Family planning, women's entrance into the workforce, and measures implemented to favour the country's urban and industrial development ended up affecting the food consumption attitudes and behaviours of Tunisian families, especially urban ones.

Figure 20: *Dyārī* and *ʿarbī* products

Contributing to the discursively constructing the tension between continuity and change in the food system,[58] *ʿarbī* and *dyārī* were built upon refashioned values underlying 'traditional food processing practices': health, freshness, cultural familiarity, and locality. Upholding tradition as a 'site of necessary engagement, as it aggregates people, motivates individual and collective action, informs policy, public debates, law, and representation (…)' (Beyer and Finke 2019:312), this section engages with the complex nature of *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* as evaluative standards for 'good food'.

In general, the pragmatic navigations of my women informants (as for example Khāltī Khadija's daughters in this chapter), scouting for quality products was mostly directed by their sedimented food knowledge. This was their way for 'accessing the world and of managing it (…), a significant part of the ecological link between a subject and its environment, meant both as the result of an active process of exploration, and the source of perceptually guided activity' (Grasseni 2004:46) by the need to be thrifty with their time and money.[59] Well aware of the ecological, economic, and political implications impinging on different food distribution networks, most of the women I worked with preferred food sourced from established networks of trust in town or family connections in the countryside, though other local spaces were also evaluated in terms of convenience and quality – the weekly open market, locally owned shops, supermarkets, pop-up farmer stalls on the streets, the wholesale retailer, and the itinerant wholesalers who cruised the town neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Supermarkets and wholesalers, for example, were preferred for cheap staples but not fresh produce or meats; the local mill was a trusted source of quality flours to make homemade bread. Whilst De Certeau argues that in shoppers' tactics 'the intellectual synthesis of these given elements takes the form … not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is 'seized' (1984:xix), in Zaghouan such daily practices were surely imbued within

[58] Such tension was evident in the passage from food self-provisioning practices (which relied on the extended family's agricultural land and labour), to food supply chains (inserted in global trade and ago-industrial food circuits).

[59] For both of *Khā*ltī Khadija's daughters, using money and time wisely while finding good quality food was important. As detailed in Chapter 1 and in the section above, being finished with food preparation allowed women to spend their time as they wanted. In Khāltī Khadija's daughters' case, Amira (working as part-time engineer) really enjoyed her working time and the space at her office, while Nadia, at that time pregnant with her third child, enjoyed spending time relaxing at her mother's house. Other women I met in the neighbourhood had multiple jobs (Farah in Chapter 1 directed a youth training centre and had a sewing workshop in her garage, some others volunteered at the local association for orphans, etc.)

'organized systems of meaning and values' that favoured locality and proximity of food ingredients (Reed 1996: 149). Like the Marrakesh shoppers that Graf (2016b) observed, across Tunisia too *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* informed people's ideas of good food and its categorisation in terms of quality. The former *dyārī* indicates the process of producing food/ingredients at the household scale,[60] while the latter *(ʿarbī*) '(…) literally means of the country…it denotes that which is local or home-bred in opposition to foreign or imported object or produce' (Ayeb and Saad 2009:139). This was especially based on the condition of proximity, where good food was produced locally and hence considered safe to eat, versus *suri* food produced afar, which was seen as risky and bad to consume as it was culturally foreign (see also Graf 2016b).

In Tunisia, *sūrī*, originally denoting someone or something coming from abroad,[61] can be glossed as foreign-imported or large-scale cultivated/processed food, and implies poorer quality regarding taste and nutrition. Indexing a long-term relation with early modernity and the gradual interconnection of world systems, (Liechty 2012), *dyārī /ʿarbī* and *sūrī* as vernacular idioms worked in Zaghouan to privilege a knowledgeable local against a less proximate (hence less intelligible) global. Commonly employed across the Middle East and North Africa through distinct regional terminologies (*baldī:rūmī* in Morocco, Palestine, and Yemen, *baldī : ʾifranjī* in Egypt), the pairing is also emotionally and symbolically charged (Meneley 2014). Across the region, *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* food*,* constructed in opposition to the cuisine of 'others', embodies attachment to national food traditions and its cuisine (Maclagan 1994; Yamani 1994; Zubaida 2000). This makes of proper food an implicit statement about how things 'ought to be done properly', and makes traditional food practices, a transmitted cultural model, into a marker of *authentic* regional identities (Beyer and Finke 2019).

Undeniably, in Zaghouan, a predominantly rural region, *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* food

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[60] How is it possible to operationalise the difference between *dyārī* and *ʿarbī*? In town, spices - the essential ingredients for preparing homemade food - were labeled as *dyārī* to underline that their processing labour (sieving, milling, mixing, etc.) was almost at the scale of the home, or an artisanal one. *ʿArbī* was mostly used to index a ready-to-buy product produced at home and then sold: clarified butter and fermented milk, coffee, thin bread, or the indigenous varieties of seed, meat, etc.

[61] *Suri* was an adjective first employed to refer to people coming from Syria employed by the Bey regency as translators from Arabic to French. Later, the meaning came to mean foreign products or people more widely. In practice, it is also commonly used to indicate an attitude toward modernity in the way people talk, dress, or act in comparison to a backward or more traditional way. '*Ummi sūrī* (my mother was a modern one), she didn't want to bother with cooking at all. My dad purchased food from markets or relied on my grandmother', Rim told me one day, explaining the contrast between her care for good food and her mother's generational attitude in the late 1970s.

never ceased to be considered superior in quality - and especially in taste. Home processing is currently highly valued for a few central items of the Tunisian diet, such as olive oil and spices. Olive oil production from the family-owned land and trees[62] is thought of as pure and uncontaminated, and all-around better tasting. During the olive harvest in late December, families would collect olives from their trees and, with extended family members or neighbours, gather similar varieties of olives to bring to the local oil press. The taste of new olive oil was a hot topic in every household, and the oil was often proudly offered to guests. Some other indigenous or homemade products also held special value as they were indispensable in certain life-cycle events and ritual occasions, while others were used as remedies for common ailments. I learned this from first-hand experience when, after giving birth, I was gifted a huge jar of *zrīr*: a homemade mix of *ʿarbī* honey, *sman* (clarified butter), and nuts to be eaten in small quantities before breakfast for post-natal strengthening of the body. *sman ʿarbī* was commonly listed as one of those cure-all foods (see also Maclagan 1994). Local knowledge of different aromatic and medicinal herbs from the mountains surrounding Zaghouan was also widespread: throughout the seasons, different plants were collected and distilled into aromatic waters, dried as spices, or turned into essential oils with curative properties. Relationships of trust between producers, relatives, and friends in the town and the nearby countryside were indeed cultivated to source quality foods, such as indigenous varieties *(ʿarbī*) of fruit, cereals, or poultry.

This section discussed the process of the construction of *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* as a standard of quality and an expression of local identities, in contrast to the 'food of the others' or other ways of growing, processing, and preparing food, including agro-industrial farming. Since in contemporary Tunisia consuming healthy, nutritious, and fresh meals was a central part of people's normal (good) life, the act of processing food traditionally or scouting for quality ingredients were practices that a 'skilled' proper woman (*mra ḥurra*) dedicated time to. Underlying the tension between continuity and change in the provisioning system of Tunisian families and discursively informing people's ideas of good food, these quality standards were not always expressed through my interlocutors' everyday sourcing or preparation practices. As emphasised in the next section, the suitability of food, amidst new and

[62] Most of the Zaghouanian households I met owned at least two or three olive trees in the surrounding countryside, or in their gardens.

old uncertainties, also relied on people's contingent and sedimented sensorial knowledge. People touched, looked at, and smelled food before purchasing, while also factoring in taste preferences, price, and time availability. Whilst showing these daily negotiations ethnographically, the material below then moves on to note how *dyārī* and *ʿarbī,* as unstable food standards, could be manipulated by vendors that indulged in display and offering 'authentic food traditions' to meet their trading interests.

3. Taste and authenticity: negotiating multiple interests around good food

My neighbour Rim, a woman in her fifties who owned a pastry workshop producing the *kaʿk al-warqa* (a Zaghouanian pastry valued for its unique taste across Tunisia) on the first floor of her house, highlighted how homemade food was indeed taste-situated: 'Everybody in town knows that *dyārī* is so much better. It's tastier and healthier. And women' hands are sophisticated, that's what makes the difference'. In her words, but also for many of my informants, the particular taste that homemade (*dyārī*) food is rooted in proper sourcing and labour-intensive processing, contrasting with industrially processed food. *ʿArbī* varieties of fruits, vegetables, cereals, and animal breeds, meanwhile, while often smaller in size and irregular in shape and colour when compared with the standardised *sūrī* varieties, were considered more flavourful.

Figure 21: A young woman working at Rim's pastry workshop

Nevertheless, as also noted by Graf (2016a) in practice neither *dyārī* / *ʿarbī* nor *sūrī* were valued as absolutely good or bad: the meaning was contingent on the

shopper or cook, their own evaluative skills, and their socioeconomic background. Observing how provisioning for the household also displayed socio-cultural belonging, the material below discusses the entanglements among people's ideas of good food. Purchasing decisions were hence not necessarily automatically made in favour of *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* (Graf 2016b) but rather factored in the sourcing or food preparation time, the consistency of taste, as well as costs. In fact, the 'tactics' (Certeau 1984:xix) employed by people I met through my fieldwork to determine food suitability amidst new and old uncertainties relied mostly on a sensory specialisation as one looks, feels, smells, and moves through familiar places (Graf 2016b; Grasseni 2004; Sutton 2001). This approach factors in seasonality, preference, and price. *ʿArbī* chickens for instance, despite being considered superior in taste, required connections in the countryside to source, and usually needed to be purchased alive[63] before being brought to a local butcher for cleaning. They also were generally more expensive than *sūrī* or *ḥākim* (government) chicken, thus several of my informants considered them not worth the multiple hassles. *Dyārī* couscous was not always favoured in everyday cooking either, as it took longer to steam, and its whole-wheat taste matched primarily with vegetable sauces. *ʿArbī frīk (*cracked green barley) was preferred by older generations of cooks but not by younger ones, who found its flavour too strong for regular soups. As Graf argues, 'standards are not confined to rigid or predefined patterns, but are actively constructed, cultivated and, most of all, sensed through the on-going process of being in the world' (Graf 2016b). Similarly, from my notes:

> A man in his fifties entered today and took time to sample the *bsīsa dyārī* (a chickpea flour, nut, and herb mixture). With the tips of his fingers, he pinched a bit and smelled the flour mixture, also inspecting it for colour. His face showed that he was not very satisfied. 'I'm not sure', he said, 'give me 100 grammes and if they like it (at home) I'll come back and buy more. To me it's missing spices.'

Despite trusting the homemade spice mixtures of the owner of the milling shop, this frequent customer took the time to closely inspect her *bsīsa* mixture when it appeared to smell off. In this case, scouting for good food relied upon evaluative skills built on a situated knowledge. Situated taste was indeed an essential for

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[63] I was told by one of my informants that the previous autumn (2019), a new line of *ʿarbī* chicken was introduced by the well-known Tunisian poultry franchising company *Al-mazraʿa*. Now it is also possible to buy what is labeled as *ʿarbī* chicken or turkey in supermarkets or corner shops where the brand is sold.

constructing good food. Rim used *ʿarbī* rosehip distilled water for producing her pastries marketed to local customers but also shipped to Tunisian customers living abroad. She explained:

> 'Women across Tunisia have tried to replicate the *kaʿk al-warqa* pastry without success because of the *nisrī* (rosehip water extract which gives the specific taste to the pastries). We (Zaghouanians) can only do it right (the extraction process). The flower grows here thanks to the water and air from our mountain, it cannot be found with the same *gout* (taste) or intensity anywhere else in Tunisia. So it is *ʿarbī*, *ʿarbī* from Zaghouan.'

As the taste of locality itself was constructed upon contingent situated knowledge, this aspect could also easily be deployed in one's interest. In this case, Rim's claim about the specific quality - the taste - of Zaghouan's *arabi* rosehip water recalls Trubek's work on *terroir* products in Europe, which are associated with a specific taste of the place: 'Places make unique tastes, and in turn such flavour characteristics and combinations give those places gastronomic renown' (Trubek 2008). As food authenticity was often constructed through labelling a product as *ʿarbī* or *dyārī,* as a marker of attachment between food and local identities, at times it was also manipulated into a tool to promote the economic value of certain products.

Simultaneously a linguistic and a material strategy – 'a bond between contemporary material good, a place and histories of those goods via linguistic means' (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014:55), the construction and the linguistic appropriation of *dyārī /ʿarbī* labels for marketing purposes can be inserted into the wider process of food heritagisation happening across Tunisia, and employed to generate 'cultural and economic value'(Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014:61). Indeed, observing how people negotiated *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* through their 'linguistic materiality' allows for an understanding of the dynamic entanglements of 'words and things' within emerging global economies and different people's interests within it (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014:52). Authenticity claims, as Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014) remind us, while blurring the line between object and commodities, index how the process of constructing standards is always ambiguously negotiated. In the Zaghouan region (but also across the whole country), this unstable construction was manifested in re-claiming quality (and hence taste) of one's own products, while mistrusting the products of others. Specific flavours, breeds, or varieties of indigenous food were also actively naturalised to support particular interests. One could see how

these kinds of discourses concerning localness could spiral endlessly from vendors' mouths, for example:

> 'You cannot find good homemade food in Zaghouan, so for me it is worth paying a little bit more to get the good quality food. I lived for 20 years in Nabeul (40 km from Zaghouan) and there they have good food, but here, nothing! So I leave every Wednesday and buy stuff from people I know in Nabeul and bring it over on Thursday (the market day in Zaghouan). My dream is to set up a quality food wholesale shop that is different from the low quality one in *centre ville* offering *dyārī / ʿarbī* food.'

While discussing my research with one of my early interlocutors in town, 'Amm Tariq, while exchanging food-gifts I had brought back from Italy, I realised that it was evident that the sale of *dyārī / ʿarbī* products was becoming an opportunity to profit from their association with authenticity. Some were trying more than others, according to all the rumours circulating in town about traders' cheating behaviours:

> 'Sara, you see, not all the *tawābil* (spice) vendors are the same,' he explains. 'You find the honest ones, but nowadays many are also big cheaters. Everything is kind of loose after the revolution. People started searching for *dyārī* food and it was an occasion for others to just profit from it. Take *hrīsa* (hot sauce), for example: it is very easy, you buy it at the factory and add colour to make it look like it's homemade, and then sell it at a higher price. So about your interview in the morning, I'm not saying that the guy is a liar, you see, the homemade pastas in small jars, for sure that is the work of Zaghouan women. But the *shkāra* of *qamḥ* couscous (a big bag of around 70 kg of whole-wheat homemade couscous), that seems weird to me!? And what about the *shkāra* (the bag)? Next time check on how it is sewn, if it looks like machine sewing, that's it, -you know it's from factory!'

'*Maghshūsh* (adulterated)', said Tātā Samia, talking about the *tawābil* scene in town. '*Maghshūsh',* said 'Amm Tariq, referring to the large quantities of supposedly homemade couscous crammed into an industrially sewn bag, and the overly vivid red of much of the *hrīsa* sold in town. '*Maghshūsh'*, said Youmna, about the honey I got in Tatouine: supposedly thyme-based, but actually honey with added thyme oil. Even an expert and *ʿarbī* food specialist like Youmna was cheated before Ramadan: trying to buy good *shurba* (small-cut barley) to last for the entire month, she went home and showed what she bought to her mother, who was in her seventies. Her mother, a farmer all her life, shook her head, saying that the barley had been cut with wheat. Leveraging on a part of the population's desire for acquiring *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* food as a

display of status, while at the same forging connections between materiality and 'lost' knowledge, vendors indulged in manipulating authenticity in their favour.

At the local level of distribution in the region, this process of food heritagisation was not so much an extractive operation, as people retained part of that knowledge and knew how to activate their connections to safeguard their interests as consumers or producers. A cheater would be shamed and possibly forced to close down; the prices of quality products would be negotiated directly between producers and vendors; and affective relations would most of the time prevent those value appropriation operations from happening instead at a national scale (see Chapter 6 for more on this). Nevertheless, a certain attitude toward consumption began to manifest itself, even in a peripheral town such Zaghouan, as *dyārī* and *ʿarbī* consumption became a recognisable marker for social positioning, working as standard of distinction in relation to the act of purchasing. This outsourcing work hence allowed mostly middle-class women to perform gender through purchasing the gendered labour of others. For those who could afford them, couscous, pastas, and *bsīsa* were processed on demand, with the customer advancing the cost of the raw products and of the processing labour:

> 'Some people are really ridiculed,' commented Tātā Samia, the milling woman I was working as an apprentice for, from behind the pepper grinding machine. It was the day after a person had stopped and asked about *ʿarbī shurba* (small-cut barley), which was evidently out of season. 'They search for *dyārī and ʿarbī* and they are ready to pay whatever they are asked. But they don't really know what they are looking for.'

The high costs of *ʿarbī* food, however, marked it as an exceptional good not for everyday consumption for most of my lower-income interlocutors. *ʿArbī* honey or eggs, for example, were only purchased if a family member needed a special, invigorating diet – such as children with a capricious appetite, or a sick elderly family member. *Ṭābūna ʿarbī* (clay oven-baked flatbread) was more affordable, but was nevertheless purchased only as a treat to interrupt the monotony of the daily baguette, or when a special dish benefitted from being paired with the taste and texture of the semolina-flour bread. For people with more modest means, small-cut pasta was either made at home or purchased in the supermarkets. Places such as Tātā Samia's milling shop were also affordable spaces where one could bring one's own mixture of grains and pulses, paying only for the more labour-intensive part of the process (milling).

Figure 22: *Ṭābūna ʿarbī* breads, and a grandmother engaging in small-cut pasta preparation while watching TV

4. Conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, good food mattered, and it played a central role in the everyday social lives of my informants. As illustrated above, my female interlocutors' varied repertoires of recipes - sometimes indexing a desire to participate in an imagined sophisticated modernity, sometimes making up for a lack of time, or based on weariness and thriftiness - shaped the everyday meals that contributed to re-creating different elements of traditionalisation within Tunisian cuisine. Food preparation revealed care for *ʿādī* (normal), good food, constructed as freshly sourced, tasty, and often home-prepared. Managing food sourcing and preparation, including ensuring taste and health while balancing this with time and cost constraints and other daily commitments, was hence part of the daily routines through which my informants contributed to recreating good, normal lives for their families and themselves within contemporary Tunisia.

Certainly, good food and its preparation were also considered time consuming, and some even considered this as conflicting with current gender expectations:

> 'When I was a boy, during the summer my mom would wake up, go to the field and gather some wheat, mill it with her hand stone mill, and prepare couscous, all in time for lunch. Nothing like today's couscous. But things have changed meanwhile, and there is no way we could continue like before. With jobs and education, the *internet*, one gets ideas on how to eat and to live well. Today, it [what to do with her time] is mostly a woman's choice, you see."

Figure 23: A fresh, healthy, homemade meal

'Amm Tariq and his wife Tātā Insaf's livelihoods revolved mainly around food. A couple in their fifties, Tātā Insaf produced home-made sweets for sale in a room in her house, and 'Amm Tariq sold vegetables at a small shop in the vicinity of my house. Their new, nearly completed apartment on the second floor of their family house was a big cornerstone of their life project, and they showed it to me proudly. Tātā Insaf was particularly proud of the new kitchen that she had ordered from Tunis: a big, sparkling new oven, a spacious, black marble counter, black cabinets. That space would replace the more modest pastry workshop I was received in at the first-floor apartment where their family was living currently. My visit at that time was quite revealing: some of their narratives about modernity and social belonging were displayed through the new house, while others emerged as we chatted over tea. While they were inquiring into marketing options for shipping pastries to Italy, Tātā Insaf commented on her hopes for their daughter's future. Different from her own experience, she hoped her daughter would find a respectable job after her higher education: 'a girl needs to study and to get a good job, there is no more time for intense food preparation,' she affirmed, without thinking twice.

Due to modern societal stances towards education and a woman's role in the job market, good food was also partly becoming a valued commodity that one could

purchase. Amidst social change, the availability of both *dyārī* ingredients and and *ʿarbī* products for sale hence signalled a spatial/temporal (*dis)continuity* between foodscapes of production and consumption in the area. In recent decades, *dyārī* ingredients - and sometimes *ʿarbī* products - came to discursively represent standards of good food: a shield against the negative traits of a fast-changing society, including the modernising effects of the industrial food chains. As seen throughout this chapter, especially for older generations of women such as Khāltī Khadija, life had always been shaped for the most part by the production and processing of foods at the household level. Nowadays, however, the most time-intensive seasonal post-harvesting practices (such as the preservation of foods for winter or the stocking and processing of cereals) were no longer widespread practices in town. Across town, in fact, even families living on modest budgets could afford to outsource the more labour-intense practices of food preparation (such as milling or sieving cereals) to trusted local milling shops. Therefore, as men and women still cared about developing a taste for good food, they built trustworthy networks of proximity from which to source quality ingredients (*dyārī*), through those sustaining their food knowledge while supporting their family's wellbeing. *ʿArbī* food, which was expensive to purchase for everyday consumption for most of the low-income population, was mostly sourced for specific rituals or curative purposes. However, as partially noted throughout the chapter, among middle-class Tunisians *ʿarbī* food was turning into a commodity through which to display status, with vendors increasing the prices of these coveted foods. The dynamics through which *ʿarbī* food production and sales intersect with food heritagisation discourses and practices at a national and international scale will be discussed further later in the thesis, especially in Chapters 4 and 6. There, I will explore the different processes through which local food knowledge and practices have come to be appropriated or re-crafted to fit or break into viable livelihoods, observing how good food might be disenfranchised from its cultural and biological ecologies of production, or rather how it can re-create new life opportunities for producers and vendors (Kneafsey et al. 2008). The next chapter instead opens up to observe in detail the everyday social dynamics (relations of mutual help and care) that surround and construct networks of proximity around sourcing good food in two Zaghouanian neighbourhoods.

Chapter 3: Food provisioning, networks of proximity and care

> *Tātā* (auntie) Samia's mill and spice shop was abuzz with people: some asking for favours, some bringing in food for promotional purposes, and some stopping by to buy a few *dīnār* (the local currency) worth of spice mixtures while resting on the 'customer chair', chatting away. During the early days of our acquaintance, as an aspirational shop assistant at the *ṭāḥūna* (mill shop), I often sat in a corner on an empty bucket, browsing around and observing the space as Tātā Samia was busy serving others. A dusty layer of flour covered the floor of the grinding room. Many half-opened sacks of various products lay stacked on top of each other. Buckets of cereals from clients sat patiently on the floor waiting to be ground. I would think to myself: if nothing else, I could help Tātā Samia to organise the shop, she is so busy with people! Ibrahim, the salesman from the shoe shop located a few metres away, often brought her a freshly made sandwich for lunch, along with a daily report about the market and the nearby vendors. Women doing their household provisioning at the shop often talked at length with Tātā Samia about their ailments or their families' troubles. New arrivals in the neighbourhood would be redirected to her to ask for help. Keeping her hands busy with work, Tātā Samia listened patiently to each, offering thoughtful answers: *ʿarbī* (indigenous) remedies, contacts for solving issues of different sorts, or religious references. At Tātā Samia's, some women from the neighbourhood even advertised their homemade sweets, couscous, and dried meats. One woman, to whom I later became a regular customer, would praise Tātā Samia every time we met: 'Everybody in the neighbourhood calls Tātā Samia *māmā*, she is such a generous woman. She even let me put a flyer out there in her window to advertise for biscuits – look, there is my number and everything!'

This short vignette begins to reveal some of the everyday dynamics around food provisioning in Zaghouan. Highlighting how different practices surrounding food sourcing and consumption (favours and help among neighbours and/or between salesperson and client) furthered mutual support beyond kin affiliation, this chapter will question the formation of what I will call 'network of proximity'[64] across a few neighbourhoods of a rural town. Hence, through observing people's tactics for

[64] Already mentioned in the Introductory Chapter and in Chapter 1, the expression directs the reader's attention to the mutual help practices constituting support networks across different social milieus. Whereas Chapter 1 described networks of support at the level of the household, this chapter will explore the formation of networks around food provisioning at the level of the neighbourhood. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will follow network formation around the food trade in town and on a smallholder farm.

provisioning their households, this chapter interrogates how these networks are constituted, questioning their power to differently include segments of the population and their long-term lasting productive effects. In particular, it was the materiality exchanged (both food and care), the giving and taking among clients and customers, permeated by an ethical sensitivity that invites one to care for each other in times of need, that rendered visible these networks of proximity and people's positions within them.

Figure 24: Tātā Samia's spice shops (note the chair where customers could rest)

In the first part of this chapter, the discussion concerning my informants' everyday sourcing practices observes how they expressed different orientations toward 'modern' styles of consumption and people's preferences for specific shopping venues in town. Despite the presence of an increasing number of supermarkets offering wide varieties of products at relatively low prices, the local retail ecosystem was in fact rather vibrant. Showing the negotiation among the values underlying good food consumption, the need to make ends meet at the end of the month, and the ethical sensitivity towards each other's needs in one's neighbourhood, my interlocutors' daily sourcing operations revealed their preferences for proximate corner shops as venues for their weekly or daily food purchasing. Both cultural proximity to familiar food and caring relations with smaller shop owners (who may extend credit, connect people with possible jobs, or advise them concerning family issues) worked together to construct relations of trust among customers and vendors, which in turn helped many of the corner shops in town to face the threat of supermarket expansion within the local socio-economic milieu. The second part of the

chapter focuses on the dynamics of provisioning and the formation of networks of proximity in a specific venue - Tātā Samia's milling shop. I show the minutia of daily practices that arise while exchanging homemade ingredients and cereals, which I have framed analytically through the lens of care. The material will specifically detail and unpack how - in Tātā Samia's milling shop, but also across the neighbourhood I frequented - caring relations and food transactions were informed by the specific moral imperative of redistributing care for God (see Schaeublin 2019). Coupled with the hard-working attitude of the shop owners, caring practices, which could be both gratifying and burdensome to perform, contributed to delineating the contours of moral personhood in the neighbourhood.

1. Care as an analytical framework

While trust emerged as a meta-discourse in many conversations, it was the everyday acts of care between clients and owners, or among neighbours, that filled it with meaning. As shown by scholars unpacking this concept (Bachelet 2019; Colson 2003; Corsín Jiménez 2011; Möllering 2001), trust manifests through people's "shared experiences" (Bachelet 2019:858). Khāltī (aunt) Khadija was a quiet, sweet woman in her late sixties, and a neighbour who I was close with. One morning, as we returned from the *ḥānūt* (corner shop) where she left her freshly baked bread, she opened her hand, showing me the few coins she had received from the corner stop owner. Khāltī Khadija told me she continued to make the bread because if she stopped, who else would make fresh homemade bread for the neighbourhood? She was old and tired, and combining her small retirement pension with that of her deceased husband, she had enough money to run her household, but she cared about whether the neighbourhood had good fresh bread, and hence continued baking it. During Ramadan when orders would increase, one of her daughters would help to meet demand. ʿAmm (uncle) Kamal, the *ḥānūt* owner, on the other hand, told me that he cared for the old lady bringing him a few pieces of bread every day, as she had been widowed for a long time and still had one of her three daughters to marry off. Though not gaining much profit from the sale, he suggested that a few pounds a day made a difference in the lives of his 'suppliers', women such as Khāltī Khadija who would bring him breads and other *ʿarbī* (foodstuffs) for sale.

Observing exchanges such as these lead me to explore *care* as 'an open-ended

process which (…) connects a giving and receiving side in practices aimed to satisfy socially recognized needs' (Thelen 2015:509). Assessing the vast interdisciplinary literature on care and attempting to overcome its fragmentation[65], Thelen invites scholars to take care practices as a starting point for research, advocating for an approach to care that does not undertake relational classifications and assign different actions to 'predefined categories, such as friendship, kinship and patronage' (Thelen 2015:498). Rather, she shows how care practices are central to the emergence, maintenance, or dissolution of significant relationships, making care a productive concept that is central to social organisation (Abbots, Anna Lavis, et al. 2015; Thelen 2015). This move also allows one to push beyond a solely positive understanding of care as standing up to capitalist exploitation and global inequalities, a stance that emerged in earlier feminist research and Marxist inspired anthropology (Gilligan 1982; Read and Thelen 2007; Tronto 1993). It also pushes for the expansion of care beyond the domain of kinship studies, broadening the understanding of care outside the realm of the family, and extending its analytical capacity to the public spheres of economics, politics, and humanitarianism (Ong and Steinmüller 2021). Hence, in an attempt to avoid binary readings such as seeing caring relations as informed solely by altruistic logic and reciprocity versus market or state relations imbued in the logic of profit logic self-interest, I explore care as a 'set of practices bringing together bodies, subjectivities, materials and technologies' (Barnes and Taher 2019:419), unpacking the existential and material entanglements at work through the everyday care practices I observed.

In dialogue with the literature on the processes of the expansion of supermarketisation in the Global South (Abrahams 2009; Atasoy 2013; Hull 2016; Miller 2005; Reardon and Hopkins 2006; Tessier et al. 2008, 2010) and the Tunisian 'economy of indebtedness' (Hibou 2011b, 2017; Meddeb 2011, 2012; Pontiggia 2017; Santini and Pontiggia 2019), my analysis in this first section focusses on caring transactions (Aulino 2019; Englund 2008) emerging around food provisioning as a pattern of interaction between clients and shop owners, who exchange both quality food and moral recognition within the neighbourhood. This chapter extends and

[65] In a recent review of care (2019) Thelen points to 'the fragmentation of care is by orientation toward different categories of care receivers, such as the elderly, those with disabilities and chronic illnesses, or children.' Reflecting on the embodied intersections of eating and caring, Abbots, Attala and Lavis (2015:1) similarly advise on the slippery exercise of thinking through care: '…to care may denote a feeling, a relationship or form of work…' or instead '…as action, labour or performance…'.

pushes forward recent scholarship in the region (Hibou 2011b, 2017; Meddeb 2011, 2012; Pontiggia 2017), as such works have mainly discussed solidarity practices among people in relation to 'everyday process of state formation', showing how they fail to engage with the roots of inequality and instead contribute to reproduce inequality and subordination (Pontiggia 2018:147). My contribution here aims instead to complicate those readings, making visible the centrality of those mutual support practices in people's lives. Relying on mutual support was one of the few strategies that allowed people to navigate states of permanent precarity. Attending to the everyday minutia of those relations will also tease out their centrality in constructing the neighbourhood as an intimate caring space, and what it takes to live there as a good person, a good neighbour, or a caring shop owner in challenging times.

Chapters 4 and 6 will complete the examination of the 'two sides of care' - the 'good and the oppressive' (Thelen 2021) - by showing how care networks may simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of marginalisation by reinforcing existing hierarchies. This chapter, however, addresses how such ordinary forms of support are carriers of moral sensibilities that are the basis of the vision of a good life and moral personhood in working-class neighbourhoods of a rural town. Its conclusion will touch on the process of belonging and different forms of inclusion negotiated through dispensing care across mutual help networks, to signpost how the three chapters together (3, 4 and 6) bridge the existential with the political.

2. Politics of place: supermarkets and corner shops

In the 1990s the first supermarket, *Magasin General*, appeared in Zaghouan, an affirmation that the local people must have been ready to buy into a new model of food consumption that no longer relied exclusively on home production. Initially set up as a state joint stock company in 1883 (Tunis), in 2007 it was acquired by the Bayahi and Puolina group (73.31% stake).[66] Situated on the main roundabout in the town, *Magasin General* – now a town 'institution' - was followed by Carrefour (first opened in Tunis in 2001 and managed by the Chaieb group) and *Monoprix* (founded in 1993 and owned by the Mabrouk group since 1999). Finally, *Aziza*, a quality discount supermarket chain that was founded in 2014 by the Slama group, was under

[66] The year after, the stock was divided between the Mabrouk group (35%) and the Hamrouni group (34%), with the Bayahi group retaining around 20% of the capital (Zammit, Cherif, and Jebali 2010:5–7). All of these groups were connected in various ways to the former Tunisian President Ben Ali's family (Rijkers et al. 2017).

construction in Zaghouan while I lived there in the spring of 2019.

This landscape of family-owned Tunisian supermarket monopolies still reflects the wider unequal economic development inherited from the postcolonial period and developed as part of the 'networks of privilege' (Heydemann 2004) in proximity to power. Especially under the Ben Ali regime (1987-2011), such a network was constituted of groups, families, and associates who relied on connections with the presidential entourage, receiving special treatment for their ventures (Kalin 2012; Rijkers, Freund, and Nucifora 2017; Santini and Pontiggia 2019). In those years, Tunisian 'development', whilst seen as an 'open market success' by Europe and the Unites States, was achieved by guaranteeing prosperity to only a few social actors who were politically connected with the central power and concentrated geographically on the coast of the country, to the detriment of the majority of its population in the south and internal regions of the country (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Santini and Pontiggia 2019).

Surveying how the Tunisian state was able to maintain an unequal social-economic state of affairs for so long, Hibou (2011b) argues that it was not only through coercion (police control directed by the single party) but also through constant compromises and negotiations with the population, differently included in what Hibou calls the 'security pact'. Founded on neo-patrimonial logics, this pact aimed to prevent and minimise destabilising political or economic dynamics by enticing the population at the margins to participate (although unevenly) in such a system, responding to the desire part of some sections of the population for protection, stability, consumption, and modernity (Hibou 2011b; Pontiggia 2017, 2018).

In what follows, I will complicate and extend such findings by looking at the everyday participation of 'the margins', in my case mostly low-income populations in networks of food consumption. How did the desire for modernity and consumption play out in relation to grocery shopping in Zaghouan, a rural town that can be considered part of the geographic and political margins of Tunisia? How are values informing food networks in the neighbourhood negotiated, and what do they allow us to observe? How have local retailers managed to re-craft their operations in response to supermarket competition?

'There were no supermarkets of course when I was a little girl. We went to the *marshī*

(the open market, still a weekly event in town) and we shopped at the *ḥānūt* (corner shop). They sold the essentials, not like now. We would go to the *ḥānūt* and buy a little, maybe some tomato paste, 100 grammes or something like that, in a little bag. If we had money. Otherwise we would rely on the tomatoes we dried in the summer and then use them in food preparation in the winter.'

Khāltī Kahdija recounted the food landscape of the town in her youth while we walked together to the local corner shop, five minutes from her house. She had just finished baking her stack of *brīka*, a paper-thin semolina bread used to quickly assemble appetisers. The head of a family of five women (her two older daughters had their own nuclear families but often spent the day at their mother's house with their respective children, see Chapters 1 and 2), her answers to my questions on food habits and consumption in the town were often tinged with a critical stance towards the present, especially the new generation's obsession with immoderate food purchasing. She (like many of the older generation of women) still bought foodstuffs thriftily day by day, a habit that many Tunisian families had taken up following the opening of food shops in their neighbourhoods, in addition to the weekly market.

Before I befriended Khāltī Kahdija and her family, I had regularly explored and visited local *ḥānūt* and *tawābil* (corner shops and food shops with spices, grains, pulses, and other essentials), as this gave me an initial understanding of how homemade and processed foods were produced, circulated, and consumed. Each neighbourhood in the town, demarcated mostly by diverse time landscapes of construction, is served by at least two or three *ḥānūt* and a similar number of *tawābil* (corner shops and spice shops[67]). While these shops opened at different times over the last 60-70 years, they sell mostly similar foodstuffs and packaged foods. This often includes a small offering of *dyārī* (homemade) food – a word that (as seen from the previous chapter) is an adjective derived from the noun *dār* (home), literally translating as 'from the house'.

The locations of these corner and spice shops reveal details about the town's socio-politics of space. Some of the oldest *ḥānūt* (corner shops) in town are located between narrow neighbourhood alleyways and cul-de-sacs (the two I frequented the most, owned by ʿAmm Kamal and Tātā Samia, are marked in yellow on the map below – see Figure 26). Sometimes difficult to spot for outsiders, the *ḥānūt* (corner

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[67] From here on I will refer to *tawābil* as 'spice shop', although one could find more than spices (pulses, cereals, flours, etc.)

shop) built in the middle of a neighbourhood have secured their survival based on relations of proximity with a loyal clientele visiting their shops, reinforcing the perception of a *ḥūma* (neighbourhood) as an intimate and 'rather personal place' (Fernea 1976:205).

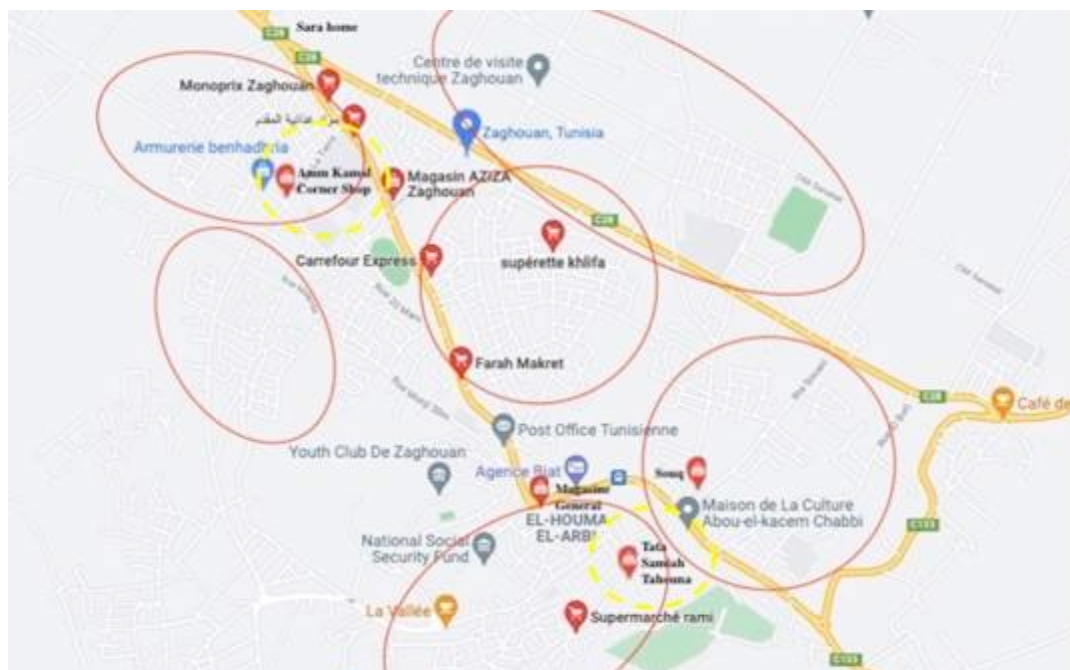

Figure 25: Maps of supermarkets in town, 'Amm Kamal's corner store, and Tātā Samia's spice shop

At the opposite end of the scale and like all of the supermarkets mentioned above, many of the more recent *ḥānūt* (corner shops) rented central locations in the town, especially the main town artery, which runs from *al-mdīna-l-ʿarbī* (the old town), merging with the regional road that stretches towards Tunis or Hammamet, and which has become the core of the town's trade. Despite their centrality, these shops did not always last long: I witnessed their quick turnover in the year and a half I was in Zaghouan. At the top of the town, close to the location of the weekly open market, warehouses make up the operative centre from which one of the most notable families in Zaghouan supplies bulk goods to the entire town*,* most of the *ḥānūt*, and sometimes also individuals.

Observing the everyday provisioning patterns in town while shopping in my neighbourhood, attending to spice shop clients in the *al-mdīna-l-ʿarbī* (the old town), or talking with mothers from different walks of life while preparing meals, allowed me to consider the 'social and moral work' of food networks emerging in everyday interactions. What follows will unpack this loaded work to tease out how many of my low-income informants reconciled the imperative to scout for quality food with their

economic constraints by establishing significant and meaningful relationships with shop owners in their neighbourhood. I also discuss how these relationships of trust, extended through the materiality being exchanged (quality food, credit, moral and social acknowledgment in the neighbourhood), in turn allows corner shops and spice shops to create marginal gains in a context of the increasing supermarketisation of supply.

3. Spatial and cultural proximity in food provisioning

Almost all the people I encountered and spoke with did not rely on one single shopping venue for their food provisions. Rather, they shopped strategically and contextually in relation to the type of goods they were looking for. Most of the people I met who had a steady household income (middle class and lower middle-class informants) would primarily shop once a month for staples at one of the town's supermarkets, while moving between the *marshī* (open market) and local retailers and supermarkets for fresh items. Jasmine, whose husband Kadri owned a stationery wholesale business in the South of Tunisia, offered a good example:

> 'I do my big shopping at *Magasin General* once per month, and I buy everything I need. Of course not vegetables and fruit. Also the lamb, we don't buy it in town, we bring it from Tataouine (their native town located in Southern Tunisia) because we trust more people we know there with that. But the beef at *Magasin General* is good quality, so I buy that there. Toward the end of the month, if Kadri opens the refrigerator and it is half empty, he looks at me frowning and he asks – why is that? And then he gives me extra money for groceries.'

While running out of money at the end of the month was common across different social classes in Tunisia, for certain households the challenge was greater than for others. People with less cash in hand scouted for discounted prices at supermarkets to buy cheaper staples, while using various other shopping strategies[68] to deal with the rest of the weekly purchasing. The complexities of the tactics through which people managed to provision their households resonates with the recent critical literature on the expansion of supermaketisation in the Global South. Much of this literature presents the 'supermarket revolution' of the 1980s as a transformative

[68] As we will see later in the chapter, these strategies include buying small amounts according to daily needs, asking for credit, or when extra cash is in hand buying in bulk from itinerant vendors offering better prices for imperfect goods, and so on.

experience that dramatically affected the pre-existing socio-economic and cultural milieu in which trade took place (Reardon and Hopkins 2006). Indeed, around the world, supermarketisation - characterised as the expansion of corporate control across the commodity chain and the incremental ownership of capital shares by a small number of firms - marks a fundamental shift in operations across the global food system. At the local level of analysis, as often happens, events show complexity as the process of supermarket expansion does not follow a linear progression, as some literature seems to assume (Abrahams 2009; Miller 2005). More recent studies (Atasoy 2013; Hull 2014, 2016) show how supermaketisation in the Global South has not involved a simple replacement of pre-existing systems of production, trade, and consumption. Instead, local retail and consumption practices have re-crafted their operations to thrive in the market interstices not filled by supermarkets (Hull 2016).Various studies led by ethnographic analysis demonstrate that despite the large-scale impact of supermarkets on the retail landscape, the ecosystem of small supermarket chains and other retail formats are still alive and even thriving, organising themselves to supply products to consumers who prefer to buy through local networks. In middle-income countries in Latin America, Humphrey (2007:448) notes there is a 'resistance to the purchase of fresh produce in supermarkets and hypermarkets. … [Customers] are frequently served by small, independent supermarket chains or small self-service stores, and they also continue to rely heavily on wet markets.' Hattersly (2013:231) describes a similar process in certain regions of Australia, where 'strategic horizontal alliances have become increasingly important for manufacturers seeking to counter retailer dominance.' This also happened transnationally, with local canneries in Australia seeking trade alliances with canneries in Thailand, Spain, China, and South Africa.

My research resonates with this literature and unpacks the Tunisian specificities. While the four supermarkets in the town have partially succeeded in enculturating values of modern food shopping practices such as 'product choice and low cost, and in providing convenience practice attributes like free car parking, ready meals' (Dixon and Isaacs 2013:284) and, to a certain degree, anonymity from gossiping mouths,[69] the majority of the Zaghouan population remained sceptical of

[69] As one of my informants put it: 'at the supermarket I'm mostly free from gossipy mouths and scrutinising eyes'. (see also: Chapter 4)

the big retailers.

> 'I have told you several times not to buy fish at *Monoprix*, Sara,' Monia commented after I complained about the fish I had to throw away due to its pungent odour. 'You know what happens there, they have big fridges where they put fish and meat to store in the night, and then they offer them again the next day. There is no comparison with the fish vendors who get fresh fish from Hammamet or Tunis. You need to go early, that's true, but then you won't waste money.'

Refrigerators - devices of food safety to my inattentive eyes - were carefully scrutinised by my neighbours and generally mistrusted as devices that tricked consumers by offering products that were not fresh. Similarly, Tātā Samia commented that supermarket spices should not be called spices at all since, as opposed to her hand-grinding on the spot, these products were processed in far-away factories and shipped over to supermarkets, losing all their proprieties and aroma by the time they reached a woman's kitchen. As seen in the previous chapter, freshness, a quality that contributed to constructing goodness, could hence be evaluated by the distance (or better, by the *proximity*) between production and consumption sites. Mistrust and suspicion of what was distant, hence out of sight, was also constructed around the possible lack of care by impersonal and not relatable employees. In turn, its shadow, trust, was built upon the premise of proximity and care for one's food, such as that offered by locally grown food, by the everyday labour of a shop owner,[70] and by the ability for the customer to feel, taste, and smell their food on the spot. Supermarkets' attempts to re-embed 'food economies and food cultures in local imaginations just as they dis-embed them through their global supply sourcing' (Dixon and Isaacs 2013:284) were not always successful, as their products were meant to be appreciated according to different values (convenience of price, impersonal relations with the producers and distributors, etc). While both lower-income and medium-income people would buy factory-packaged staples for everyday consumption (such as pasta and couscous, ironically branded *dyārī*[71]), they would not buy the *brīka* special appetiser dough because 'they are just plastic wrapped in more plastic'. Instead, everybody bought *brīka* at the corner store where women producers such as Khāltī Khadija brought them fresh every morning, showing that the negotiation between

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[70] For instance a local fish store carrying small quantities of fresh fish every day and giving away any leftovers at the end of the day, or Tātā Samia carefully grinding spices on the spot.

[71] As we will see in the next chapter, local standards of food goodness, *ʿarbī* (from the country or region) and *dyārī* (homemade), were commonly employed as evaluative criteria for ranking products.

price and quality revolves around the centrality of ingredients in determining the goodness of a dish and its overall cost (or quantity) in relation to the budget for the whole shop.

A recent study (Tessier et al. 2008) aiming to capture the transition of food practices in Greater Tunis (the most affluent region in Tunisia), supports the trend I observed in Zaghouan around shopping. Despite surveying the peri-urban area around the capital, the authors found that less than 5% of the population under consideration used only supermarkets for shopping.[72] Having a steady income to rely on was indeed a determining factor that marked the ability to buy from supermarkets regularly, but other factors played a role in shaping Tunisians' preferences. Tessier's study (Tessier et al. 2008) also reports social, physical and cultural proximity as the primary reasons for valuing and continuing to frequent corner shops. Further, in my observations, food's cultural and spatial proximity, informing sourcing practices across town, contributed to fostering social cohesion among people from similar walks of life. The next section will unpack how networks of proximity and support among clients and vendors in popular districts were formed particularly through multiple acts of care (favours, care for clients, borrowing and lending money), while exchanging familiar food.

4. Strategic provisioning: caring for the customers

As seen above, the aversion that some shoppers had towards supermarkets and their apparatus of standardisation led town dwellers to frequent corner shops where the relationships of trust were cultivated and sustained by the feeling of proximity to food. This feeling was produced according to a sense of cultural familiarity and an ethical sensitivity towards 'proximate' people. Indeed, most of the narratives offered by the corner and spice shop owners I interviewed across town revolved around food quality or goodness, which I unpacked through the spatial and cultural proximity[73] of the products they guaranteed to their clientele:

> 'So is it the superior quality of the products that makes a difference?' I asked Ali. He replied: 'Of course it is. People come here for specific products, because they value them and trust what I offer. When they enter they already have an idea about what

[72] Cross-sectional survey (Tessier: 2006).
[73] The previous chapter discussed how good food was discerned by educating oneself to favour a specific 'taste' of food.

they want to buy. The people who go to supermarkets instead have no idea; they buy randomly according to what they see. So they get an idea from what they see displayed, you see the difference?'

At Ali's spice shop, large quantities of cereals, different cuts of wheat, oats, barley, pulses, and spices are displayed in bulk bags containing possibly 60-70 kilogrammes on average of merchandise. With inquisitive eyes, Ali, a short thin man in his fifties, moved around his shop quickly and skittishly, replying to my questions by showing in his hands the different varieties of cereals and pastas he offers. He also sold indigenous varieties of wheat – red-coloured, round grains that are grown in the hills around the town. Dipping his hand into a bag full of factory-made *macaroni* (factory-made pasta), Ali also added that he has products for all preferences. He stated that most of his customers preferred the more expensive indigenous varieties, but not all of them, of course.

A few months later, talking about homemade food, ʿAmm Kamel, the owner of the corner shop in my neighbourhood, added some complexity to the matter:

> 'Of course people care, and they know that some products (homemade or local) are better than others nowadays. Most of the people know it, but you also need to think about your means. If you work in a local factory, your salary is 400-500 *dīnār* per month (the equivalent of approximately €130-160 euro), a local policeman slightly more, like a teacher, around 800-900 *dīnār* (€300 euro). What can you do with that money if you are the head of the family? You do the best you can, but maybe you buy the cheaper and pre-packaged couscous. You see, that's the reality for most in town.'

As highlighted by the literature, the end of the last century - marked by the harshness imposed by the structural adjustment measures of the 1970s coupled with a crony capitalist system - saw the end of an era of state employment, the erosion of its (though partial) redistributive capacities, the failure of the social security programmes and the consequent spawning of a precarious job market unable to absorb both qualified and unqualified personnel (Meddeb 2011, 2012). Struggling with a lack of liquidity and day-to-day and economic constraints, entire sections of the population were pressured in a frantic race to grab material resources. Meddeb's analysis (2011, 2012) portrays the everyday manifestations of the strategies enacted by Tunisian households for making ends meet as a '*yijrī ʿlā al-khubza'* (literally a 'race for bread', or a race to make a living). With this phrase, Meddeb highlights how running on

credit and accumulating debt, and borrowing and lending among families, friends,[74] vendors, and clients, represents one of the strategies on which working-class Tunisians (but more recently also middle-class households) rely on to stay afloat economically from month to month. Hibou's analysis similarly refers to the economy of indebtedness in Tunisia as the cornerstone of the political economy of domination (Hibou 2006, 2011b, 2017). Hibou focuses on the relationships among different lending actors (banks, employers, micro-credit agencies, informal circuits, and shop owners) and the popular and middle classes to expose the intricacies of the circuits of indebtedness and petty corruption in which Tunisian families are inserted. The economic tactics of a large part of the Tunisian population are indeed still strongly structured around the 'beginning of the month' (Meddeb 2011). Wages constituted the primary resource for feeding social networks, repaying debts and contracting new ones, hence maintaining what Pontiggia (2018:262) calls 'solidarity by proximity',[75] and contributing to forming social networks that keep people afloat through redistribution and mutual help.

During my fieldwork, after complicated years of transition toward a 'new democratic system', the 'race for bread' for the majority of the Tunisian population I observed still seemed quite frantic. ʿAmm Kamel's comments similarly highlight one of the central factors contributing to the Tunisian family's preference for the corner store: the practice of offering credit to recurrent customers. By highlighting the existential and social implications of giving and taking in people's lives, my material here extends the existing scholarship. While Meddeb (2011) stresses the beginning of the month as the central time in which one has to pay the local grocer, transfer money to relatives, and pay the rent, ʿAmm Kamal pointed instead to the vulnerability of the 'end of the month', a time of shortage in which mutual aid among people is invoked and granted:

> 'You know especially at the end of the month… you understand a lot from what people buy and how. At the beginning of the month they buy everything and a lot,

[74] During my fieldwork I witnessed how borrowing and lending were ingrained practices developed across classes (see also Chapter 4). For instance Kadri, the elder of four brothers, often helped out each segment of the family, giving away money when needed - to the great disappointment of his wife Jasmine. Jasmine then complained that this attitude would prevent them from saving up for her two girls' education, let alone expanding the other business they ran.

[75] From Pontiggia's work: 'local forms of solidarity are not a form of opposition nor resistance to the state but, on the contrary, they link people and families to public institutions and contribute to reproducing inequality and subordination' (Pontiggia 2018:262), see also (Zammit et al. 2010).

and then the end of the month comes, and they buy one piece of everything if they can: one egg, one piece of bread. That means that they have used their money for the month and might ask me for credit… And that makes a big difference for people. Sure, supermarkets might seem cheaper, but in the end they are not, since they cheat people with their offers. Plus they are an option only if you have cash all the time. They incite you to buy more, and in the end they don't care about the clients. I put forward my face, the supermarket is unknown.'

Figure 26: At 'Amm Kamal's corner store

Through dispensing credit, being honest about his prices and the quality of his products, and allowing people to sell their homemade goods at his shop, Kamal responds to the moral sensitivity of 'picking each other up' in difficult times (*yhizzū bʿaḍhum*). Mostly used to express how people help each other out financially (e.g. through credit, loans, or goods), *yhizzū bʿaḍhum* nevertheless vernacularly merges the materiality component with an existential one. Literally, *yhizzū* (to pick or lift somebody up) indexes how people are moved to help each other to prevent one from falling 'under the threshold' of a normal, dignified existence. Responding to this moral orientation, Kamal meets his obligation as a shop owner and a good neighbour, which in turn allows him to proudly show his 'face'. As seen throughout the previous chapters, the moral sensitivity toward 'helping each other out' was acquired through socialisation within the first context where mutual support and care are manifested: the family. This chapter shows how a similar moral disposition[76] was also cultivated

[76] However, help logics within the family held different moral strengths than the ones among friends or neighbours. Reciprocal help and support were often taken for granted among the immediate family, as the primary

in everyday interactions among proximate people: neighbours, recurrent clients and salespeople, and friends. In other words, these mutual help practices contributed to constituting networks of proximity through which vulnerable people especially (but not exclusively) sustained each other's strategies of social reproduction throughout their neighbourhoods.

Soon after this conversation with ʿAmm Kamal early in my fieldwork, I realised that every corner shop in town offered credit. Asking for credit was not seen as shameful: clients would simply ask to add their purchase to their list and leave the shop. At any point when they needed to know their current total they asked at the corner shop, trusting the owner's credit book. One day I had to ask Leila (another food vendor I was familiar with) for credit. She laughed hard as she watched me stare at my empty wallet: 'You have become a real Tunisian today, Sara, if you are asking for credit.' Taking away my groceries without paying, I reflected on how my vulnerability that day had entrusted me a place within the networks of givers and receivers,[77] extending it beyond the present moment. Indeed, since the marketisation of food production in Tunisia, corner shop owners, among others, have played an important social function as a sort of social security cushion or safety net on which people rely in times of cash scarcity.

Figure 27: Eating soup while shopping at Leila's

Later on during fieldwork, I learned that the opposite also stood: if hard times prevented shop owners themselves from offering people credit, a sign was hung on

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social locus was on attending to each other's vulnerabilities. 'Favours' as ethical acts were instead constitutive of friendships (see Chapter 4 for a more in-depth discussion).

[77] Revealingly, being indebted is expressed in Tunisian as '*muʾsal'*, meaning that one is asked to repay since he asked first to receive (from *su'al*, asking).

the door: *no credit.* This was to avoid to the embarrassment and shame of having to refuse people credit when asked. I never saw this happening in Zaghouan, but one of my informants told me that this happened in Tunis, where local people's sense of 'proximity' was diluted by the size of the neighbourhood, and people could more easily eschew social obligations. In Zaghouan, I believe the shame of being unable to sustain the community in times of need would have hardly been bearable.

Kamal also admitted that he had to work quite hard to keep the shop competitive with the supermarket – 7 days a week from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. – but his and his family's hardworking attitude and status in the neighbourhood allowed him (and the other corner shops in town) to stay open, in spite of the aggressive competition from the supermarkets. His reflections here reveal the loaded and at times also burdensome work underlying the construction of moral personhood in the neighbourhood, as the relationships of trust built upon this asking and giving are demanding to sustain over time (Englund 2008).

As described in more detail in the next section, some of the people who frequented the corner shop in their neighbourhood viewed it as space where values of caring for each other were entangled, and at times also overcame the logic of profit. The discussion below starts by exploring the underlying morality of giving in a Muslim community, rooted in the belief that one ought to share the wealth one received from God with less affluent people (Henig 2019; Mittermaier 2013, 2019; Schaeublin 2019). Following the work of these authors, in the next section I show how in certain trading spaces in town, the moral orientations endorsing mutual support as the proper way to act in a community were translated into everyday ethical reflections and practices while exchanging foodstuffs.

5. Caring for food and souls: Tātā Samia's milling shop

Tātā Samia's two small rooms nestled in *al-mdīna-l-ʿarbī* (the old town) included a small-scale mill, or *ṭāḥūna*, as well as a *tawābil* – the space where she actually sold what she milled. Tātā Samia's reputation in the neighbourhood, built on the high quality of her products and her own personal integrity, made her shop a popular venue. After explaining my research project to her, and proposing the idea of helping out in the shop, I had to continue visiting for a few weeks before she decided I could actually contribute in some way.

Figure 28: My work station

At first, when I showed up she would sit with me and have a rest from whatever she was doing to chat, making me feel doubly guilty for wasting her time. The two rooms where Tātā Samia worked were quite packed with her supplies: floors were hidden under bags, buckets, sacks filled with pulses, spices, dried peppers, more spices, and so many types of flours. Everything was covered in a thin layer of dust, which I later identified as *bsīsa* flour,[78] which filled the room with a mountainous aroma of dried herbs. The main room, which opened onto the street, showcased her own spices and cereals on the shelves (though many of the spice containers were half empty), along with an iron scale on a small countertop to weigh her products. A small plastic wall divided what was supposed to be the back shop - an accumulation of unsorted products that often invaded the customer area. The second room, a processing room, held three different milling machines: a primary one used to grind cereals and pulses, a smaller one for processing dried red peppers, and the last to grind a specific type of nut, typical in the mountain region. To block the noise from the machines, Tātā Samia wore noise reducing headphones as she milled. Clients who entered had to interrupt her milling work to be served. This is how I ended up sifting pulses and cereals and attending to clients for a couple of months.

[78] A mixtures of roasted cereals ground with different spices and consumed traditionally at breakfast as a dense paste or as a drink during Ramadan Iftar.

Figure 29: One of Tata Samia's milling machines, and the adjacent space for sales

This second part of this chapter focusses on Tātā Samia's everyday experience at her milling shop as a window to reflect on the entanglement of moral rubrics: the social obligation to 'pick each other up' and the religious invitation to 'redistribute care for God' intertwining with logics tied to commercial exchange.

Tātā Samia had two credit books, one of which was also used for accounting when she wanted to make sure that the final count was accurate. The other contained mainly notes of what she was owed. She would register the name of the person in whatever random white space she could find, and subtract the money the person returned each time. She told me that sometimes she was late in paying her wholesaler because people took so long to come back and pay what they owed her. 'People are *msākin* (vulnerable), [79] what would you do in my place?' she asked me – referring to credit as a quasi-affective practice. The shoppers indeed acknowledged Tātā Samia's efforts and made sure to repay what they could, even if it was only one *dīnār* (a few cents) per day, since they knew that Samia also had to pay her suppliers. As Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977) argues, the time of the gift-debt was experienced as an affective state infused by demonstrations of gratitude, respect and concern for the giver (Jasarevic 2012). Clients would stop at the door on their way to other errands and would reach over the counter, often silently, stretching their hands out with coins. Tātā Samia would take the money, smile, and bless them while reaching for her book, crossing out the old debt, and registering what was left. People, especially from the neighbourhood, granted Samia's shop the loyalty of their short-term debts, making the

[79] *Msākin* is a highly contextual word used to refer to people in a condition of weakness. A possible close translation could be 'miserable' or 'vulnerable', or more generally 'poor'. It is mostly used in Tunisia to denote somebody who cannot afford to fulfill their essential needs fully because they have been betrayed by an unfair life. However, it is also used to define somebody who does not stand up and fight back for the injustice they were subjected to.

ṭāḥūna their main venue for purchasing staples.

However, it was not only about the credit. During my apprenticeship I learned a lot about how Tātā Samia runs her business, and a little about her own personal life, past, and future aspirations. 'She cares big time, she runs her business with a big heart and a big mess', I noted down in my field notes during one of the last days of Ramadan. It was indeed the display of mutual care I witnessed in the everyday at the *ṭāḥūna* that led me to reason on the practices of caregiving: Tātā Samia effectively fed her community as a form of 'day to day morality' (Naguib 2015:18). Naguib's work on Egypt (2015) emphasises the necessity of investigating people's intentions and actions in the everyday to understand how they construct what is meaningful in their lives. Samia cared about the *ṭāḥūna* clients who stop in to buy just a little bit of spice (sometimes only 25 or 50 grammes because they could not afford to spare more than 50 cents on each ingredient). Shoppers showed their care as well: if what they wanted was not ready to be bought, or if the mixture they had brought over was not yet milled, clients would simply return the next day. '*Dīmā nāqṣa Samia*' (Samia is always missing something), joked a middle-aged man one morning when he could not find fresh turmeric. He was back the following afternoon, though.

Figure 30: A half empty spice bowl at Tātā Samia's

Coming to the *ṭāḥūna* to purchase something, many of Tātā Samia's recurrent clients ended up venting about their family, asking for advice on how to cure an ailment, or asking for help to solve imminent issues, while having a rest from the roughness of their daily life on the customer chair. In my notes, I often find traces of ordinary acts of mutual help that occurred at the *ṭāḥūna*:

> 'Today, a woman brought her own wheat to be ground. Handing over the bucket and stressing that she needed flour for bread (hence she wanted the grain milled accordingly), she also asked for the phone number of a common acquaintance to call about a potential job for one of her family members. Tātā Samia promised that she would call herself and report back the information later the same evening.'

Often, people *in need* would be redirected to Tātā Samia's. A woman who had just moved to the neighbourhood and needed somebody to help with carrying her furniture up to the apartment was sent to ask for help at the shop. 'The truck driver can't help, but he told me to come to the milling shop and ask for Tātā Samia. I saw you talking, and I thought I might be in the right place.' Tātā Samia welcomed the newcomer and started going through her phone contacts, saying 'Don't worry, we will find someone, are you all alone?'

Tātā Samia was also eloquent about her beliefs. Late one afternoon while closing up the shop, pushing back against the remarks of a friend of mine who had commented that 'she had never seen anybody helping anybody else for free', she declared that '*yhizzū bʿaḍhum'* ('picking each other up') was the only proper and righteous way to go through life. I argue that food provisioning at the *ṭāḥūna* and in the town more generally was a practice through which *the vulnerability* of everyday life experienced by both shoppers and vendors (a shortage of cash, dependence on social relations to solve ordinary issues) was *reconfigured* through a productive mode of action which invites *proximate* people, beyond the family, to 'pick each other up'. While not all the vendors I visited or spoke to would engage in as deep a display of care as Samia did, they all mentioned their care for good food and the people who stopped by their shops. Like Kamal in the previous section, many of the vendors I talked to used similar arguments to justify their choices in term of products, prices, and selling practices (including credit), acknowledging that in a place where the state feels absent, people providing basic services to the community have the moral obligation to care about what and how they operated on a daily basis.

6. Doing good for God

Tātā Samia's beliefs, as well as her everyday patient work in the *ṭāḥūna*, must have been suffused with her religious devotion. Both her constant tending to people's requests and her producing good food seemed to be a meditative experience for her, through which she felt she was 'doing good' for God. She selected quality raw

products from the market or from her trusted wholesaler, sifted them, ground them, and stored them in the right containers, and served clients while dispensing suggestions on crafting both food and life. Often in the evening, after shop hours, she loaded some of the bags of merchandise onto a truck sent to her house, where she continued working: roasting pulses, mixing ingredients, and sorting through the merchandise she stored in her garage to bring to the shop the next day.

Figure 31: *Bsīsa* (traditional drink) mixture ready to grind

With both her customers and myself, she demonstrated an infinite patience. Based on incidents in everyday life (for example reflecting on how other shops in town would sell unclean products, cheating the clients), the *ṭāḥūna* customers often engaged with Tātā Samia in discussions about how a proper Muslim is supposed to act and how hard it seems to live a proper life, proceeding *gad-gad* (along the exact or 'straight' path following God's prescriptions) in current troubled times. They spoke about how virtuous values have become out of fashion, or how many are overcome by the desire to affirm oneself through conquering the materiality of this world. Tātā Samia often quoted various passages from the Quran to frame her opinion. In her daily activities, attending to her customers or processing quality food, Tātā Samia enacted and embodied shared values of honesty, hard work, and mutual help, sketching the contours of moral personhood in a Muslim community. Her 'engagement in the lives of others across a multiplicity of singular social exchanges and situations in everyday life' (Henig and Makovicky 2017a) disclosed its centrality in Tātā Samia's production of self-worth (existential relevance) and respectability (social relevance) in the neighbourhood (see Reeves 2017). When Tātā Samia spoke

to me about her early days at the *ṭāḥūna*, 15 years earlier, opening up about her own past, she offered me so much more than contextual information:

> 'My sister was supposed to get married to my ex-husband. But she stood up for herself and she refused. I was a shy girl of 17 years and my mother then decided that I would take my sister's place. I said nothing at that time, and I become a mother, feeding all my children with patience, until my husband left me.'

After years of marriage made difficult by a hassling mother- and sister-in-law, Tātā Samia was left to raise five children alone after her ex-husband divorced her and re-married soon after the death of his own father. Left with a wretched house to live in with her five children, she had to find a dependable source of income. Initially she worked, with her two older boys helping her, as a reseller of second-hand clothes, and later the *ṭāḥūna* became her life project. 'I knew the place had not been in use for 10 years, and I knew that there was a milling machine I could rent as well, and I knew the owner. I did not know a thing about the job itself. I will teach myself, I thought back then. And so I did.' For Tātā Samia, the *ṭāḥūna* constituted the emotional and tangible place where she was able to re-negotiate her life experiences, to cultivate herself (Kleinman 2012) as a devoted caregiver, and to make sense of her existence through supporting and attending to people in her community. Her family history also helped me to unpack her recurrent rhetorical question as she sighed: 'People are *msākin* (poor, miserable), Sara*,* what would you do in my shoes?' Having emerged from a life of hardship, Tātā Samia managed to endure. She created a job for herself that allowed her to raise five children who are now all employed – with one studying in Turkey. She became an acknowledged institution in her neighbourhood, and was well known across the surrounding countryside as well. *ʾAy, naʿrafhā, maʿrūfa al-mrā*' ('yes, I know her, the woman is popular') one of my farmer informants told me one day while I was describing what I was currently doing with my time during Ramadan. As Kleinman notes, 'What is at stake is doing good, for others and for oneself, if need be, despite the emotional and material cost. Indeed, the rewards—unvoiced or explicit—can be transformative, going to the heart of who we are and what we can offer, or endure' (2012:1551). By repeating to me over and over that people are *msākin,* Tātā Samia included her own previous self in that category. She did not only do this: she also told a story of perseverance despite life's adversities, and a trust in God's generosity that protects all (*Rabbī yustur*). We are all *msākin* (poor and receivers) in front of God, Tātā Samia seemed to say.

Here, I build on Schaeublin (2019), Henig (2019), and Mittermaier (2019), writing respectively about Palestine, Bosnia, and Egypt, to discuss the everyday mutual care displayed by Samia and her customers in the frame of everyday ethics. Given that God is believed to sustain people materially and spiritually with abundance and his provisions reach people with different intensity (Schaeublin 2019), there is a moral and social responsibility to look after each other in Muslim communities. It is the moral responsibility of the receivers blessed with prosperity to redistribute some of their wealth to those who were not similarly blessed. There are prescribed patterns in Islam through which more affluent people are supposed to share their blessings through *zakāt* – an 'obligation to give away part of the wealth for the sake of others' (Schaeublin 2019:123). Thus, the everyday acts of generosity and mutual help among neighbours - what Mittermaier (2013) calls 'good deeds' or Schaeublin (2019) translates as *ṣadqa* - find their roots in this grand moral scheme. As stated above, Tātā Samia received God's generosity at one point in her life and is now redistributing it. At the *ṭāḥūna,* Tātā Samia's everyday ethical choices seem to reaffirm that we all are receivers of God as the 'sole and ultimate owner' (Hallaq 2009:296). Through provisioning quality food honestly, dispensing advice and connecting people, by offering credit and keeping her prices moderately low, Tātā Samia's generous acts construct her as a virtuous Muslim woman redistributing the many gifts that she has received from God.

7. Weighing food through different scales

Tātā Samia was a little disorganised with her provisioning for the shop, and this became evident during Ramadan time. Even though she had several days' worth of work lined up, she accepted new clients' mixtures to grind before she could finish the previous week's workload. I asked myself several times why she would take such a burden on herself, especially while fasting. Bags trailed from the shop out onto the sidewalk, shifting places as she constantly moved them back and forth according to their stage of processing. Spending half of her day grinding mixtures that people brought from their houses for a few *dīnār*, Tātā Samia focused less on her own products during Ramadan. One day, while trying to clean the dust and flour from the floor, she reflected:

> 'This would be a job for two, I would really love to focus on my own spices only. But "*el abed msākin*" (the people are miserable), what can I do? My sister came for a

> while last year and helped out, but then she wanted to get paid [or her husband wanted her to get paid according to the sister's version], and I couldn't afford it really. And here it is not like the other *tawābil* shops. There are many *tawābil* who cheat and cut the curcuma turmeric with chickpea powder, for example. Indeed, people forget to observe God's commands and that's the result. I used to go to the other *ṭāḥūna* in town before getting my own machine for peppers, and they were just cheating people, I saw that. The sorghum they would sell into bigger sewn-up bags and that's it, you couldn't check inside, but they would sell it without sifting, with the dirt still inside.'

As a hard-working devoted woman, Samia's story was different, as she was doing work that was 'good for God'. I started to doubt whether she was taking her own time into account when she did the calculations to establish her prices. For example, her process for making *shurba shʿīr* (barley soup), a staple during Ramadan and a regular appetizer for daily meals. She sifts the cereal once or twice, then she needs to grind it for the first time. The ground barley then needs to be beaten with an improvised tool: Samia selects a long wooden stick to remove the excess chaff. Before beating, she wets the barley a little to keep the chaff from flying everywhere in the shop. At night, she takes the barley home, and roasts it on the large stoves she has installed there. It is roasted only a little so that it does not taste like roasted chickpea hummus*,* which is a totally different job. The next day, she sifts the grains once more, and mills them. After all of this time-intense work, Samia is concerned that people might not be able to afford the final product, so she keeps the price moderately low. Again, I find in my notes, 'People are *msākin*, I don't want to raise the price to more than 10 *dīnār* like the others'.[80] She told me that she would finish the milling and see how much came out (from the original quantity of grains) before determining the final price. 'You know right after the harvest I can keep the price low, because barley is everywhere, but now I have to see.' She would buy either from the farmer whom she knew, or from trustworthy people at the market, in which case she was not really able to sell without aligning with the market price herself.

Samia's thoughts and ethical dilemmas on the one side and her tiring food processing work on the other, demonstrated how labour-intensive and burdensome doing good for others was, while maintaining her operating standards (food quality)

[80] In the summertime, before the new harvest, other vendors would sell barley for up to 12 or 13 *dīnār* per kg. Considering that barley soup is a staple food, the price was quite high for a low-income family.

intact. Similar ethical concerns resonate in the literature across different contexts. Paxson (2013) worked with artisanal cheese producers in the US, which allowed the author to similarly observe how decisions concerning what cheese to make and how to produce it (which ingredients and techniques to select) often required never-ending negotiations between economic and moral values. Paxson argues that. 'as a commodity sold in the market, artisanal cheese is a manifestation of the capitalist economic enterprise – but its production is not strictly governed by the industrial logic of economic efficiencies' (2013:12). Paxson refers to a very incisive expression to describe the ruminations and negotiations of artisanal cheesemakers in the US around the sustainability of their business and methods – 'qualculation or qualitative calculations' (2013:70). Henig's (2019) work in (Henig 2019) similarly challenges claims about the pervasive effect of neoliberalisation on everyday life. Henig's work highlights and captures the complex religious, ethical, and divine economies at work when people exchange favours, gifts, or acts of generosity (see also Mittermaier 2013). Both the literature on caregiving as well as that on the economic 'theology of divine abundance' (Henig 2019) note how the logic of nurturing / caregiving relates more to practices of gift giving and receiving among a community of care than logics concerned with financial exchanges (Kleinman 2012). This seemed to be the case at the *ṭāḥūna* as well. Tātā Samia was generous with her own time and careful in establishing a fair price, but not only this.

With time, Tātā Samia trusted me with serving the customers while she was busy with grinding. In charge of weighing spices and flours for the customer, for the first month I struggled with understanding how the scale itself worked. My grandfather had taught me to use a similar one back home, and I tried to apply what I knew to my new task, but I just could not get it right. Worried about getting the right measurement, I would call Tātā Samia, busy grinding in the other room, to verify that I was reading the scales properly. She would look at the scale and say, 'almost right', adding a bit of extra product for the customer. I would insist with Tātā Samia that the weight should correspond to the quantity of goods served; hence the plates of the scale should equally align. However, Tātā Samia kept correcting my measurements, adding some extra spice or cereals to the customer's plate. 'How come?' I kept asking, 'I don't understand how the scale works!' 'That's the right way to do it,' she would repeat, 'that's how we do it.' One day, though, she added a quote from the Quran. At that point, though I was unable to decipher the classical Arabic of the

sacred book, I finally came to understand that we were measuring with different scales.

Figure 32: The scale conundrum

Schaeublin's work, exploring a triadic model of gift-giving informed by Islamic morality (2019), helps me to further illustrate my point: *homemade* ingredients and food with their tangible values (taste and fair prices) as well as intangible values (Tātā Samia's knowledge and care for the bodies and souls of her customers) are gifts circulating from God's generosity. These gifts move through Tātā Samia's hand, landing on the customers who are compelled to reciprocate as they can (being a trustworthy customer, picking each other up) - hence reproducing a community of care that redistributes God's gifts.

A sense of belonging to a precarious world and the exchange of 'moral responsibilities, emotional sensibility and social capital' (Kleinman 2012:1551) was created when homemade food was sold and bought at the *ṭāḥūna*, affirming that good food was worth it, even if one cannot afford it on the spot. While exchanging homemade food, other fundamental matters of life were also reaffirmed as well: there are values that mattered, that lasted, in a threatening fast-paced, ever-changing society. As witnessed at other times when small instances of generosity and care took place among neighbours, in the *ṭāḥūna* the good deeds of both customers and owners addressed their personal quests for salvation. In addition and more importantly, these acts challenged the solely calculative and accumulative logic diffused especially among the political and economic elite, but which also subtly pervaded the survival

strategies of some segments of the Tunisian population.

Put differently, mediated by the moral imperative of 'redistributing care for God', mutuality and caring practices among owners and customers in Tātā Samia's and ʿAmm Kamal's neighbourhoods make clear for us how the economy is 'imagined, expressed, practiced and cosmologically framed by different actors in the region' (Henig and Makovicky 2017b:4).

8. Conclusion

This chapter began its analysis by observing how despite the appeal of the modern apparatus of food standardisation that offers fast sourcing, cheap prices, and wide-ranging varieties of food products, supermarket operations in town had not displaced the local retail food ecosystem. All of my informants sourced good, familiar food contextually and strategically, using multiple shopping venues to better account for their time and money. Further, especially as highlighted in the core of the chapter, widespread moral dispositions fostered practices of mutual help among proximate people from similar walks of life and who were constrained by similar hardships. Relationships of care among vendors and customers, while allowing those corner shops to face (not without hardship) the threat posed by competition from supermarkets, extended the mutual help networks beyond the family, contributing to construct a neighbourhood as a place where local solidarities are enacted through what I called networks of proximity. As we saw in the introductory vignette, Tātā Samia was called '*māmā*' by many in the neighbourhood. Similarly, ʿAmm Kamal's corner shop was a sort of a local 'institution', as ʿAmm Kamal knew everybody in the neighbourhood and had useful leads for any problems his customers might be facing. Through discussing Tātā Samia and ʿAmm Kamal's everyday caring work in their shops, I interrogated the formation of networks of proximity in their respective neighbourhoods. In particular, the material highlights how people were 'picking each other up', supporting each other by reciprocating favours, borrowing and lending from each other in times of crisis, and asking for contacts to solve issues: in other words, preventing one another from falling under the threshold of a normal, dignified existence. These practices represented a diffused ethical attitude that each person cultivated with different levels of intensity in response to different social and moral pressures.

This was the case for Khāltī Giuda, who was buying bulk tuna from an travelling salesperson for her neighbour's family, who were preparing to celebrate their son's engagement later that summer. Showing me her kitchen and seeing my puzzlement at the huge amount of 2-kilogramme cans of tuna piled up in a cabinet, she sighed. 'What can I do, people know that I had saved some money, and I know they have expenses coming up. The travelling salesperson offered a very good price, so they asked me to buy some extra for the party. They will return me the money after, when they can.' Small acts of kindness or generosity were also celebrated in a performatory way, turning a stranger into kin.' *ʿayshik ʾukhtī, ʿayshik khūya*' ('thank you sister, thank you brother') – performing a person into a family member – were customary ways to express gratitude towards perfect strangers who watched your groceries while you went into another shop, or walked with you for a while to point you in the right direction, or toward a friend who lent their car to you.

The analysis has also shown how such ordinary mutual acts of help and the caring practices exchanged around food provisioning were subjected to the evaluation of others in order to perform their intended purpose. Being a proper shopkeeper, being able to maintain a good reputation, and showing one's face in the neighbourhood proudly by offering good food and honest[81] prices for it - in other words, mingling care for others with the logic of commerce - was also a burdensome and tiring affair, as both ʿAmm Kamal and Tātā Samia's moral reasoning and acts showed. The material hence has begun to allude to the more wearying aspects of everyday self-cultivation towards becoming a good person, especially if one is situated within networks of proximity and mutual help practices in a broader historical trajectory characterised by the state's neglect towards the low-income population.

Finally, if networks of proximity around food provisioning were constructed upon acts of care and generosity towards each other, in order to overcome ordinary and extraordinary impasses or necessities, then it is also possible to wonder about the limits of such networks. In other words, who remained outside of such networks, and what were the possible lasting productive effects on social change of these networks?

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[81] As seen in the previous chapter, cheating on food quality -for example, by offering '*makhsush*' products (selling pulses without sifting, putting chemical colouring in cooking paste, etc.) - was a surely less tiring operation and an equally common game in town for vendors. However, customers would soon comment and advise each other against the deceitful and greedy sellers. Shops then would close down as quickly as they were set up.

As detailed by the material, among my low-income informants' networks, expressions of ordinary acts of care, kindness, and generosity were essential to everyday material survival, and central to their understanding of proper living - enmeshed with the lives of others. Combining the analysis on care practices with a contextualisation of the country's economic structures across different scales, Chapters 4 and 6 will offer a shadow reflection of this chapter, examining how care practices, in specific my informants relational work[82] can re-produce inequality instead of challenging it (Thelen 2015). Hence, what follows will also point to the frailties of the networks of proximity described here, illuminating instead the complex nexus of power relations at play among people from different walks of life.

[82] As noted in the Introduction, I employ this expression to denote how people relied on their social relations to access different networks of proximity as a productive investment of their time (see also Brković 2022; Thelen, Vetters, and von Benda-Beckmann 2014; Venkatesan 2010).

Chapter 4: Social-spatial marginalities in the re-making

Addressing the importance of displaying 'caring relationships' for strengthening what I called 'networks of proximity', the previous chapter showed how people supported each other's navigation towards social reproduction in the everyday. As the struggles around making a living through food or provisioning for the household were always existentially and materially conceived, I showed the construction of the neighbourhood as a moral space in which clients, shop owners, and neighbours could rely on each other in times of scarcity and gain social acknowledgement through their everyday good deeds. This chapter will complement those reflections by showing the 'oppressive side of care' (Thelen 2021), noting the possible failures of networks of proximity and their inherent mutual help logics in supporting people's normal, good living (in particular for people located at the margins of social hierarchies).

> Youmna was one of my first contacts in Zaghouan. After meeting her as a member of the Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment (OSAE, a network of farmers and young activists based in Tunis) early in the spring of 2018, I instinctively asked her to recommend a young woman who could look after my baby when I resumed fieldwork the following autumn. This was how her daughter, Ola, became my baby's carer, and by extension Youmna's family became some of my most intimate acquaintances in Zaghouan.
>
> I only realised the seriousness of Youmna's family's economic conditions toward the beginning of the next summer, when Ola started asking for advances on her wages in the middle of week.[83] I knew that her mother (who was known in the region and among young activists in Tunis as an expert in the processing of medicinal herbs, essential oils, and *ʿarbī* food sold through her personal networks and markets) worked hard, and at times struggled to cover her family's expenses at the end of the month. Over the previous months of fieldwork, I had come to realise this was a normal situation in people's lives across different backgrounds – one could even joke about running out of money towards the end of the month. So I did not worry too much

[83]We agreed to weekly payments of 200 TDN (66 euro) per week (5 days, from 9:30 am to 4 pm), which amounted to around 900 TDN monthly (approximately 300 euros), depending on how many extra hours I asked her to cover for us. As I asked for suggestions for a fair salary, I was told this amount was more than a primary school teacher would earn. I was concerned that I was hindering the young woman's opportunities to enter vocational training, and I hoped that the amount would allow her to save up and later enroll in vocational training.

> when Ola started to ask for her money in advance in the early summer. I only came to understand how things had turned more serious after the pattern repeated for a couple of weeks in a row, and I asked her what was happening. Ola confided that her mother was mostly out of work in the summer when her clients - mostly middle-class women from town or the capital - left for holidays and the weather was too hot to host food festivals. Later on, Youmna herself told me about the increase in the cost of the cow's food, the advance she had to find to buy more wheat from her neighbours and to pay the women who would have processed it with her at the end of the harvest, and the repayments for the new TV they had purchased when Chieb, her son, broke their old one in a fir of anger – as a household without a television was a sad one.

The material below, responding to recent calls for scholars to engage with vernacular understandings of precarity in the Global South (Hinkson 2017; Kasmir 2018; Neilson and Rossiter 2005), grounds the analysis in the local experiences of Tunisian families who have long navigated fragile lives. This chapter frames precarity as an ontological shared condition common to human experience (Butler 2004) and simultaneously a manifestation of systemic vulnerability ingrained in a specific place and time (Han 2018; Hinkson 2017; Muehlebach 2013; Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Weston 2012). I will hence bridge precarity as a conceptual tool[84] with the historical process of socio-spatial marginalisation, shedding light on the construction of Tunisia as highly stratified country in which a large part of its population experience precarious living conditions (Ayeb and Bush 2019). As seen in the thesis Introduction, the two dimensions of marginality (social and spatial) shed light on the historically sedimented processes in Tunisia through which part of the population has been included in society in a disadvantaged position since independence (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Ayeb and Zemni 2015). Social marginalisation has affected both the poorer classes and rural populations across Tunisia through hindering their access to public services while stigmatising the places in which they live (popular neighborhoods or the countryside). Spatial marginalisation instead refers to the

[84] Within the social sciences, for more than forty years precarity has been interrogated as a pervasive and life-structuring condition intimately connected to the constant transformation of work and life under late capitalism, affecting not only social interactions but also people's imagination, values, and affects. Despite precarity and precariousness having been mostly employed as part of critiques of post-Fordist societies (especially Japan, Europe, and North America), more recent analyses have highlighted that in such societies, wage stability was 'always limited in its scope and partial in its impact' (Kasmir 2018:4), (see also Allison 2012; Neilson and Rossiter 2005). In this sense, the concept, in its innumerable manifestations, can be better described as the prevalent mode of securing livelihoods for the majority of labouring people across the world (Kasmir 2018).

process of differential inclusion of the Tunisian regions in the state's development plans.[85]

In particular in inland and southern regions, scant state investments and no clear strategies to leverage local resources have contributed to the development of what Meddeb (2012) calls 'survival economies', with much of the vulnerable population relying on informal activities and mutual help networks to get by. The specificity of the Tunisian socio-economic milieu, however, with the so-called informal sector accounting for between 30-40% of the national GDP and the proceeds from informal activities reinvested into formal distribution channels, makes the distinction between the two sectors (formal and informal) evidently futile (Meddeb 2017; Santini and Pontiggia 2019). Indeed, scholars have frequently noted how in Tunisia, both illegal and informal practices are intimately connected to the ways in which space, sovereignty, and capital have intertwined to re-create inequality (Hibou 2011b; Meddeb 2016; Pontiggia 2017; Santini and Pontiggia 2019). The pre-revolutionary literature on the country has in fact highlighted how informality in Tunisia constitutes a practice at the heart of politics and of the Tunisian state's exercise of power (Hibou 2011). Structured as closely intertwined circuits, with the proceeds from illegal and informal activities reinvested into formal distribution channels through local markets, formality and informality have been feeding one another while both are being controlled by the central government. Again, the existing literature emphasises how informality, especially during the Ben Ali era (1987-2011), has contributed to maintaining a certain degree of social stability. Heavily based on patronage and clientelism, in those years informality was coupled with other consolidated practices of governing such as the distribution of subsidies and police securitisation (Feltrin 2018; Hibou 2011; Meddeb 2011, 2012; Pontiggia and Santini 2019).

By examining Youmna's struggles to sweat for her everyday bread in detail, as she attempts to navigate a state of permanent precarity by processing and selling *ʿarbī* food, this chapter pushes such scholarship forward. While reflecting on the multiple productive effects of her 'relational work',[86] I highlight the ethical

[85] At a different scale, it also infers the disadvantaged political inclusion of Tunisia within the Mediterranean.

[86] As noted in the Introduction and in the previous chapter, I employ this expression to denote how people relied on their social relations to access different networks of proximity as a productive investment of their time (see also Brković 2022; Thelen, Vetters, and von Benda-Beckmann 2014; Venkatesan 2010).

negotiations at play as people strive to escape the uncertainty and arbitrariness of life at the margins.

The chapter begins by exploring the vernacular idioms and discourses surrounding people's attempts to juggle diverse streams of income to afford a good and normal life. Simultaneously, it observes how those idioms and discourses convey distinctive moral and social evaluations. Since much of the Tunisian population's cross-class struggle against everyday precarity was managed by pulling strings – obtaining credit, relying on relations to access services or jobs, borrowing money from family or friends – the second part of the chapter addresses the intense (and at times excruciating) moral reasoning accompanying my interlocutors' struggles for social reproduction. The material shows how my informants acknowledge the moral ambiguity of such practices, reflecting on and evaluating their and others' relational work through ethical considerations, negotiating among religious, political, and social rubrics (Deeb and Harb 2013). Finally, the chapter, seeking to avoid prescriptive analysis, addresses the frailties of the relational work underlying some of my informants' networks of proximities. By discussing the complexities of a highly stratified social milieu, I show how class, gender, family origins and seniority structuring Tunisian society are crucial for explaining how people were differently able to leverage networks of proximity and aspire to better lives.

The material will hence show how mutual support logics and the relational work of people who are well positioned in local hierarchies facilitate their race for bread (accumulation of resources, social mobility, etc.). When triggered by people in disadvantaged positions, these strategies and tactics often reveal their fragile character. Leveraged to ease people's struggles for social reproduction, everyday mutual help practices and accommodation logics often contributed instead to reproducing the unequal system and marginalities they were trying to escape from.

1. Juggling and judging each other's race for bread

1.1. Struggling for social reproduction: mixing and matching different income sources

This section discusses Youmna's struggles for social reproduction and her attempts to offer a good, normal present and future to her two children. From there, I reflect more widely on how, within 'survival economies' (Meddeb 2011), mixing and

matching different streams of income and juggling different occupations and engagements were cross-class strategies that people resorted to in aspiring towards a good, normal life. Finally, in the context of a highly stratified society, the section observes how different local idioms were employed to denote different degrees of prestige and social acknowledgment of people's life paths.

Youmna's rural origins excluded her from pursuing certain opportunities, such as formal higher education, while it opened others. At the time of my fieldwork, Youmna and her children lived in Oued Sbahiya, a hilly rural area thirty minutes by car from Zaghouan. As I learned, Oued Sbahiya was one of the areas currently considered by its urban neighbours as a 'shadow area' (*manātiq al-ḍill*), or a 'place beyond the street signs' (*wrā al-blāyik*), expressions borrowed from the derogatory populist rhetoric of the Ben Ali era. The term was employed to indicate under-developed areas of the country where the absence of light inferred both the lack of materiality, infrastructure, and services necessary for conducting a good, normal life (decent education and health systems, roads, water supply to the houses), as well as the lack of initiative from the inhabitants to progress and advance as 'proper' Tunisians (see Chapter 1 and the thesis Introduction for more on the hegemonic discourse surrounding *Tunisianité*, Tunisian identity).

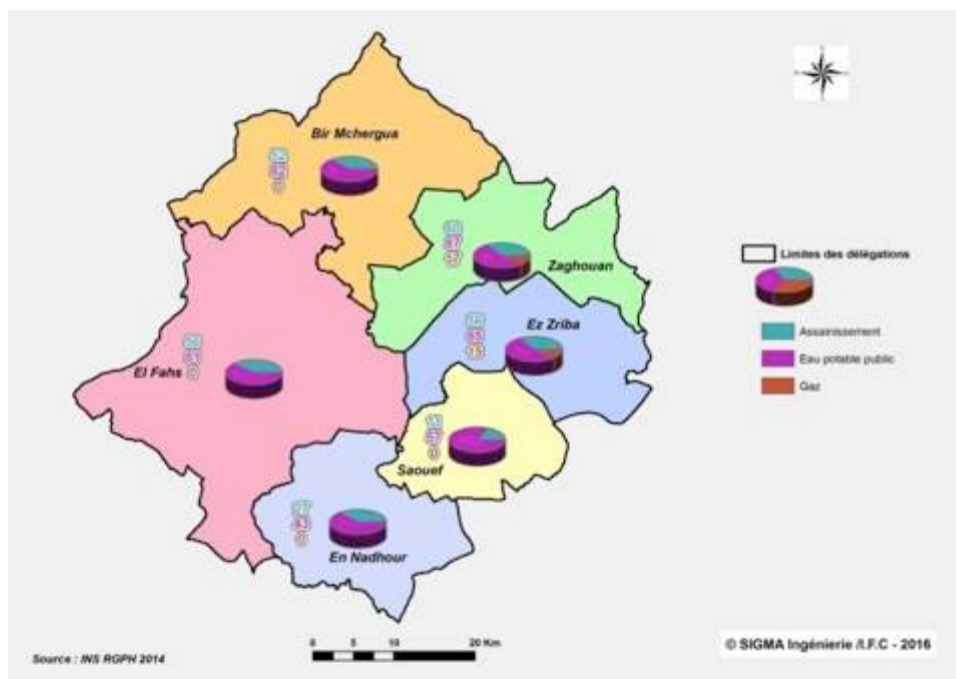

Figure 33: Public services access rate (sewage system, public potable water, gas). Source (Hammami et al. 2017:30)

Youmna, who had divorced when her children were young, lived with her children (Ola, then 19, and Chieb, 20), sharing a bedroom in Youmna's childhood

home at the top of a hill in Oued Sbahiya. Youmna's mother and one of her sisters also lived in the same household, but they did not share meals, chores, the home budget, or help with the cows that Youmna was raising at the time. Together, however, they cultivated the almost one hectare of land behind their house with wheat (an ancient variety) for self-consumption.

Figure 34: Broken road to Oued Sbahiya, the place beyond the street signs

Figure 35: Oued Sbahiya's lush countryside in early spring

Over the years, Youmna had turned her skills in the processing of medicinal herbs, essential oils, and *ʿarbī* food into a source of livelihood. At the time I met her, and for several years before that, she had been in charge of facilitating work among

women at the GDFA[87] (Women Farmer's Development Association), which had been set up within the wider frame of a Regional Project for Participatory Upland Conservation, sponsored by the FAO in 1995. The project – started in her native region mainly as a development project focused on land and water conservation – added a micro-credit component, allowing interested women to undertake economic income-generating activities, and Youmna leveraged her skills as a herbalist and food processing expert to embark on a series of livelihood projects on which she relied to sustain her family. Despite the daily pressures she faced since she took upon herself the task of organising work at the association a couple of years earlier, Youmna enjoyed the freedom that this kind of entrepreneurial work offered her. While trying to appease everyday jealousies among women and manage their requests in term of daily jobs, training, and payments, Youmna, together with the other women, collected the wild mountain herbs and berries and processed, packaged, and stored them.

Figure 36**: Oued Sbahiya products at a food festival in Tunis**

Despite the hard work and the often low returns,[88] Youmna loved her occupation. 'I love working on my own', she told me one day after I commented on

[87] Initially, the group's activities consisted mainly of selling veterinary products and animal feed, renting out small equipment, and providing veterinary services. Later, the group introduced other activities to diversify its interventions and income sources, such as organising a collective project of forest exploitation (i.e., the collection of Aleppo pine seeds), a collective pea harvesting project, an aromatic plants distillation project, selling legume seeds, food processing activities, etc. (Gana 2013).

[88] Zaghouan itself, as Youmna often lamented, was not a good place to sell her products, because every *mrā ḥurra* (see Chapter 1, skilled - hence free - women who were often the 'manager' of their household) possessed

the difficulty of making her own income month after month. '*Yikhdim ʿla rūḥū*, or 'working on one's own', was a vernacular expression often employed when I inquired about someone's employment. It implied a certain degree of *autonomy* from impositions of authority, especially employers who could often be high-handed. Most of all, it meant work that offered at least partial control in one's quest to make a living. Possibly connected with the value of autonomy in historical ranking systems - in which a 'proper man' should work free of supervision, upholding trust and respect among 'equal' individuals as the only mechanisms of social constraint (Hopkins 1977) - working on one's own conveyed a sense of respect (*qdar*) for hardworking people who mostly relied on their own entrepreneurial skills to make a living.

For Youmna, in any case, '*yikhdim ʿla rūḥū'* was, at least at that time, much more preferable than working at a factory, as she had when she was still married. With difficult shifts, degrading working conditions including monthly contracts without benefits and poor treatment of workers within facilities,[89] a two-hour daily commute from the countryside, low pay, and chores awaiting her return – humans, plants, and animals to attend to – she decided to quit both husband and employment. After her marriage was ended,[90] she decided that her work at the association, which for her represented meaningful work, would temporarily sufficed, providing her and her two little children with the means for sustenance, as her ex-husband re-married and did not provide his children with additional support. In some ways, Youmna's life choices recall the literature on the precarious lives of women described in the peripheries of Rio (Millar 2014) There, the disrupted living conditions at the social margins clashed with the ordered living conditions required by formal employment. Millar examined the fragile conditions punctuating the dumpster collectors' lives as enabling of what she calls 'relational autonomy' (2014). A quasi 'refuge', the work at

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part of that food knowledge, and anyway most households could not afford to pay premium quality prices for food staples (such as her couscous made with indigenous wheat) or her beauty products. Due to this, Youmna and the GFDA mostly made their money through sporadic fairs in the capital or the richer coastal regions, or sold raw products to customers who were able to brand and market them better, such as in central shops in the capital, through hotels, or even abroad. Some of the upper-class employees at the regional Ministry of Agriculture and a few other wealthier families in the region were recurrent clients of the group.

[89] Work at the factory was always 'on demand', one month on and the next off, and conditions were often abusive.

[90] Zaghouan's population census (National Institute of Statistics 2014) reports the divorce rate of women over 15 as 1.2 per 1000 inhabitants per year, slightly lower than the country's average of 1.84% (the census differentiated between urban and rural contexts, reporting the divorce rate at 0.84% for regional rural areas, and 1.75% for urban ones). I often observed a subtle social stigma around divorce, especially expressed through charitable tones commenting on the status of divorced women and their children: 'you know the poor one is divorced'.

the dump, selling items for cash according to one's time and need, allowed collectors to attend to other important matters as part of their uncertain lives.

While her children were still young, working in Oued Sbahiya and processing wild mountain herbs and berries into value-added products for cooking or curative purposes similarly allowed Youmna to foster her relationships, sustaining parental and family obligations, while also dedicating time to other income-generating activities. Further, declaring that she would 'work for one's self' ('*yikhdim ʿla rūḥū*) allowed her to avoid the social stigma associated with working for a factory, a 'meaningless' job for a middle-aged woman. The expression in fact was commonly employed to gloss over and avoid a direct positioning of one's occupation in society, circumventing undesirable comments or possible judgment, especially for jobs that included a labour component and that were considered by middle-class Tunisians as low status, hands-on occupations.

Figure 37: Youmna working at the Oued Sbahiya *majmaʿ* (rural women's association)

Differently from the *catadores* in Rio that Millar discusses, however, for Youmna working independently at the *majmaʿ* (rural women association), especially with the children growing up and the household's consumption needs increasing, did not provide a sufficient and stable income. She had to integrate her *majmaʿ* activities with extra work: breeding cows she purchased through credit to sell calves; making *lban* (curdled milk) and milk to sell in town; leading hikes for tourists through the hills, and hosting and cooking for groups of visitors connected to the 'solidarity' tourism circuit in Tunis, activated through the development project that her association was part of. She was constantly developing new ideas for added value food products that she could run independently from the *majmaʿ*, and which she tried to sell through her multiple middlemen contacts, not always successfully. When all of

this did not suffice, especially during the winter and summer periods when life (and consequently sales) were slower, she would ask for help - reaching out to her sister in Italy or going to the local NGO based in Zaghouan to ask for a loan: it supported its 'clients' by lending small amounts of money. As we will see in the following chapters, pluri-activities on the farm or multiple livelihoods on the outskirts of town better explains the myriads of paths through which people make a living, and reminds us that especially among vulnerable populations, meagre wages are but one social relation among many (Denning 2010). Youmna's decision to invest in the processing and sale of *ʿarbī* food products hence structured much of her activities around harvest periods, while she organised her other engagements accordingly.

Like Youmna, many people in Zaghouan, in the absence of stable employment, often organised their work around specific seasons, or *mwāsim*. During Ramadan or around *Eid* time, many street vendors (mostly men) appeared on the streets with stands or carts selling seasonal or festive sweets, toys, or clothing.[91] During the summer, these same people might become unregistered taxi drivers (renting friends' or family cars), ad-hoc construction workers, or *khaddāma* (workers) in the fields.[92] While the trafficking of tobacco, clothes, electronics, and petrol constituted the bulk of the informal activities - especially in other border regions - the 'informal' economy across the country was comprised of microenterprises (of less than 6 workers) working without registration, avoiding taxes, and lacking any kind of social protection for the workers (Pontiggia 2017). In Zaghouan, too, with an overall regional unemployment rate of 16% (14% for males and 21% for females, rising significantly in rural delegations[93]), unregistered activities such as mechanical garages and wood workshops held a significant place in the population's race for bread. The population that engaged in such activities – a long insecure, unprotected, and over-exploited workforce – can be better described vernacularly as '*ydabbrū fī rūshom*', which describes one's relentless search for new economic opportunities while juggling existing ones.

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[91] Every family I met had a least one or more woman in their kin network who was involved in trading second-hand clothes coming from the capital or shipped internationally, mostly through Egypt or Turkey.

[92]Middle-aged women from rural areas in particular, such as Youmna, constituted a coveted workforce since they could be paid less than men (15 versus 20 dinars per day) while at the same time being hardworking and more reliable than men.

[93] Each governorate is divided into 'delegations' or 'districts' and further subdivided into municipalities and sectors.

This expression, different from '*yikhdim ʿala rūḥū*' (working on one's own, gaining a respected existence through hard work), was used instead to signal the frail, insecure conditions of those who struggled every day to make a living. Describing the hardships of those forced to constantly re-think stratagems and daily tactics to bring home bread*, ydabbrū fī rūshom* highlights the instability of a person's life path, despite that person's efforts through daily navigation of scant opportunities. For this category of people who are 'living on the edge' (Meddeb 2011) - engaged in casual random work - preserving a semblance of good, respectful living while fighting daily uncertainties and arbitrariness was hard. For Youmna, the vernacular expressions describing the effort of battling long-lasting precarity, juggling different unstable jobs (*ydabbrū fī rūshom*'*)* and working on her own (*yikhdim ʿla rūḥū*) both applied.

Figure 38: Youmna selling *ʿarbī* products at a food festival in Tunis

Finally, highlighting how hardships in making a living were experienced across class, even a lower-middle level job within the public sector (in state companies, administrations, or the public service) could not be considered as a secure source of income. Until the 1980s, such jobs were regarded as a marker of success in a person's life path, or a *musmār fī ḥīṭ* (literally 'a nail in the wall'). Following the 1990s wage contractions in Tunisia, however, a post in the informal sector could now probably provide higher returns than one in the public sector (Pontiggia 2017;

Schielke 2012; Vacchiano 2021). Due to the low pay in the public sector, many of the people I spoke to had to manage a secondary activity to complement their public employment salaries (see also Feltrin 2018; Pontiggia 2017, 2018). Similarly, private business ventures were considered profitable but risky to embark on without diversifying or having wide social networks or economic resources to draw upon. As my informant Kadri, Jasmine's husband, explained (see Chapters 1 and 2), different business streams would salvage each other. He and his brother managed a stock of school materials in Tataouine, reaching Tunis and Zaghouan as sale markets. Simultaneously, Kadri managed a smaller business selling 'green' home detergents. His cousin Rafat, a geologist who studied at one of the best universities in Tunis and worked for a construction company there, nevertheless embarked on strenuous, long weekend trips to manage consultancies in the South of the country, contracting for European companies extracting oil. Rafat never ceased searching for better jobs and gigs, despite his current multiple income streams guaranteeing him a good income. He was seriously concerned about the volatility of the local economy and the awful contractual conditions in the private sector: he could find himself without a job from day to night, he stressed many times to me. Part of Rafat's income was directed to his extended family in Tataouine, and he also was covering the expenses of his younger brother who was enrolled in university in Tunis and shared an apartment with him. At 33 years old, Rafat was not married.

Summing up, this section discussed how mixing and matching multiple activities was a very common strategy that allowed a large section of the Tunisian population (across classes) to navigate 'survival economies' (Meddeb 2011, 2012, 2020). I also argue that the run to earn everyday normal bread was for many of my informants an obstacle race, one which was exposed to the scrutiny of others. While autonomous employment (private businesses, but also matching different informal/petty businesses '*yikhdim ʿla rūḥū*') conferred a sense of respect, working in the public sector was socially acknowledged as guaranteeing a stable – though quite meagre – income. In addition there were the struggles of a large part of the Tunisian population who were managing different streams of income to make ends meet (seasonal engagements, insecure factory jobs, seasonal work on other people farms, working for other people as salespeople, contraband). *Ydabbrū fī rūshom*' (juggling different unstable jobs) signalled the strenuous effort required as people searched constantly for new opportunities in the attempt to lead good, normal lives. The next

section will delve into another aspect of my informants' race for bread, examining how people rely on their networks of proximity for support to complement their efforts at social reproduction. Many of my interlocutors supported each other as best they could, but also talked of each other's performances, judging and evaluating each others' conducts.

1.2. What constitutes need? Moral reasoning around asking for and receiving support

As discussed in the Introduction, local 'survival economies' across the country were the result of the clear political will of integrating spaces according to their relevance to national development plans (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Meddeb 2011; Pontiggia 2017). While the previous section revealed the complexities of the strategies that people rely upon to aspire to normal lives by matching and mixing different streams of income, this section unpacks the ethical negations underpinning people's race for bread. In the attempt to escape the vulnerability ingrained in such a differently inclusive system (Hibou 2006, 2011b, 2011a; Meddeb 2011, 2012; Pontiggia 2017), people also leverage their networks of proximity, reaching out to friends, acquaintances or their extended family to solve issues, and access material or social support. By observing my informants' requests for help and the reasoning based on local moralities underlying these requests, I show how people face many of their hurdles by ethically framing their own and others' conduct. Employed to navigate different aspects of life (from accessing jobs or services, to obtaining significant loans or daily credit for provisioning) my informants' requests also elicited moral queries, such as: how should one share resources and with who, or who is entitled to receive help and what constitutes need? (Brković 2022; Makovicky and Henig 2022). Despite residing in Zaghouan, Jasmine (see Chapters 1 and 2) managed a clothing shop in Tataouine, her hometown. She hired a young woman to manage sales, while she took care of the shop's business and financial management from afar. Surfing online to scout for new fashions to order from Turkey or Egypt, she dealt with import logistics as well as online marketing through a Facebook page. Part of her daily management involved dealing with customers' payments, which often happened through multiple instalments. 'Women were crying while buying clothes for Eid this summer', Jasmine confided after a hard day spent on the phone with some of her clients, reminding them of the need to cover their deferred payments. 'But then, why

do they buy then?’ I asked. ‘They are mothers, and they want to, don’t you want your child to look good for the festivities?’ she answered. As also underlined by Jasarevic in her work in Bosnia (2012:31), some of the informants I met did ‘suffer through their purchasing’. After several weeks spent anguishing over her clients’ delays in repaying their debts, and also after asking a cousin of hers in Spain for a loan, Jasmine resorted to asking me for help. Suppliers would not extend the date for her payment, and she did not want to ask her husband Kadri for money, as she wanted to avoid arguing about her venture with him. Kadri had dismissed Jasmine’s business many times in the past, especially at times when Jasmine was worrying about cash flow issues.

> ‘Just close it down, he says, but he has no clue. He doesn’t realise how much I rely on it to buy stuff I need for myself and for the girls. Last summer, he didn’t have to add anything to the food budget and house bills – he just did not ask me where the rest of the money for our daily needs – shampoo, shoes, clothes – came from, but it was all from my business’.

When I brought over the sum of money requested, Jasmine squeezed me into a hard hug, calling me the sister she never had.

When I recounted what had happened with Jasmine to Youmna, who I considered my closest friend in town, she scolded me.

> ‘Sara, you call her your friend, but I tell you, she is not your friend. If she were your friend, she would have not asked. She is not in need; her husband owns two businesses. True friends ask each other for help when they are really in need, for food on the table or to pay the rent, and when don’t have anybody else to resort to’.

By judging Jasmine on her request for help, Youmna set boundaries and placed a moral judgment on the practices of mutual help and solidarities that punctate people’s everyday race for bread. As seen in Chapter 3, friendships were constituted through and by reciprocating care for each other, exchanging favours that were expected one day to be returned (Abu-Zahra 1974). [94] There, the material highlighted how social-economic vulnerabilities produced what I called ‘networks of proximity’ as social systems enabling people to rely on each other in times of need. ‘Helping

[94] Based on the ideas expressed by ‘*bināthom mzāya* (favours among two persons) (Abu-Zahra 1974:125) and by *ʾin shāʾ ʾAllāh yjī nhār bāsh nrajjaʿ al-mzāyā* (God willing one day I will return the favour).

each other out and picking each other up' – as giving dispositions cultivated *in primis* through histories and pedagogies[95] acquired within the kin group – thus constructed wider sociality among proximate people beyond one's kin group.

Figure 39: Preparing bread for lunch at Oued Sbahiya

Here, I highlight how different requests for help, situated in a highly stratified social context, were indeed subjected to moral evaluation. Whereas exchanging favours set up the contours of a friendship, an inappropriate request for help could also dissolve them (Abu-Zahra 1974). In Zaghouan, friends borrowed each other's cars and money, asked to delay rent or grocery payments, looked after each other's' children, etc. All of these transactions hold economic consequences, but they were not fully comprehensible only in terms of cost-benefit evaluations, but rather they were actions subjected to social scrutiny and central to the construction or disruption of social respect and personal reputation (Henig and Makovicky 2017a). Youmna's moral reasoning concerning Jasmine's request for help was certainly experientially and phenomenologically situated (Reeves 2017), grounded in her understanding of what constitutes necessity, embedded in her specific history as an autonomous rural worker and the single mother head of the family. It was explicitly a judgment on what she believed was an exploitative request, since Jasmine had family to rely on and the request was not essential to her family's survival. These actions impinged on

[95] Mutual aid and solidarity practices have been analysed in the social sciences as support nets that historically acquired a certain 'sacredness' (Joseph 2011; Pontiggia 2021:14). As emphasised in Chapters 1 and 2, caring for people from the same lineage or neighbourhood is one of the central values of Islam. Care was also historically central to the functioning of the moral economy of tribal pre-Islamic society (Ben Salem 1990). These mechanisms are often invoked in the literature as social barriers preventing the extreme marginality of a person in the community, although - as argued later in this chapter - they may perpetuate social inequality within the group.

Jasmine's moral integrity and her ability to be acknowledged as a proper woman, let alone a friend.

On the other hand, Jasmine's request for help, woman-to-woman, was a pressing need for her, contributing to asserting herself as a middle-class mother who, despite having subscribed to the principle of complementarity in her marriage, was trying to establish her partial autonomy through her business which contributed to feeding her aspirations and her children's well-being. As situated needs mobilised differently positioned interlocutors to leverage help and support from their networks, the material below will articulate how such threads often played out in the long run by reproducing disadvantaged inclusion for people at the margins.

The next section will further scrutinise people's 'ethical reflection, reasoning, dilemma, doubts, conflicts, judgment and their decisions' (Laidlaw 2014:23). It will push the analysis to understand how some of my informants recognised the limits of the negotiation systems and their own relational work underlying networks of proximities: while allowing some to get by and accumulate more resources, at the same time they delimited and curtailed many others' fields of opportunity.

2. *Khīṭ*: weak access to networks of proximity

As seen above and throughout Chapter 3, the race for bread for many of my informants also depended on turning to friends, relatives, and acquaintances in what was an ever-going exchange of mutual help and favours. Giving and receiving support and relying on extended family or socially proximate people for everyday necessities was hence ingrained as a natural part of a communities' life (see also Brković 2022; Henig and Makovicky 2022). When Asif, a young 18-year-old man and an apprentice mechanic (and at the time Ola's boyfriend), applied for a position within the regional police corps through a public competition, the positive result was no big surprise as the young man's father, a retired police officer, had ensured his son's future post. Ola and Asif, even before knowing that the application would be successful, spent the last month speculating about how to handle a long-distance relationship. As in Asif's case, the person providing support - often a relative, a family acquaintance [96] or a

[96] Often *khīṭ* would be activated within the extended family (Pontiggia 2017, 2018). Despite the changes that occurred during the last century (see Chapters 1-2), the family still constitutes the first site from where each member can ask for material and social support.

friend, - would provide a *khīṭ,* a thread through which to enter a new network which, in turn, could possibly lead to a job placement, a piece of information, or support to escape from economic or financial hurdles, credit etc. (see also Pontiggia 2017, 2018).

A network of at least three nodes, *khīṭ* emphasises the idea that to get to something, to sort out troubles of whatever nature, one needs to activate and gain 'access' through a network of relations (Pontiggia 2017, 2018). Historically associated with the ways through which the state mediated its presence on the territory by allying with local notable families to differently include the population in the redistribution of jobs or assets (land, business concessions, etc…) (Pontiggia 2017), sorting things out through *khīṭ* was part of that relational work that helped people navigate hurdles in their everyday lives. Blending self-interest with reciprocity and social obligations, reaching out through *khīṭ* to access different networks of proximities that could grant access to resources or services was hence not seen as morally wrong. Rather, it was intelligible in the light of the everyday ethics of care among proximate people through which one overcomes life's hardships, also often normalised as a pathway system toward social mobility (Brković 2022; Henig and Makovicky 2017a; Joseph 2011). As Sawassen, Khāltī Khadija's youngest daughter, candidly announced one day, 'I will start a job soon, Chafik [her fiancé] has found me a good post in a nearby factory'.

Nevertheless, as one of my informants tried to explain me, pointing to the thinness of the thread, resorting to *khīṭ* to access a network was also indexical of the long, thin path a person had to walk to sort out their issues. It exposed the frailties of the thread and the possibility that, at any point in the network, the thread could break. Triggering a thread, in other words, was also revealing of the hardships that people with limited assets or connections had to face to push their life paths in directions that could guarantee them a dignified life, and of its uncertain margins of success.

Whereas exchanging help and favours, including triggering contacts to access resources, were social acts understood in the light of local moralities that invited people to 'pick each other up', among my informants in town there was also a clear awareness of how in their society some people were better positioned to succeed than others. Tapping into powerful networks, those social actors could easily manage to

overcome their hurdles, accumulating assets, social capital, and resources. Farah, one of my neighbours, was responsible for one of the regional vocational centres located just outside Zaghouan. Managing flexible hours in her state employment, she worked on the side as a tailor and a mentor for young women she met through her primary employment in a workshop she had opened near her house. At the same time, she was about to plan the construction of a guesthouse on land she had inherited on the outskirts of town. Heba, the regional trade union secretary, was also involved in processing food and beauty products, taking training courses and applying to local projects that could help her business. Youmna, who knew her well since they had tried to set up a business cooperation selling herbal remedies and beauty products together years before, really despised her for her greediness. 'She is an old woman, her children all married well, she has everything she needs, a nice big house, and she still she craves money and showing off'. It was well known that people in proximity to power could access advantageous posts with 'a push through their shoulders'. *Dkhal bi-l-ʾaktāf,* a phrase meaning 'he entered through recommendation or nepotism', was used to denote and emphasise a clear abuse of power or authority,[97] an illegitimate exploitation of one's social capital. Hence, whereas *khīṭ* was vernacularly associated with help and assistance among people from similar walks of life, a natural part of managing life and survival economies, *ktif* (literally shoulder, meaning a strong connection) denoted the power and authority of a person who had the ability to provide somebody else with different sets of privileges.

Through employing specific vernacular idioms to express judgment about different mutual aid practices through which people navigate their everyday lives, my informants also negotiated the 'conceptual limits' of such practices and idioms (Makovicky 2017). However, even though people disputed situated practices, ascribing them to different categories of brokerage, they remained inherently ambiguous. Immersed in everyday life, such practices were hardly fully disclosable to

[97] *Wasta*, which in Tunis is considered an archaic expression, formally translated as 'mediation', originally expressed the idea of a person able to use his good reputation to mediate conflicts within a family, community, or among tribes. Based on the idea of respectability, the mediation of an individual (usually a local leader or notable) was conceived as an element denoting the character of solidarity within the group and implied future reciprocity as the only term of obligation of the exchange (hence, closer to the local moralities leveraged by the concept of *khīṭ*). From here, the meaning is ambiguously extended to include, in the modern bureaucratic apparatus, social actions judged as illegitimate, from breaking procedures to acting against the law (Ramady 2016). Joseph (2011) similarly argues that in Lebanon, political and economic familism, centred around the primacy of the kin group solidarities versus the state, is represented by the ensemble of idioms, ideologies, practices, and relationships leveraged by citizens to activate their claims vis-à-vis an absent state.

the readings of others (Henig 2017). It is precisely this moral ambiguity that my analysis here aims to show, pointing to how people's evaluations of their behaviours and those of others (and their consequences) were never morally clear-cut, and were always contingent rather than prescriptive.

As seen in Youmna and Jasmine's cases, doubts, conflicts and serious ruminations - matters of everyday ethical conduct - often informed people's relational work and requests for help. Youmna condemned Jasmine's request for help, arguing that 'a friend knows how it is hard for everybody to make a life nowadays, so one thinks twice before putting a person she cares for in front of a difficult refutable request'. Nevertheless, Jasmine experienced months of anxiety, sending her mother to knock at clients' doors, begging the suppliers to delay her payment, asking for help from her cousin in Spain, before resorting to ask me for help. Similarly to her clients crying while buying clothes for *ʿīd (Eid)*, Jasmine suffered for and through a business that guaranteed her a margin of autonomy from her husband and allowed her daughter to enrol in educational and leisure activities that they otherwise could not have afforded.

In closing, this section further revealed how - across social classes - my informants' races to bread, composite social actions, and tactics attempting to secure dignified livelihoods were also a matter of everyday ethical ruminations and judgment. Most importantly, borrowing, exchanging favours, presenting gifts, and mobilising connections were all practices that - especially when triggered among neighbours, friends, or acquaintances - entangled material interests while eliciting intense ethical dilemmas on what constituted need or help, and who was entitled to receive it. While mingling affect and care with evaluations of each other's economic hardships, people contributed to constructing the political and economic in their social worlds, in part obscuring issues at the root of their inequality (Allal 2010; Khiari 2003; Meddeb 2011, 2012). The next sections, following Youmna's family's race to bread, will detail how leveraging a *khīṭ* (thread) may also not achieve the intended results, especially if the people activating it are positioned at the margins of the social hierarchies. As we will see in Youmna's case, the instability and difficulty of her work's casual engagements inherently intertwined with her social positioning, constantly pushing her back to the margins of her society.

2.1. When the *khīṭ* (thread) breaks and deals do not come through

My observations in this last section further unpack some of the social dynamics underlying Youmna's unsuccessful 'relational work'. Expanding on the work of scholars in the Tunisian context who have documented how, by navigating economies of survival through accommodation logics and relational work, much of the Tunisia population participate in reproducing inequalities and social hierarchies (Allal 2010; Hibou 2011b; Khiari 2003; Meddeb 2011, 2012; Pontiggia 2017; Santini and Pontiggia 2019), below I reflect on the complexity of practices of 'mutual help'. For Youmna and her children, rural dwellers with broken extended family relations, those negotiation logics - including her relational work - in fact exacerbated their marginality. Although Youmna was well-known across Zaghouan for her ability and knowledge as a herbalist and food producer, with working networks extending to different local administrations, the activists' network in Tunis, and the wealthy coastal town of Nabeul, her efforts failed to secure her a steady base from which to ensure the future of her business. Unpacking her social positioning will reveal how local dynamics intertwine with people's race for bread.

Youmna had to manage both her current nuclear family and her family of origin. As detailed in the Chapter 1, the extended family currently represents a safety net [98]that is central to social reproduction in Tunisian society. When possible, parents and children live in closely located households - often separate apartments in the same building - supporting each other's life projects (caring for the children, sharing the preparation of food, loaning money, etc.). In a subtle way, offering 'cultural legitimacy to shirking state intervention' (Sacchi and Viazzo 2014) by equipping the younger generations with the tools and resources for navigating life, in times of economic crisis or unemployment, the family of origin also constitutes the primary safety net supporting its members (Ben Amor 2011; King 2003; Pontiggia 2017; Sacchi and Viazzo 2014). People often relied on their primary network, their own (extended) family, to provide a buffer and support in other spheres of life,

[98] While the surge in welfare schemes and institutional attempts to weaken tribal solidarities, post-independence internal migrations, and the growth of a wage economy seem to have contributed to the diffusion of the nuclear family model (Ben Amor 2011), continuity with the past maintains the role of the inter-generational family as the primary welfare social institution. Both in town and in the countryside, I witnessed the often different degrees through which the moral bonding work inferring the sense of 'being family' was constructed through multiple acts of care and mutual help (leveraging resources, patching up different streams of income, triggering connections) which were vernacularly expressed through the phrase 'picking each other up'.

transforming and leveraging family connections into useful social capital. Youmna, a divorced mother, could not rely on a partner to construct the first social unit where solidarity should be manifested, as her former husband had always neglected caring responsibilities both towards the children and Youmna herself. Her family of origin were scattered around the country, and mutual help among the siblings was scant. Even her own mother and unmarried sister, with whom Youmna lived, conducted a separate organisation of their daily lives, and expected monetary compensation if they helped Youmna with caring for the cows or going up to the mountain to collect herbs or berries to be processed at the *majmaʿ* (association). They organised a separate kitchen space within their home where they consumed their own meals to the point that even Ramadan *iftars* were consumed separately. Youmna's relationship with her brother, who lived near her, was similarly not stable. Instead of finding a way to cooperate and share better returns from their joint activities on the farm, he had proposed several disadvantageous deals with her over the years (for example, he wanted Youmna's cows in exchange for building her an independent house at the bottom of the hills, a project Youmna believed he would stop working on as soon as he received the cows). Similarly, within her own rural community as well, Youmna did not enjoy much social acknowledgment. A conflict with a former colleague with whom she shared responsibilities at the *majmaʿ* several years earlier left her alone to facilitate the *majmaʿ* s work, while at the same time increasing some of the local community's distrust and other women's expectations concerning her leadership.

Simultaneously, Youmna's rural belonging was a reason for social stigma. In the light of a modernist, urban-centred development model, since the time of Bourguiba (1957 forward) the state has portrayed rural inland and southern regions and their inhabitants as a social burden. Dismissing them as unable to adapt to the technological advancements necessary for participating in a modern productive economy, this stigmatisation still manifests today in everyday interactions among Tunisians (Ayeb and Bush 2019). At the beginning of my fieldwork, Jasmine had tried to dissuade me from working with rural families. Six months later, joining me on a visit to the GDFA (Youmna's rural women's association), Jasmine realised the potential in terms of technical equipment and natural resources that the venture held. She then complimented Youmna for her efforts and for the future possibilities: 'We should partner up!' she exclaimed, adding a moment later, 'You are so brave! Are you not scared though, working here all alone?' Straightening her back – as she was

leaning on the machine to finish the rose water distillation – Youmna looked directly at Jasmine, replying that no, she was not afraid. ‘This is my home’, she added. Indeed, in Jasmine’s mind, Oued Sbahiya was a *jabri* (uncivilised) place, located where street signs end. By extension, people inhabiting such places were also *jabri*: an epithet that, ‘much like its Italian equivalent ‘*terrone’*, associates geographical origin to negative connotations of peasantry, ignorance, and impoliteness’ (Feltrin 2018:7) Further to Jasmine’s explicit remark on the rural location, there was a subtle inferred judgment of Youmna: not married, alone, and raising her children in a morally dubious and unequipped rural area: not a proper woman, nor a proper mother. Constructing the contrast from education to ignorance and impoliteness, modernity to backwards views and habits, the peasantry had historically been framed as a social group at the margins of the hegemonic discourse on *Tunisianité* (Tunisian identity: see Chapter 1).

Such discourse (Zemni 2016) in turn has also broadly contributed to structuring a very ‘*classiste’* (classist, stratified) society in which often people judged and ranked each other according to occupation, family provenance and name, and urban or rural belonging. While natal origins alone would not suffice for the reconstruction of one’s social position, in Zaghouan as well as throughout the whole country, one’s appearance (accent, clothes, skin burnt by the sun), level of education (‘have you got your *bac*?’), and/or profession would contribute to ascribing people to a looked-down-upon class (*zawwālī,* or those who cannot afford a decent living, living even below a standard of precarity, and *ʿayyāsh ,* those who work for a living, making just enough), rather than an acceptable one (*wāḥid mi-l-ʿbād,* working class*, mutwassaṭ,* middle class, or *lābās ʿlīh,* well-off people). A person’s education level in particular would guide the process of inferring their social positioning, as education was related to the economic possibility of investing in the younger generation and represented an indirect marker of family wealth and status.

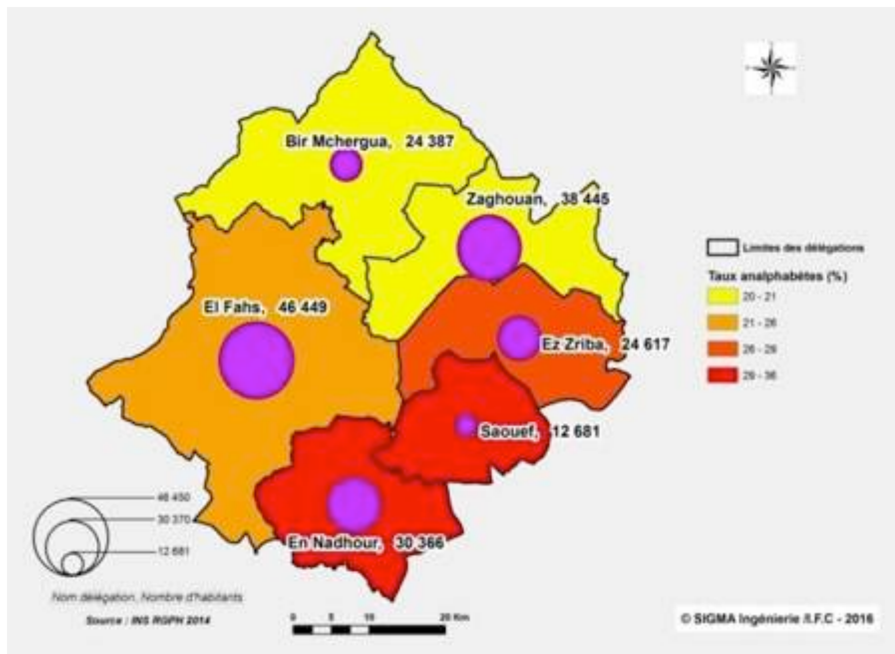

Figure 40: Illiteracy rate across the different Zaghouan districts. Source (Hammami et al. 2017:31)

Therefore, in attempting to capture how inequality is reproduced on an everyday level in Tunisia, one needs to consider how class - here intended as an analytical category that 'represents social relationships of exploitation linked to property and modes of appropriation' (Kadri 2014:12) and which emerged in the country as a sociocultural phenomenon 'growing out of industrial relations of production and the modern state' (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012a:9) - intersects with status (wealth and social proximity to high-level connections) and kinship affiliations, and social allocations such as gender- and age-based hierarchies.

This was the case for Youmna. Her social positioning as a divorced rural entrepreneur (*ydabbrū fī rūshom*), struggling with a patchwork of projects; her appearance, her skin darkened by work in the fields collecting herbs and taking care of the farm; her lack of stable family connections or assets such as a husband to back her up; and her limited French, often prevented her from sealing good business deals and progressing towards more stable employment, while exposing her to people who could instead tap into their resources and thus capitalise on her products and expertise.

Most of her colleagues who were active in the '*bio*' (organic) field, a newly gentrified name indicating *ʿarbī* processing practices (medicinal herbs and food), were people with high-level social contacts and the means to invest in marketing, branding, or sales, and they offered Youmna disadvantageous deals. They were especially interested in purchasing large quantities of Youmna's processed quality

products for a low price, to then package and sell them under their own brands. She accepted selling to some of them. To others, such as Heba, the secretary of the regional farmers' trade union who wanted to cooperate with Youmna on her own terms, she resisted. As seen above, Youmna's moral evaluation of Heba's greediness, which pushed the woman to accumulate business opportunities along with her position in the trade union and a well-off family, convinced Youmna to refuse any possible work cooperation with someone who was well-connected, but whose dubious moral reputation hinted at the woman's possible malintent in searching for partners to work with.

Figure 41: Processing wheat into couscous at Oued Sbahiya

The tipping point was reached when the manager of a big agro-tourism business in Zaghouan who knew Youmna for her excellent natural beauty-products and *ʿarbī* food reached out to her through a common acquaintance in town with what seemed an interesting business proposition. The manager, wanting to create a sales point from which to sell herbal products and essential beauty products to customers at his venue, asked Youmna to train a young woman to assist her in selling and the organisation of the sale space. After the first months of training at the venue, Youmna's appearance was commented on and, as a member of staff, she was asked to wear a uniform when working at the venue. Youmna did not take that imposition lightly. The negotiations about compensation related to working hours were also not what Youmna had expected: she had to cover the shop for a fixed number of hours, but she was paid only according to her sales. After a few months, her commute made it difficult for Youmna to be on site as much as they venue owner expected, and her

income from sales barely made up for her time and transport costs. The young woman who Youmna trained took over the entire job herself. With the help of the owner of the venue, this young woman developed a very refined line of health and beauty products with quality packaging, and publicised it throughout social media, also engaging a famous Tunisian actress to promote the products. Youmna was invited the day they shot a promotional video for the products, but after that she was not offered any support with packaging, marketing, etc. She returned to selling her product to her usual acquaintances.

This episode, despite furthering Youmna's understanding of her social world as characterised by discrimination and prejudice, had originated by activating those logics, through specific informal negotiations and deals. Walking daily through thin *khyūṭ* (threads) that could break easily, Youmna often found herself pushed back to the margins, facing the randomness of a vulnerable life. As discussed above, her race for bread relied on her limited social assets (her lack of French and modest appearance inhibited access to upper classes sales; her untrusting attitude toward business opportunities due to previous bad experiences; and lack of family support or rural community support) and material assets (no car; living in a remote rural area; no resources to invest in the business; lack of cash flow for everyday necessities). All this hindered her from entering a new work milieu and the opportunities that this would have opened. As in Youmna's case, the active participation of the majority of Tunisia's population in a system functioning on accommodation and negotiation logics allowed some people to emerge and succeed, or at least to survive. For others, however, it also contributed to humiliations fomenting their frustrations concerning their limited opportunities for constructing a good, normal existence.

3. Conclusion

Throughout my fieldwork, it was common to hear harsh comments targeting people living in dire conditions, especially rural dwellers. 'If your friend is 50 and he has not succeeded in his wheat business, it is his fault, not the state, not the living conditions, only his', explained Hammedi, another of my informants in Zaghouan, while discussing marginality in the country. As a retired director of a local bank in Zaghouan, living in a luxurious country house surrounded by ten hectares of recently acquired olive groves, Hamedi summed up clearly how the average middle-class

Tunisian – who conducted their lives around values such as family, hard work, comfort and moral obligations toward lower-class Tunisians – framed many Tunisians' fragile living conditions as personal failures. Re-fashioning former nationalistic ideologies through neo-liberal narratives about self-entrepreneurship and self-responsibility (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012b; Ong 2006) partially articulated in response to the fear concerning the political and social instability that followed after the revolution in Tunisia (Zemni 2016), these comments discursively mirrored the different inclusion of the Tunisian population who did not fit narratives and claims of class belonging (Schielke 2012). This chapter demonstrated how such differential inclusion was also reproduced through people's everyday 'relational work' (constructing networks of proximity to lean on in challenging times), intertwined with structural lines of difference such as gender, family belonging, religious orientation, and age. It was in fact possible to observe how often a person's greediness for bread limited other people's ability to reach any. Class, intersecting with situated social allocations, consolidated through weak or strong networks of proximity, contributed to re-producing the unequal system that people had fought against 10 years earlier, perpetuating the disadvantaged inclusion of low-income Tunisians within local hierarchies. The chapter also observed how resorting to mutual help practices and negotiation logics often posed ethical questions concerning what constituted need and who was entitled to ask for help and to access scarce resources. Constellated by ethical ruminations on the proper ways to conduct one's race for bread, people also evaluated the properness of each other's requests for help and favours, also noting how situated negotiations achieved particular consequences in their lives. Materialising different degrees of success in their race for bread, my interlocutors contributed to constructing the social and material world and their places within it.

Chapter 5: Striving for a normal life on a smallholder farm in contemporary Tunisia

This chapter explores issues around food production in Southern Jouf, a rural area belonging to the Zriba district[99], a thirty-minute drive from the region's capital Zaghouan (see Figure 42 below). Extending my observations about food and the struggles of Tunisian households for social reproduction further, it discusses how different practices, discourses, and values intersected at different scales (locally, nationally, and globally) around the production of cereals. The chapter documents life on a farm, specifically the struggles of a smallholder household to prosper based on a cereal business cultivating 40 hectares of land (4 owned and 36 rented). Echoing the battles for better lives fought on the streets of the capital 10 years earlier, I describe my interlocutors' struggles for existential and material recognition in their society as food producers, as they carve a space to thrive in the broken system in which they find themselves operating. Although there are numerous accounts of farmers' resistance and protests in the aftermath of the revolution (see for example Ayeb 2011; Fautras 2015; Gana 2012), from what I observed, social reproduction on the farm was instead a matter of negotiating ideas about what constituted a good life, the means to reach it, and the struggles to gain social and economic inclusion.

[99] Each Tunisian governorate is divided into "delegations" or "districts" and further subdivided into municipalities and sectors.

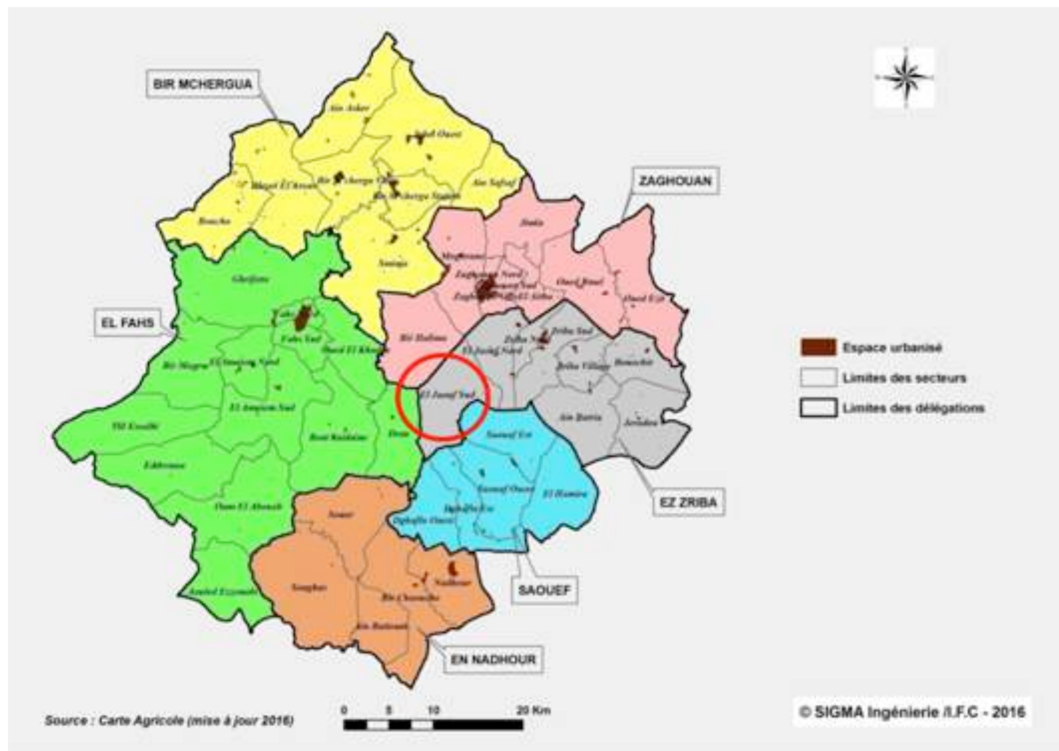

Figure 42: Subdivision of districts in the Zaghouan region and urban versus rural settlements. Circled, Jouf South was the district where Dar al-ʿAmmār's family lived. Source (Hammami, Muslah, and Megdiche 2017:18)

When I returned to Tunisia for the first time (fall 2021) after my fieldwork, I spent a couple of nights at Dar al-ʿAmmār's house. Chieb, Youmna's son, who had driven with me in the afternoon from Zaghouan, was invited to stay over as well. The first night, after dinner, we all gathered in the warm kitchen, sitting on the mattresses around the *kānūn* (small portable clay brazier), chatting humorously as tea was continually made and remade. There were stories about life in the countryside: a motorcycle accident on a dark night when Chieb hit a herd of sheep; the time he ate twenty eggs after the Ramadan *ʾifṭār*; Yasser, ʿAmm Fathi's oldest son, hunting wild boars and killing snakes; *ʿarbī* chicken sold as a remedy for coronavirus. We laughed and turned serious and laughed again, going through our lives' exhilarant moments and preoccupations. We spoke of money and the future. My remarks about the importance of acting well, as doing good will be returned soon or later, was associated with *ṣadaqa jāriya*[100] (long-term acts of kindness or charity), which I was told was one of the three pillars of Islam. To bring the concept to life, ʿAmm Fathi suggested thinking about the act of leaving a cup full of water on the edge of a fountain: if everybody refills the cup after they have finished drinking, then the cup will be endlessly full. I asked about the next wedding in the family. ʿAmm Fathi

[100] The act of voluntarily making a long-term charitable contribution that continues to benefit someone other than yourself.

hoped that in a couple of years, they would be ready for Yasser to marry – they needed to save up for the *bānū* (the house bathroom, expected by the brides of today), which would cost 12,000 dinars (approximately €4,000 euros): the foundational iron bars alone would be 5,000 dinars (€1,250 euros). These days, a decent house costs a fortune, the men sighed, nothing less than 60,000 dinars (about €20,000 euros). There was excitement in the air due to Yasser's first contract as a farmworker for a landowner who lived in the hills above their house, which would be signed in a couple of days. Tātā Samira remarked that hard work was essential for a boy to grow into a man, recalling how ʿamm Fathi would come home exhausted during summers or winters, with his shirt glued to his skin from the rain or the sun. ʿAmm Fathi shrugged, adding that for Yasser, more interesting times also awaited: Madame Safra, the new farm business partner, promised to include Yasser in training for both learning Italian and marketing techniques in the upcoming spring.

This brief vignette – sipping tea with friends after a long day of work in the fields while discussing projects to look forward to and laughing at past experiences and lessons learned – discloses a glimpse of what a life worth living was built upon for ʿAmm Fathi, the head of the rural household I worked with in Jouf.

Figure 43: *Macaruna* (pasta) at 'Amm Fathi's

Interrogating ʿAmm Fathi and his family's understanding of what a good life on the farm consists of, in this chapter I first locate the struggles of smallholders more widely in a historical frame of dispossessions, situating the present constraints and opportunities of trade in indigenous wheat[101] as specific features of 'agriculture under

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[101] By labeling the varieties of wheat cultivated by ʿAmm Fathi as 'indigenous wheat or seeds', I refer to what is vernacularly called *'al-budhūr al-qadīma'* (literally 'old seeds') that are passed down from the ancestors, the result of on-farm selection practices adapted through time to different ecological conditions. The outcomes of this work

capitalism' (Ayeb and Bush 2019:13). The chapter will then move on to discuss labour, gender, and age-based dynamics on the farm, in particular highlighting how larger, shifting economic and societal pressures informed the tensions between maintaining the honourability of the household *vis-à-vis* individual aspirations to construct a good life for the younger generation of the family. Demonstrating many of the battles that smallholder families in the region fight as they attempt to live a worthy, honourable life, the second part of the chapter discusses ʿAmm Fathi's moral reasoning and his frustrations concerning the family trade of indigenous varieties of wheat. These frustrations were mostly connected to the lack of opportunities to upgrade his business, despite his incessant attempts to do so.

1. Smallholders in Zaghouan: a history of dispossession

Providing the basis for a reading of the operational complexities and frailties of family farming in the region today, the historical digression that follows here aims to support an understanding of the progressive processes of social-spatial marginalisation of smallholder farmers in the country.

Though many of the authors writing about pre-colonial times would concur in depicting a relatively dynamic farming sector characterised by cultivated semi-autonomous farms (Chérif 1970; King 2003; Mahjoub 1987; Valensi 1985), it is important to note some of the frailties of such a social system (Chérif 1970; Mahjoub 1987). At the bottom of the social hierarchy were the families without land, especially those working on the land owned by the Bey of Tunis (regency of Tunis). These *khammes* (sharecropper) families, whose in-kind compensation was fixed at 1/5 of the harvest, often ended up caught in a spiral of debts with their landowners, which de facto chained them to the land. Further, aristocratic families provided administrative, military, and judiciary services for the Bey in different regions of the country in exchange for semi-feudal land rights and tax collection (King 2003), and flourished on the shoulders of farmers and artisans (Mahjoub 1987). As they also managed to monopolise sea trade and (to a point) trade running across the country, their fiscal and

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are known as 'landraces': varieties that have evolved through on-farm management practices, which are adapted to local production conditions. Farmers' selection typically takes place at the population level rather than the varietal one, as farmers choose the best grain from the previous harvest to use as seed, resulting in landraces that have considerable genetic and phenotypic variation (Barnes 2016:92).

commercial revenues reached exploitative levels. The military invasion of Tunisia established the French protectorate in 1881, generating more drastic and profound changes that affected the whole country, including the farming sector. Structural modifications in farming included: the introduction of cadastre (a private land register in 1885 – see Jouili 2009; Poncet 1962) and the subsequent acquisition of the most productive lands by the settlers (800,000 hectares in the north and in the Sahel region); the challenging of the right to usufruct and collective access to land; the prohibition of transhumance from the Steppes to the North; the introduction of salaried labour; technical mechanisation and utilisation of pesticides; and the concentration of agricultural trade to revolve mainly around three major crops (grape vines, oil, and cereals, and especially soft wheat, which previously had rarely been cultivated). In the restless reorganisations of capital spatial forms (Harvey 2000) and in addition to open spoliation, the years of direct European colonisation exacerbated both Tunisia's internal social differentiation and its dependency on Northern markets through tariffs and policies favouring incoming finished goods from the centre of the French empire.

The economic policies of post-colonial governments did not overturn such capital dependence ties; rather they sought appeasement policies to avoid brutal transitioning. Further, the agricultural policies immediately post-independence (1956), coupled with measures to strengthen social cohesion and state legitimisation (social welfare, food, oil subsidies) must be understood as part of the wider struggles for power consolidation over the leadership of the new country. The new government, supported by the urban-based Neo-Desturian party, identified as priority objectives the creation of a wide base of support and the dissolution of the rival political force, the more conservative and pan-Arabist party which had its base among the tribal families in the centre and the south of the country. Both were pursued by the drafting of a series of aggressive reforms through which the Neo-Desturian party aimed at supplanting the rival kin-based political alliances and networks across the country. In this sense, and especially relevant here, was the dismantling of the collective tribal ownership of land (law of 28 September 1957) and religious property rights (1956-7) (Ayeb and Bush 2019: 109), and the subsequent distribution of land to individual owners after compensating former tribe members. The dismantling of those collective lands (law of 1957) partially succeeded in guaranteeing the basic conditions for social reproduction of farmers communities previously living on those collective lands,

(Gana 1998), as the government in those first years following independence sought to stabilise the peasant population through their partial integration into the land market.

On the other hand, the government sought to cement the alliances between the bourgeoisie urban political elite and the large–medium landowning class by avoiding a radical land redistribution reform, which could have positively impacted the productivity and income of many smallholders (Ayeb and Bush 2019). In that sense, the later law on the complete nationalisation of land returned from the French (May 12, 1964) meant mainly a 'transfer of property to big landowners and the public or cooperative sector' (Ayeb and Bush 2019:104). Through these laws, the newly-formed Tunisian state came to control around 10% of the total farming land of the country, around 800,000 hectares (Elloumi 2013:8).

In Zaghouan in those early years, where the French colonisation had previously created a land market mainly through the dispossession of the native rural population - exacerbating their marginalisation also in relation to large Tunisian landowners who benefited from the newly introduced laws on private properties - one third of the *ḥbus*[102] land was redistributed to local farming families. The second main mechanism of land redistribution implemented in the area involved the creation of state land farms from land seized to the French, with the state becoming *de facto* the biggest landowner in the region, controlling more than 49% of the land (Gana 1998). This land was mostly then leased to officials or families in proximity to power (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Elloumi 2013; Gana 1998).

In the late 1960s, in an attempt to foster innovation in smallholder farms across the country who were perceived as unable to cope with 'modern' models of agricultural growth, the state proceeded with cooperativisation[103] of the land, incorporating mainly farms under 50 hectares in size. The cooperative as a discourse of modernisation ignored the intricate system of social relations, kin patronage, and networks on which the family farming economy was based (Gana 1998; King 2003). It thus came as a shock for the majority of the rural population who *de facto* came once again to be dispossessed of the land they had acquired post-independence, and

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[102] The *ḥbus* was 'a system of endowments by which the income of a land holding is connected to a religious or public foundation (mosque, hospital, school). Through this mechanism the *ḥbus* lands were made inalienable. Hence *ḥbus* lands were in principle exempt from sale and fragmentation and were protected against confiscation' (Gana 1998:13).

[103] Ayeb and Bush 2019 detail how "the new Minister of Planning and Finance, Ahmad Ben Salah wanted to recover the small farmers' land to constitute large Cooperative Production Units, directly managed by state officials" (2019:104).

who were instead transformed into low-wage workers. A new class of administrators – former state bureaucrats with little knowledge of rural life and land management (Perkins 1986)– took over the organisation of cooperative life. Meanwhile, employment for the farmers, whose roles had been replaced by mechanisation, was scant. A first wave of rural migration to the coastal area began in those years. Protests over the cooperative experience burst into open riots in the early 1970s, as people demanded the reconversion of the land to private property. Some of the former cooperative workers regained ownership of the land. Although, because they received little support to help revitalise their activities (such as credit or input supply extension), many lost their lands from debts contracted while trying to restart their operations. Instead, the new state agricultural strategy in the mid-1970s focused on supporting internal and foreign private investments in agriculture. Further, during those years, leveraging on patronage logics, state lands became instrumental to the maintenance of state consensus: in just two years, from 1972 to 1974, 329,000 hectares of land were redistributed among Bourguiba's base (Elloumi 2013).

In Zaghouan, only 15% of former cooperative land was redistributed, to about 700 beneficiaries who received 19 hectares on average (Gana 1998). Many of the remaining cooperatives and state farms were put on the market, favouring the entrance of big investors from coastal areas or large landowners from other regions while, starting in the late 1970s, leases on much of the state land were not renewed. As noted by Gana (1998, 2008), the privatisation of the land in the region led to high levels of discontent among both former cooperative workers and smallholders who believed they could have benefited from land privatisation. Instead, they witnessed the entrance into the area of social actors such as investors and businessmen operating in other sectors who had little in common with local struggles, and who, to the locals, came to represent the face of the new '*colon*' (coloniser).

From the mid-1980s, successive policies buttressed by international recommendations moved the country towards agricultural intensification, specialisation, and integration in the world market, inviting capital investment in agriculture. Once again, large landowners were able to consolidate their power thanks to a new code for agricultural investment issued by the government in the early 1980s through which new companies (referred to as SMVDA, *Société de mise en Valeur et de Développement Agricole*,) were created with the scope of improving the management of former and remaining cooperative land. Ignoring smallholders'

contribution to the country's food provisioning and social stability, the different state policies after independence failed to outline clear development plans for the specific concerns faced by smallholder farming, especially in terms of access to land markets and financing their operations.

In a new context in which more capital and labour was a requirement to compete, family farms as productive units were forced into internal labour re-allocation strategies. In the attempt to mobilise cash, some family members were pushed to search for salaried and low-skilled off-farm employment in nearby cities. On the farm, meanwhile, pluri-activities were carried out mostly by women (reducing expenses for cattle feed, seed reproduction, manual fertilisation, and harvesting) as a strategy that substituted labour for capital (Ayeb and Saad 2009; Gana 1998). Data for the whole country clearly shows such dynamics, pointing at the parcelisation of the land. Much of the farming population who took work in town sold most of their land, retaining only a few hectares for self-consumption or local trade. Small land holdings (below five hectares) increased dramatically after 1961, rising 'from 133,000 units in 1961-62 to 251,000 units in 1994-95 and to 281,000 units in 2004-05, an increase of 111%' (Jouili 2009:5).

In Zaghouan, comparing recent land statistics though with those from the 1990s, it is possible to observe similar dynamics. A clear increase in government land concentration and a parallel further fragmentation of small- and middle-sized holdings is illustrated in the 2004-2005 census. Covering 272,000 hectares of agricultural land (between arable land, forest, and gazing fields), Zaghouan's Regional Development Plan (Hammami et al. 2017) reports a total of 12,250 farmers and a total of 12,140 parcels on a total of 191,786 hectares of arable land. The number of owners relying on more than 20 hectares (large owners) of land had risen to 10.4% in 2004-5 (the 1994 census showed large owners with more than 100 hectares representing 2.5% of total owners cultivating 61.78% of the total land). Mid-sized holders, with an average of 10-20 hectares, represent 34.7% of the farmers in the region. The number of farmers owning less than 5 hectares has reached 54.9% of the total number of farmers, owning 16,848 ha of the available land. In 1994, data reports that 89.5% of farmers owned less than 20 ha, with an average size of 4.36 ha, smaller than the 5.75 ha average in 1986 (Gana 1998). It should also be noted that within the Zaghouan governorate, 55% of the total surface of arable land is still state owned, managed mainly by SMDVA (14,013 ha), while the remaining 2,223 hectares are currently intended for local young

farmers. As discussed later in the chapter and further in Chapter 6, the aftermath of the revolution's evident difficulties concerning land re-distribution and the allocation of state land in the region is still largely in continuity with policies of the past, fuelling much frustration among smallholders (see also Elloumi 2013; Russo 2019).

> 'No, you won't find big land ownings in the Jouf area, not privately owned nor from the *dawla* (state owned land),' ʿAmm Fathi informed me as we drove together, exploring the social-geographic features of the area. 'All our lands are small: maximum 5, 10, 20 hectares. You have to drive to Souaf (sub-district) or get closer to Zriba (district) to see the large dormant state lands.' A mantle of November fog covered the surrounding rocky hills, which became visible only when we stopped to have a closer peek at the landscape. We were standing on the street just above ʿAmm Fathi's house, which was perched on a small hill. From there, everything seemed vast and spread-out: the different *duwwārāt* (hamlets of 15-20 houses usually made up of an extended family), organised by lineage, and each household's holding delimited by the *hindī* (prickly pear bushes that marked the borders of private lands). ʿAmm Fathi also pointed out how despite ordinary cooperation, most of the time each household within the same *duar* retained economic autonomy and independently cultivated their piece of land. At the village of Ain Lansarine, after leaving the roundabout with the village's main water source behind us, we proceeded along the main street past the elementary school, a medical centre, a mechanic's garage, a smattering of corner shops, and the ʿ*omda* offices, the administrative head for each sub-district (Jouf). [104] Services in rural districts were mainly provided according to the density of people inhabiting the area. In smaller localities such as Ain Lansarine, which counted between 100-500 households, and its surrounding *duwwārāt*, water infrastructure did not reach past the houses located on the main street of the village, and transport was provided by a minivan stopping only on the same road. These primary streets, often the only paved ones, split the hills and lands into two mirroring sides. The secondary roads, called the *piste* (dirt road), connected people inhabiting the hills to their houses.

[104] The municipality was located in the delegation capital, the town of Zriba.

Figure 44: *Duwwārāt* (hamlets) in Southern Jouf

At the level of production, the majority of land in the region is used for cereal and arboriculture (olive and almond groves). While the latter has extended from 27,000 in 1970 to 58,911 hectares in 2014, the area under cereal production (mainly durum, but also soft wheat and barley) has decreased from 112,000 to 67,750 hectares (Hammami et al. 2017). Over the same period, land used for animal grazing also increased (from 55,000 hectares to 87,000) because of difficulties in producing animal feed at an affordable cost. Attempting to circumvent simplistic interpretations of statistics, this chapter tries to reason with such historical legacies to offer an account of current life on the farm in the south Jouf area. As one of the four rural areas belonging to the Zriba district, Jouf is known for its frail social-environmental conditions, the pollution and human encroachment threatening its mountain ecosystem, and an aggressive semi-arid climate. Farming practices in the valley are also described by the Zaghouan Regional Development Plan reports as not 'fitting' (a modern agricultural model) (Hammami et al. 2017). I was also told that Southern Jouf lands were mainly distributed among smallholders who often retained small parcels of land for self-consumption, while relying on off-farm work or agricultural work on other people's lands.

2. ʿAmm Fathi's household

The history of dispossession delineated above intersects and constrains the actual conditions in which smallholders' households operate. In its report about the state of food and agriculture across the world, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations) (Lowder, Skoet, and Singh 2014) also shows how the number and distribution of smallholder farms across the world are following a worrying trend. The average farm size has decreased, and the total number of farms has instead surged: more than 475 million farms across the world are less than 2

hectares in size and more than 410 million are less than 1 hectare (FAO 2014). This global trend also reflects the reality of Tunisian smallholders, pushing academics to wonder what the future will bring. 'Are small farms in Tunisia doomed to disappear?' asked Jouili (2009:1), pointing to the many factors of distress that made it extremely difficult for smallholder ventures to ensure self-reproduction: unequal land allocation, water scarcity, the strengthening of the phenomenon of 'price scissors[105]', and limited access to credit and agricultural services. Jouili notes how same mechanisms that buoyed small-scale farms' survival on their land (such as financing production through off-farm work) are being extended, but also that the permanence of farming on the land in Tunisia is mainly driven by the lack of any alternative employment (2009:13). My ethnographic findings below partially align with Jouili's conclusions, pointing at migration as the main route for the social mobility of rural youths. Further, my material, observing everyday dynamics on the farm, allows a deeper understanding of how, intersecting with situated constraints and wider geo-political issues, smallholders experience life on the farm and construct ideas of what constitutes a good life in contemporary rural Tunisia.

Hence, in what follows, I look at everyday life in Tātā Samira and ʿAmm Fathi's household, which relies on the cultivation of indigenous wheat on 4 hectares of owned land and 36 acres rented from neighbours. Thanks to their fluid character [106] (Holmes-Eber 2003; Hoodfar 1997; Joseph 2018), households in the region can be considered as resilient institutions, ensuring their members' access to resources and security *vis-à-vis* an absentee state. The following two sections will detail internal household dynamics with a focus on its labour organisation strategies and hierarchy. They will examine how social allocations (such as age and gender dynamics) and wider cultural dispositions (cultural meanings and obligations), coupled with the availability of specific material and non-material resources (Hoodfar 1997), interplay with external constraints, shaping and conditioning each family members' life trajectory.

[105] A divergence often caused by stagnant prices of agricultural commodities against rising costs of agricultural inputs and of living.

[106] One can think of household compositions which, while culturally defined (in Tunisia as for the rest of the North Africa region) by blood and kin affiliation, can vary throughout different phases, constituting the lifecycles of the family as a result of external pressures or socio-economic environmental change. Literature on family systems in the Mediterranean also highlight the fact that customs such as dowry 'could fade and reappear, and that family structures too, could change rapidly and were sometimes replaced by other structures bearing morphological resemblances and yet the product of historical discontinuities' (Sacchi and Viazzo 2014).

Associated with the Arabic word *ʿayla* (household), stemming from the verb 'to provide for', the first section will look closely at the household's essential provisioning role, at the same time delimiting the space of action of its individual members. Specifically exploring how cultural frameworks differently inform household members' moral obligations and contribute to constructing complex notions of masculinity and femininity in rural Tunisia, it will examine the household as a social institution in which inequalities (especially among genders) are often legitimised in order to meet its production and social reproduction purposes.

The second section will particularly unpack how the social reproduction of the kin group is shaped by ʿAmm Fathi's household through 'cooperative conflict' (Sen 1990). While partially diverging from their father in their vision of what constitutes a life worth living, ʿAmm Fathi's three eldest sons have negotiated the boundaries of what constitutes an 'honourable household' in a rural area.

2.1. Labour dynamics and gender in a smallholder household

Following the literature on the region (Joseph 2018; Kandiyoti 1988; Laroussi 2002; Latreille and Verdon 2007; Rachik 2019; Sacchi and Viazzo 2014) my observations on farm dynamics agree that, despite the relevance of the variation in the composition of households, in rural Tunisia the patrilocal household (nuclear or complex)[107] currently represents the prevalent family arrangement to which both genders accommodate and to a certain degree comply (Sacchi and Viazzo 2014:238). Indeed, it was the household, whose spaces were defined by labour practices, which revealed much of the internal family dynamics of gender, seniority, and structural hierarchies (Crawford 2008). Labour practices in particular - such as turning a room into living and feeding quarters, fields into prolific land, courtyards and storage units into spaces for processing and selling - exposed each individual's daily struggles and contributions to the social unit. In this sense, if observed as a 'machine for living' (Bray 1998), ʿAmm Fathi and Tātā Samira's household constituted an unequal institution in which, at times, the enhancement of the standard of living of the unit

[107] Some of my informant's families were actually part of extended/multinuclear (or what the literature has defined as complex) households (see also Fargues 2003; Hübner 2011). Here, I want to signal the difficulties that young men today (both in the countryside and in the urban centres) encountered in establishing their own nuclear family, as they often lacked the resources to engage in the pre-nuptial arrangements. Yasser, 24, could have married sooner, but the whole family often pointed to the prohibitive costs of marriage and the construction of a separate house as a necessary condition to start searching for a suitable match.

could come at the expense (more work, less individual freedom) of other household members (Benería and Roldán 1987; Hoodfar 1997; Stolcke 1988). Pacing with the phone in his hands through the uncovered veranda directly outside the room that often served as both kitchen and living room, ʿAmm Fathi directed the daily work in the fields, coordinating with his son(s) and some of his nephews. Following recent studies in anthropology conceptualising masculinities as multiple facets of male identity (Ghannam 2013; Hafez 2012; Inhorn 2012; Naguib 2015) my material throughout this chapter will show 'Amm Fathi's inner conflicts, vulnerabilities, and worries - mainly related to the burdensome character of the many responsibilities he held for his household. Inserted in a system characterised by high societal conflict and inequality, the discussion below will hence reflect on the huge struggles undertaken by men to be acknowledged as such by their dependents, but also by one's *duar*, the neighbouring ones, the village administration, and the regional ministry of agriculture, etc.

Known in his neighbourhood as *Fatḥī mtāʿ al-traktūr* ('Fathi with the tractor'*),* ʿAmm Fathi retained much of the symbolic capital (in which I include both social and material capital) of the family, as he sowed and nurtured the seeds and connections indispensable for sustaining and expanding the household (see also Latreille 2008). It was principally ʿAmm Fathi who, in consultation with Tātā Samira and at times some of his brothers, took decisions on what to sow and grow, where and to whom to sell it, and how to reinvest the eventual profit. He was also the one whose 'relational work' maintained reciprocal relations with neighbouring households (based on for example the exchange of labourers or agricultural machines, borrowing small amounts of money, social visits, and mutual help in case of exceptional events) including those he rented land from. Caring for and nurturing his household was hence a demanding, at times burdensome responsibility, which he performed by maintaining everyday social obligations to his household, his *duwwār* (hamlet) and the neighbouring ones, as much as by working on the fields. If ʿAmm Fathi and Tātā Samira seemed to be both responsible and preoccupied with providing for the immediate and long-term satisfaction of the household and its members' consumption, much of the pressure seemed to weigh on ʿAmm Fathi, as requests for money, goods, and life aspirations were constantly raised and had to be negotiated with. While Tātā Samira would often intercede, reporting her sons' requests to their father, untimely the decision about how to allocate resources and labour in the household would fall on ʿAmm Fathi.

In ʿAmm Fathi's case, but also for many of his neighbours whom I visited, I argue that honourability was entangled with the capacity to earn life through one's honest labour, allowing a moderate right to consumption for one's family, and constituting a reliable resource for the larger social group. It was also overall connected with the capacity to raise autonomous children able in time to act as proper men in the group, safeguarding them from the allures and dangers of current times of crisis. I would hence contend that running an honourable household – declining in relation to its capacity to perpetuate its social and economic sovereignty (Latreille 2008; Sacchi and Viazzo 2014) and possibly extending it through the cultivation of his ancestors' land (but not exclusively through it) – held significance for ʿAmm Fathi's generation of men in rural Tunisia.

Figure 45: Preparing for the sacrifice at Dar al-ʿAmmār's

Tātā Samira was similarly enmeshed in maintaining her household honourability as well. As her hard work clearly demonstrated, she cared deeply about the social reproduction of her household. 'Samira the clothes, Samira the olives, Samira the fields, Samira the bread, Samira the animals', she teased loudly one day while men were waiting for the food to be made ready. Much of her labour was carried out in the courtyard from where she could keep an eye on the adjacent fields and her sister-in-law's household at the foot of the hill, and also be quickly updated about movements of people and activities in the farm. Her labour share was without doubt quite heavy, as she often remarked, not to mention the fact that she had raised four children, three of whom were now young men. Despite her workload she, like

ʿAmm Fathi, constantly strategised about how to contribute more to the household: ‘I wish I had a little piece of land to cultivate with vegetables now’, she told me once while cooking. ‘I usually buy vegetables from peddlers who come twice per week, but I could save more money. Before I had some (inherited) land, but with the children and the olives and the animals I couldn’t take care of it, so I sold it. Now I regret it!’ As underlined by the more recent literature on Tunisia (Ayeb and Saad 2009; Ferchiou 1991; Hopkins 1991; Laroussi 2002; Zussman 1992), rural women have always played an important (and at the same time undervalued) role in Tunisian farming. Accelerated by recent developments that have led men to search for wage labour off-farm, women’s roles have become essential to the management of the rural household, with the literature highlighting the increased bargaining power and recognition that this new role brings. In Samira’s case, with ʿAmm Fathi directing the activities in the fields, and despite the fact that she was able to pressure and influence ʿAmm Fathi’s decisions, household constraints and pressures often took over her own interests or desires. Tātā Samira, through years of generous work for her family of origin and then for her own, had learned to mould her desires and aspirations based on other family members’ needs and wishes, while putting aside some of her own aspirations. This did not preclude her from advancing ideas on how to better organise the daily routine on the farm, including her routine, or to negotiate with ʿAmm Fathi concerning how to allocate some of their resources, make improvements around the house, etc. As Naguib also notes, caregiving and nurturing are never straightforward matters for either women or men; rather they relationally involve ‘multiple acts of affection and authority’ (2015:51). In turn, ʿAmm Fathi was aware of his wife’s hard-work attitude and, when he could, he would seek ways to address and respond to her wishes. ‘Samira has never seen the sea, only on television, and we live just half an hour from Hammamet! Sara, should we plan to go one of the next weekends with your family?’ 'Amm Fathi asked me after a long summer’s day spent hosting people at his house.

Nevertheless, there was a lot of work to do around the farm, and with two of her sons working in town the heavy load was divided between Samira, ʿAmm Fathi and her oldest son. Toward the end of my fieldwork, a business opportunity long sought by ʿAmm Fathi and for which he showed quite a bit of excitement, began to be materialised. This opportunity, forecasting an increase in activities on the farm, was not exactly celebrated with much enthusiasm by Samira – who anticipated that her

work share would increase further. Indeed, opportunities to increase household autonomy or prestige did not translate into personal benefits for Tātā Samira. Tātā Samira married early and started her married life modestly in ʿAmm Fathi's paternal household. She had not had the opportunity to continue her formal education beyond the first years of elementary school, and now she feared for her sons, since she was unable to help much with homework (Maher, her youngest at time, was 9 years old), or give advice to her older sons on how to navigate bureaucratic issues. Her sister-in-law Aicha who, years earlier, had a chance to live off-farm babysitting for a woman in town, often looked down on Tātā Samira for her poor formal education and her lack of ability to help the boys with their studies, or for not having refined enough cooking skills.

Figure 46: Preparing '*usban*' (stuffed meat) with the interiors of the lamb

2.2. Generational contestations: the household as a site of cooperative conflict

Though structural constrains and cultural orientations permeated the relations among different generations within the family, the age-based hierarchies informing family arrangements were nevertheless clearly challenged by 'Amm Fathi's three eldest children. As we will see, in the course of my fieldwork such arrangements will undergo negotiations and redefinitions situationally.

The two middle sons, Karim and Yassene, were less present on the farm, returning only at the end of the day once their work shifts in town were over. Both

were apprentices in their early twenties: Karim worked at a small mechanic's workshop and Yassene at a barber shop. '*Bābā ʾaʿtīnī 10 dīnār, Bābā aʿtīnī 5 dīnār... Barra qultilhum! Tikhdim ʿlā rūḥik!*' (Dad give me 10 dinars, dad give me 5 dinars…*out* I said! Go get your own job!) was ʿAmm Fathi's explanation to my pondering on the reasons why they were working in town. While across Tunisia and in the wider Mediterranean region the literature notes the endurance of households as a form of 'welfare agency' (Pontiggia 2017; Sacchi and Viazzo 2014) on which both the youth and the elderly can rely on to start or conclude their lives, ʿAmm Fathi's understanding of manhood excluded what he considered pampered and indecisive individuals, who were waiting for the right opportunity to materialise. In his case, the wellbeing of the household was measured by the entire kin group's ability to contribute according to each individual's ability. Hence, early in their path to manhood, the two middle sons started looking for options through which they could gain labour skills, leading to apprenticeship jobs in Zaghouan.[108] With their meagre apprenticeship wages, they were not able to contribute much to their household, but they still relieved ʿAmm Fathi from dispensing resources for the menial yet important activities around which a young man's sociality is built: coffee, cigarettes, phone credit, etc. Both also chipped in with their labour during crucial seasonal times. Their everyday absence from the farm also meant that they had become progressively critical of their household circumstances, and had begun constructing their future aspirations off-farm. The literature on youth in the region stresses the indefinitely stretched liminal time (Turner 1969) hindering young men's transition to adulthood. Thinking of youth also as a relational concept (Pontiggia 2017) helps us to unpack how such a transition towards becoming a man of one's own would eventually materialise. The power dynamic/struggle with other subjects is especially informed by the preconditions that allow a young man to be taken seriously. Especially for young men, the lack of those preconditions - such as a stable job, a space to live with a future family, social networks to rely on for wedding preparations and life emergencies - would transform that liminal time into what the literature has labelled as conditions of *waithood* (Honwana 2014): uncertainty and lack of means to act on

[108] It was true that off-farm wages were considered a good investment and a step toward building autonomy for one's future, though not all available jobs were considered decent enough: work in a factory with low pay and long shifts was instead criticised as pointless work.

his own every day. Karim and Yassene's desire to move beyond their household dynamics in the countryside can hence possibly be read as desire to move away from those immobile spaces in which marginality has been structurally constructed. It can also be thought of as founded on the necessity to understand their lives as moving in some direction (other than the farm) - a perception that Hage (2009) calls a condition of 'existential mobility'. In contrast to the choices available to their parents' generation, trapped by a life of *ta`ab* (weariness) around food production, Karim and Yassene seemed to me to conceive of a good life based on the idea of existential mobility that could only be realised off-farm. Karim, especially, had the capacity to create connections with random people he met in town, and engage in random gigs that allowed him to travel across the country. Whereas both of the sons relied on their family as a primary site to satisfy their immediate needs for shelter and food, they also counted on informal networks they had built up while living their everyday life off-farm.

Yasser, ʿAmm Fathi's oldest son, was quiet and deferential, and had instead worked on the land for all of his young life. Though essential to the farm operations, ʿAmm Fathi had introduced him to me jokingly as the *baṭṭāl* (the 'unemployed'). Possibly also connected to the fact that Yasser had not been able to enrol in farming trainings that could potentially have made him eligible for credit or land, ʿAmm Fathi's disappointment in Yasser at the point was more an enduring frustration against the scant possibilities for rural youth who had little means to find training or incentives to earn new skills and contribute to the family venture. Quiet and deferential, Yasser continued working with his father throughout the winter. One of the first occasions I was able to talk to him alone was on a short trip to the village when he reflected out loud, 'Really it is a lot of *ta`ab* (weariness) there is always something to do season after season, you don't get to rest. But look for yourself, it is so beautiful here, one doesn't need much (to live well) …' That affirmation was candidly challenged on a summer's day the following year, after the harvest was over. Earlier, in April, Yasser had confronted his father with his decision to join the army, attempting something different from providing free labour for the operation of the family farm. While sipping tea in the shade, Yasser, on leave from the army to help with the harvesting, recounted how his new life in the army was not bad at all: just moving a few boxes here and there. At the same time, it offered the possibility to travel and see a different Tunisia with his own eyes. He made new friends, with whom he spent nights chatting

and surfing on the internet, and he explained that he would have been paid more once the year of training was over, during his second year. Wrapping up his current experience for me, he smiled, 'It is like with you, I went out to see the world'. However, as we will see in the next section, Yasser did not continue with the army.

Figure 47: Yasser sowing with his father and cousin

What it is often depicted as the demise of cultural patriarchy - in rural areas explained by pointing at the penetration of capitalism into the countryside[109] - challenging the 'traditional normative order' has been critiqued in the literature as tautological (Latreille 2008). Patriarchs are described as progressively losing their authority, shaken by a crumbling material base (land shortages, accumulating debts, lack of government support). The younger generations instead develop a taste for privacy and autonomy because, with the emergence of capitalism and modernity, their cultural references have also changed. Alternatively, analysis of households and in particular their nuclear units would instead suggest a more materialistic approach: when in the household the means of production are individually owned, the subordinate members will seek residential autonomy (economic and domestic, hence the power to control one's resources and labour) unless constraints hinder their movements (Latreille and Verdon 2007). While recognising that such forms of

[109] The commoditisation of agriculture - including dependence on national and international markets (prices of inputs and final products, mechanisation) - and the emergence and extension of wage labour as relations among farmers, etc.

residential and economic autonomy were sought by certain young informants who had managed to secure a more stable future, my account adds to the discussion.

The complexity of the personal histories that will follow in the chapter, and their intimate entanglement as witnessed by each family members' mutual commitments and accountability, foregrounds how both men and women at times of great uncertainty attempt to mould ideas and cultural constructs to their relevant present and past, reproducing or challenging relationships and practices (Naguib 2015). These first two sections began by complicating the accounts related to food production on a smallholder farm. The material has shown how wheat production on a smallholder farm, intersecting with sedimented inequalities and interwoven with wider phenomena (the demise of agriculture in the country, political and financial instabilities, wider access to technologies and education, migration aspirations), has come to challenge the different family members' understanding of what is a life worth living. The narrative below will take this further, recounting how ʿAmm Fathi's aim – keeping the household's livelihood anchored to the indigenous wheat business as viable means leading to a good, normal life – was challenged by the events that followed Yasser's departure for the army, and especially by the inability of ʿAmm Fathi to be 'seen' by the state as a worthy food producer.

The following sections will hence examine in particular the strategic choices elaborated and assessed during the year I spent with ʿAmm Fathi and Tātā Samira as they attempted to align available resources (land, indigenous wheat cultivation, rain-fed irrigation, family labour) with the opportunities and constraints connected to the cultivation of wheat, both globally and locally. To observe how the political and economic environment affected the household's strategies and capacity for accumulating resources and re-distributing them, I will first briefly detail the functioning of the wheat chain in the country, and then put it into conversation with the daily operations on the farm.

3. Strategising in times of late capitalism: formal wheat chains and indigenous varieties

A comprehensive understanding of the wheat chain of production in the country includes an account of the ideologies that supported its creation and contributed to its development over time. As reviewed in the Introduction to this

thesis, since the country's independence the state has pushed for the integration (and progressive specialisation) of the Tunisian farming sector in the world market. Marking a shift from strategies aimed at self-sufficiency in food to trade-based food security, in the 1980s government strategies in agriculture turned toward a capital-intensive, exports-led approach. This shift simultaneously marked an acceleration of the country's path-dependence for strategic crops such as cereals, which were the main sources of calories and nutrition in the country (National Institute of Statistics 2014) from the international market. Agricultural exports of mainly fruits and vegetables – crops requiring high investments in both inputs and irrigation technology – became a profitable business[110] over the years in the hands of large agro-industrial companies. Cereal production, on the other hand, led by durum wheat at 60% and barley at 30%, is today carried on mostly by smallholders, collectively representing 63% of cereal producers and 48% of the entire farming population (Khaldi and Saaidia 2017).

Figure 48: Wheat sowing day on 'Amm Fathi's land

[110] Recent data reports that as a result of the incentives received, fruit production grew from 1,380,000 tons in 2000 to 2,031,000 in 2016, and vegetable production from 1,710,000 to 3,004,000 tons (Ayeb and Bush 2019). In the same timescale, cereal production increased only marginally (from 1,122,000 tons in 2000 to 1,340,000 in 2015-6). This strategy, however, has been revealed to be short-sighted: while compelling Tunisia to remain a net importer of cereals, which made up[110]43% of total imports (Ayeb and Bush 2019), and 66% of the country's total cereal consumption needs (Khaldi and Saaidia 2017), the trade balance shows that food exports do not make up for imports. Currently, although aiming to reduce dependence on food imports can be found in every strategic document concerning agriculture, the contribution of agriculture to the country's GDP is currently declining. Ayeb and Bush (Ayeb and Bush 2019) highlight how it has decreased from 20% of GDP in the 1960s to 14% in the 1990s, dropping further to 9% in 2016, while there are no clear plans on how to solve current impasses in food insecurity.

Of central importance for my inquiry is recognising how, modernisation in agriculture, based on ideologies of high productivity, standardisation and competitive advantage, overlooked the diversity of the Tunisian ecosystem and the social organisation of labour on farms, including local know-how. Coupled with national policies on land and the liberalisation of inputs, the modernisation of Tunisian agriculture in the wake of the global Green Revolution ended up homogenising production strategies and knowledge (certified seeds, chemical fertiliser and pesticides, the mechanisation of irrigation, etc.), ignoring the complexities and the bio-diverse potential of different regions (Ben Krima et al. 2020).

Looking at the cereal chain, these modernisation strategies were first implemented through the National Cereal Office (CO), founded in the early 1960s with the goal of organising and standardising the different sequences of the cereal production chain and also boosting the production through subsidising farming inputs and primary goods consumption, such as bread. From the 1980s onward, connected with historical decisions related to liberalisation of the country's economy, the cereal chain was opened to international markets and national enterprises were restructured to favour private actors, resulting in dire setbacks for smallholders who had to adjust their production strategies to new constraints. The new policies buttressing 'production at the lowest labour cost' (Gachet 1987:163) also included cuts in agricultural support (subsidies and public investment, transfers to rural sectors[111]), stagnation in output prices, and increases in input prices. In the following years, these policies promoting reductions in spending also led to the shutting down of many of the National Cereal Office's operations, further affecting the already precarious cereal ventures of smallholders (Khaldi and Saaidia 2017:40–41).[112] Despite receiving many complaints and having real inefficiencies in its operation, for years the office had guaranteed a fixed sale price for harvests. After 2005, compensation for grain collection by private operators was instead based on the evaluation of the quality of the cereals, undertaken directly by collectors (Gana 2012; Khaldi and Saaidia 2017; Ben Krima et al. 2020). As part of this process, the National Cereal Office served and

[111] Especially concerning cereals production, these measures *de facto* made it impossible for local farmers in the region (Tunisia, but also Egypt and Morocco) to compete with European or US farmers, who operate under large subsidies.

[112] Following the 2005 law, with which the Tunisian state receded from activities of a competitive nature, the cereal collection is currently ensured by 11 private collectors covering 58% of the collection, 4 SMSAs (*Societe' Mutualles de Service Agricoles)* covering 40%, and OC (Cereal Office) managing the remaining 2% (Khaldi and Saaidia 2017).

currently serves mainly as an arbitrator in cases where disputes arise between collectors and farmers, while different regional and central laboratories specialise in analysing the quality of cereals at the point of collection or import. Transportation to silos, and then to mills, is currently either managed by private collectors whose costs are reimbursed, or through SMAS (*Societe' Mutualles de Service Agricoles,* former cooperatives).[113] Mills for both durum wheat and soft wheat are mainly located in the core business area of Greater Tunis.

For smallholders especially, the increased costs of inputs and limited access to credit or subsidies for investments has aggravated their situation, and has translated into indebtedness to the actors who simultaneously manage the sale of inputs as well as cereals collection and transformation. Poorly developed contractual practices and a differential in bargain powers have also contributed to the fact that many smallholders are deciding to produce for self-consumption or trade outside official channels of distribution. Recently, it has been calculated (Khaldi and Saaidia 2017) that the government's collection of cereals amounts in fact to only 40-50% of the total harvest, while the rest of the trade can be considered informal.

ʿAmm Fathi and Samira's household could be placed among those who have channelled their indigenous wheat variety through informal markets. ʿAmm Fathi was one of the few farmers still trading this wheat in the area, and making a living out of it, despite indigenous wheat being more suitable to rain-fed, semi-dry areas such as Jouf. More resistant to pests and disease, indigenous varieties of wheat do not require chemical additives, fertilisers, or animal manure to flourish. Most of all, as ʿAmm Fathi stressed to me many times, they are resistant to drought. In a good year with a decent amount of rain, the harvest would be blessed and abundant, though yielding slightly less than the commercial wheat varieties. However, in years in which rain was scarce, indigenous varieties would still prosper, producing potentially double the commercial varieties' yields. In addition, indigenous seeds could be replanted the following season, saving ʿAmm Fathi the cost of 'modern and engineered' seed dependence, which abruptly cut the chain of reciprocity between the soil, the seeds,

[113] There are 23 silos, of which 9 are owned by OC (Cereal Office) and the remaining rented by OC, covering 46% of the national storage capacity and located mainly in the Greater Tunis area and in the vicinity of the biggest processing centre in Sousse and Sfax (Khaldi and Saaidia 2017:41)

and the farmer. At the end of the 1990s, a new seed law (1999-42)[114] had in fact certified a specific list of tradable seeds and plants, identified for certain productive and commercial qualities (homogeneity, morphological uniformity, and stability).[115] The law did not permit the identification, registration, production, exchange, and marketing of old varieties, which are morphologically diverse and not homogenous, characteristics considered commercially undesirable.

In the Jouf area, as in most of the country, the seed law accentuated social differentiation, contributing to the parcelisation of land that began years earlier with the liberalisation of land sales. Those who 'had land' (10 ha or more) in the area, often also having the capacity to bring water to or drill wells on their land, adjusted their production to the new law, switching to cultivating the government certified varieties that yielded more.[116] ʿAmm Fathi told me how instead in most cases, farmers in the area who owned a modest amount of land (5-10 ha) had resorted to selling some of the land, preserving small plots (1- 2 ha) for self-consumption. After a failed harvest of conventional wheat, ʿAmm Fathi described his decision to stick to the indigenous variety of wheat, and to continue trading it informally in the area, as the only choice he had to continue to be able to live from his land. This decision later led to him having a fortunate meeting with Rachid from the Gene Bank, who was interested in the indigenous seeds, and put ʿAmm Fathi in contact with more clients and farmers throughout the country (see the next chapter for details of that encounter). It was the modest increase in his wheat trade and the prices for the indigenous wheat varieties that allowed 'Amm Fathi to rely on land as the family's main source of income throughout the years. On the informal market prices for indigenous varieties were in fact almost double those for certified durum wheat bought by the government.

'But why, ʿAmm Fathi, are you cultivating those ancient varieties of wheat Sara told me about?' my husband asked while they were waiting for my return home

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[114] It is possible to retrieve the 42/1999 online at https://inkyfada.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Loi-n%C2%B0-99%E2%80%9442-du-10-mai-1999-relative-aux-semences-plants-et-obtentions-ve%CC%81ge%CC%81tales.pdf

[115] While many farmers across Tunisia since the time of colonisation had mainly utilised seeds produced by crossing Tunisian traditional varieties and foreign varieties (Ben Krima et al. 2020), others had continued cultivating traditional varieties which had been developed prior to the 1930s by mixing indigenous seeds.

[116] While in general modern irrigation systems are in part supported by government incentives for projects by large investors, during a recent chat ʿAmm Fathi reported that the government would not allow the drilling of new wells in the region because of the fear of draining underground water resources. Earlier in 2019, when asked about drilling a well, ʿAmm Fathi told me that drilling would cost half of one year's profit (25-30,000 TND), which was quite an expense. Thinking about the possibility of growing vegetables, he had people come to check about underground water, which was found to be very deep – 9 m underground – and the cost of the well would therefore rise even more.

on one occasion. 'The money, what else? I get so much more out of those (varieties) than from the government wheat'.[117] A hectare of land on average yields 2,000 kilograms of wheat, which he sells for 150 TND per *shkāra* (around 100 kg). The net profit after subtracting the cost of land rent (350-500 TND depending on the quality of the land – flat or hilly) would be around 2,000-2,500 TND per hectare (around €613 euro per ha). Other costs such as labour and gas were dismissed as minor in the calculation. This would bring the entire enterprise close to 60,000 TND, or €18,600 euro, per year. 'A good business', commented my husband, congratulating ʿAmm Fathi. Of course, the conversation did not reflect the full reality for ʿAmm Fathi. As we will see below, this income needed to cover the entire family's expenses, including improvements for the house, fodder for the animals, and repayments for the tractor. What frustrated ʿAmm Fathi most, though, was not the hard work or their frugal lifestyle: it was the realisation of the business' potential had he been able to rent more land at a good price, or certify his wheat as organic (the impossibility of renting state land in the region will be discussed in the next chapter).

Figure 49: Sifting through indigenous wheat

On another occasion, pressed by the questions of an agronomist student who, with a regional representative of the Minister of Agriculture, was collecting data on smallholders' cultivation of older wheat landraces, and asked if he had ever tried to grow higher yield varieties, ʿAmm Fathi snapped. 'How could I cultivate common wheat with the land I have? I would not even cover the transport cost to the silos with

[117] Jouili (2009) also highlights the tendency for the government to freeze the prices of the major agricultural crop commodities since the implementation of SAP, and following the evolution of the global prices, is no longer reflecting their production costs. For example, a quintal of durum wheat remained stable at 26 TND for 3 years (1992-1994), before increasing to 28.5 TND for 4 more years (1996-1999). Currently, the price for 100kg oscillates between 70-90 TDN for the certified wheat, while the local varieties can rise up to 150 TND (interviews with smallholders in the Jouf area).

the price I would get from the state. I tried it one year, it was a bad harvest, and I would never do it again!' Following that meeting, Samira, ʿAmm Fathi, and I were disposing of the food offered to the interviewers in silence until, frustrated, ʿAmm Fathi burst out:

> 'What do we get out of this? … They come in with nothing, not even a yogurt for the kids. And afterwards … for example what do you think happens when I need a piece of information at the local Ministry of Agriculture? Has anybody ever listened to me when I asked for state land, with all the people from the ministry I fed?"'

Later that day, while pointing out the many unfinished projects around the house, for the first time ʿAmm Fathi admitted bitterly to me:

> 'You see that woman there [looking at Samira], if I haven't yet jumped on a boat to Italy it is only because she would not let me. But you see how? I wanted to finish the veranda roof this year, it is just 2000 TND, but I still haven't been able to do it. You are like our daughter - you see how we live. My sons, they want *ḥayāt ʿādīyya* (a normal life)! How can I marry them off? Yasser wanted shoes and clothes to go out, how can I blame him if he went [off to the army]?'

ʿAmm Fathi's vocal quest for dignity on that midsummer day, a quest for a normal life to offer his sons, seems to me to be clearly directed by the desire for 'being seen' by the Tunisian state (Jansen 2015; Obeid 2010, 2015) and being acknowledged as an economic actor enabled to exercise his power. The autonomy and reproduction of his household, like that of many smallholders across Tunisia, were still threatened by that lack of the reciprocal gaze of the state, which was instead focused on perpetuating the interests of large landowners (see next chapter for current issues related to land redistribution in the region). Echoing the quest for bread and dignity fought on the streets nine years prior, 'Amm Fathi eloquently demonstrated his dissatisfaction with the regional administration's tactical inertia that day when, prior to answering the researcher's questions, he challenged the Minister's representative, stressing that he would answer the questions only '*bi-l-flūs*' (for money). As a witness myself, I felt the situation had become charged and almost unbearable, but the regional representative smiled and pointedly ignored ʿAmm Fathi's request, inviting the young researcher to proceed with her questionnaire. A symbolic yet powerful act, ʿAmm Fathi's loud semi-joking register made it perfectly clear that in such an

instance, what was at stake was not of course money, but the long unresolved power struggle with the regional Minister of Agriculture. ʿAmm Fathi had done his part: he never ceased to work toward perpetuating the autonomy of his household, he shifted his strategies and attempted new ventures: reorganising, evaluating, and eventually returning to work with traditional varieties of wheat. What about the state, the other side of the relationship? In parallel with policies progressively moving toward capital-intensive agriculture, prioritising 'modern' standardisations and practices (intensive cultivation of land through high input exploitation including water, seeds, soil and fertiliser), this section has presented the specific and progressive challenges faced by ʿAmm Fathi's business, in particular the impossibility of obtaining more land at a good price, and accessing funds to upgrade the farm business.

He wanted to expand the farm's operations, to obtain a bio-certification, to rent more land, to buy a truck and move his wheat across the country, so he went to several local banks:

> 'They wouldn't give it to me, of course. I went and I asked for a modest loan, 50,000 TND, and I gave them guarantees - the house, the tractor - but nothing. They sent me to the microcredit office, and they gave away something like 500 TDN, what do they think I need to buy with 500 dinar, a sheep?'

Many sources (Food and Agriculture Policy Decision Analysis 2017; Russo 2019; Sfia 2020) similarly indicate how incentives, subsidies, and bank loans remain mostly only accessible to large agri-businesses. Of the few bank loans that are actually applied for by smallholders (around 3-5%), it is estimated that around 42% of seasonal loans and 68% of long-term loan are rejected (Sfia 2020).[118] The FTDES report also notes that the smaller the farm, the higher the rates of interest on loans (2020). Specialised banks (such as BNA National Agricultural Bank or BTS Tunisian Solidarity Bank), which were created to channel social development in agriculture by granting small amounts of money, have restricted their funding through complicating the criteria for granting a loan (such as requiring property titles, papers, and supporting documents including a detailed business plan).[119] Training courses or

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[118] Comparatively, refusal of requests from large landowners oscillates between 19% and 30% (Sfia 2020).

[119] The guarantees they require are often similar to those of a commercial bank. Smallholders' only resort is microcredit loans, with interest rates as high as 30%, or advances from suppliers and middlemen, both risky avenues as they create dependence. Local forms of solidarity finance are activated where social ties allow. Incentives from the agricultural department are granted according to the amount that people are able to invest, thus more or less excluding *de facto* the smallholding population (Sfia 2020). Small ministerial grants are also seldom

extension workers, while considered as support mechanisms offered by the government, have both in reality scarce on the ground. ʿAmm Fathi's experience confirmed this narrative.

This chapter has shown how the current agricultural model has become highly un-sustainable for the smallholding farming population who represent more than the half of the cereal producers across the country. It has revealed how those operational constraints challenge the already strained smallholders' attempts to thrive on their farms and offer a good, normal life to their family. As for ʿAmm Fathi, questioning his decision to continue investing in indigenous wheat, those constraints and adverse policies have led to increasing hardships and have fed the anxieties of farming families across the country, shaping a desire to move away from the weariness of the land.

4. Conclusion

As the assonance of the two words suggests, *el-ʿarḍ* (one's reputation and respectability in society, closely related to one's proper behaviour and efforts in life) (Abu-Zahra 1974) and *el-ʾarḍ* (land) are intimately correlated. Since a man without land is traditionally considered to be 'socially invisible' (Le Blanc 2009), being denied access to land or being banned from the land of one's ancestors damages his respectability, depriving him of the right to fully exist (Fautras 2015). Similarly, the impossibility of earning an honest living through working on the land, a condition through which one *sweats his own bread* (Meddeb 2011), was hence morally framed as the impossibility of exercising household autonomy and conducting a respectable life.

As detailed in this chapter, for ʿAmm Fathi as well as for many of the farmers I met, a proper, good, and normal life was dependent on feeling proud of and respected for one's work. This in turn allowed moderate possibilities for consumption and leisure for one's household, and most importantly a decent future for one's progeny. Impediments to those essential conditions created social invisibility. Further to my experience with ʿAmm Fathi's household, I attended different meetings between politically active smallholders from across the country and youth activists in

approved as a reimbursement (often in-kind) after purchase from the farmers (interview with the department with responsibility for funding, CRDA Zaghouan).

the capital. During one such meeting, I witnessed several people angrily making their case, including Mourad:

> 'I'm Mourad, a farmer from Jendouba, producing wheat and potatoes on 8 hectares of land. I want to share this with you: I'm 38 and I'm not married. Do you know why? I refuse to have kids and put them through this misery. I won't have a family, and this is my final decision. I will work on the land of my father until my last day, but there is no future for us in Tunisia. Why should I put sons and daughters through this?'

Like Mourad's situation, the chapter detailed the conditions through which much of the smallholder population has been left with little option but to complement self-production on small allotments of land with salaried work in town. It has detailed the frustration of farmers who, like ʿAmm Fathi, have maintained their work on their land as the main source of social reproduction of their households, and noticed year after year their different inclusion in society.

On one of my last visits to the farm before my departure, however, ʿAmm Fathi disclosed proudly that he had given his word to the leader of an association operating in a nearby region, a woman called Madame Safra, to start a joint business. He had met her through connections with national and international food networks. While such 'relational work' (Brković 2022; Lammer 2018; Thelen, Vetters, and von Benda-Beckmann 2014; Venkatesan 2015) will be detailed in the next chapter, here it is sufficient to mention that Madame Safra, who was well connected politically and in the field of civil society, was able to leverage different funding channels once the project was crystallised. The main idea behind the project was to distribute 'Amm Fathi's indigenous wheat varieties (chemical-free and hence appealing to a new elite market) to other farmers in the region who were willing to embark on the venture, and then to collect and process the harvests into value added products (couscous, pasta, etc.). Tātā Samira would work in the cooperative of women transforming the wheat into products. During my last visit, ʿAmm Fathi showed me that he had begun the construction work to widen the storage spaces he had. Further, on a subsequent phone call from England, I saw that Yasser was back on the farm. Asking if he was on leave, ʿAmm Fathi happily replied no way, damn the army, Yasser is the backbone of the new project. 'Without Madame Safra I was stuck - but now, *Al-ḥamdūllah (thank God)*'. You know I would like to breathe a little and let my wife rest a little too. And one day maybe buy a car so I'm free to visit my friends.'

Figure 50: Two generations

Following many Tunisian academics (Ayeb 2011; Gana 2012; Meddeb 2011, 2012), I read the events that led to the 2011 revolution as a request for people to be enabled to 'sweat' their own bread with dignity (Meddeb 2011). Similarly, for an honourable rural dweller such as ʿAmm Fathi, the capacity to sweat themselves out of bare survival and to maintain 'economic autonomy' across generations was a precondition to being recognised and respected as a person in the area, but also as a food producer by a wider segment of the Tunisian population. A good, normal life was hence inevitably constructed on such premises. Through their everyday struggles for better lives on the farm, ʿAmm Fathi, Tātā Samira, and their sons - particularly Yasser (as the eldest son and hence the one on whom the farm responsibilities would fall in the future) - were claiming inclusion in their society, similarly to what many Tunisians had voiced 10 years earlier across the country during the 2011 revolution. Good food, or good wheat (in their case), were the crops that allowed their household to prosper, and farmers to be acknowledged as worthy men and women. Embracing the new project, Yasser ceased to be '*baṭṭāl*' (unemployed), and was given the chance to realise himself as a respected young man.

The next chapter will move on to explore the details of ʿAmm Fathi's successful relational work with civil society actors and Gene Bank officers, with object of analysis being the construction of an 'alternative food network' that will

emerge out of those relations. This exploration in turn will connect smallholders' struggles for lives worth living with international and national dynamics (interests, concerns, and opportunities) emerging around the commercialisation of 'indigenous' wheat.

Chapter 6: An emergent food network: trading indigenous wheat in late capitalism

This chapter ethnographically foregrounds an 'alternative' food network that emerged from the convergence of new interests around the trade of indigenous varieties of wheat cultivated by ʿAmm Fathi. The chapter will describe how, despite neglect from local agricultural administrations, ʿAmm Fathi managed to leverage his 'relational work' to scale up his business by partnering with a politically and socially connected association in Tunisia. Through observing the construction of the newly set-up food network across different scales (local, national, and international), the chapter will reflect on how relations among food, people, and space can be influenced by global projects and can affect people's ideas surrounding how to inhabit the local, asking what the implications and opportunities for smallholders are. Looking at the intersections of everyday practices and ambiguous discourses constructing an 'alternative' wheat network, my reflections below will explore the *local* not as a simple reflection of global agendas, but rather by interrogating what 'moves people to do what they do' (Nazarea 2013:22). As for Lammer (2017, 2018) my observations (see also Chapter 3) return to reflect on care - as both practice and discourse - to look at the different productions it enables. As seen also throughout the thesis, care supports the analysis by mediating among different moralities and articulating my interlocutors' ideas of a good society and a good life through identifying 'who is in need of care and who should deliver it' (Thelen 2021:10). In this chapter, care is employed by my informants as a measure of each other's commitments, conditions to their inclusion or exclusion in the food networks.

This last piece, exploring the formation of food networks around indigenous wheat, also moves my ethnographic observations from the Zaghouan region to a different scale. It observes how national and international interest around what constitutes good wheat have manifested also locally in the interactions among Tunisian smallholders, civil society actors, and state representatives. Moving beyond dichotomist assumptions framing relations between 'alternative' food networks and conventional ones, state and civil society, market and communities, my analysis points to the very nature of the social phenomenon: their necessary entanglement in practice (Lammer 2017, 2018; Thelen et al. 2014).

The first section explains ʿAmm Fathi's frustration with the stagnation of his wheat business in relation to local dynamics of land distribution in the region, and his unsuccessful appeals to the Department of Agriculture's regional representatives. Approaching the state itself as

> 'a relational setting that cannot be categorized according to simple hierarchies or a governing centre, but that exists within the relations between actors who have unequal access to material, social, regulatory and symbolic resources and who negotiate over ideas of legitimate power by drawing on existing state images – at once reaffirming and transforming these representations within concrete practices' (Thelen et al. 2014:7),

my account will hence materialise it (the state) in a processual way through multiple face-to-face encounters between ʿAmm Fathi and state representatives. I show ethnographically how practices such as land and funding redistribution have for years constructed agricultural networks across the country by differentially including others (especially smallholders).

The second section, focusing on concrete and ever-evolving social relations and observing social actors' moral reasoning around their multiple interests, unpacks the process of cooperation and the 'reinvention of indigenous wheat' food networks. I primarily look at how ʿAmm Fathi came to guarantee viable futures to his family through his incessant 'relational work' around the wheat trade. For him, the construction of food networks entailed an attentive, constant navigation of different moral rubrics through which he evaluated the caring involvement of social actors in the food network and their genuine concern for life on the farm (see also Lammer 2018). The material will show how 'care', here manifested by existential and material reciprocal support among social actors in the food network, contributed to constructing the image of a neglectful and hence uncaring state. The remainder of the chapter attends to the complex relations between state representatives, farmers, and cooperative members, looking at how the different actors in the food network perform and negotiate the boundaries between the state and themselves. Following Lammer's (2017, 2018) and Thelen, Vetters, and von Benda-Beckmann's (2014) relational approaches to the state, which suggest studying the constructed 'boundaries' between the state and society as a site where 'negotiations and struggles over the power to define how the (legitimate) state should be seen and worked' (Thelen et al. 2014:8), I discuss my interlocutors' moral claims for how state-society relations should be re-

deployed in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Hence, the chapter points at how, while distancing themselves from the state which is identified as neglectful and corrupt, social actors continue to seek social incorporation (Li 2013) in an 'ideal caring society'.

By continuing to push to be acknowledged as a valuable producer contributing to feed the country, ʿAmm Fathi, like other farmers involved in the indigenous wheat trade who I met – as well as conservationists, state employees, and civil society representatives – differently reclaimed reciprocity as a material, moral, and social frame of inclusion in everyday interactions with state representatives as well as for good normal lives.

1. State and smallholders' conflictual relations: neglect and desire

By attending ethnographically to the 'concrete web of relations' (Thelen et al. 2014:7), the two sections below will reflect on the mundane interactions between smallholders and employees at the regional Department of Agriculture. Through discussing the current stalled reallocation of state land in the Zaghouan region, the following section details how the state is still perceived as an unworthy institution that neglects segments of the population (Li 2013; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Pontiggia 2017; Thelen 2021). At the same time, as discussed in the second section, part of the farming population (including ʿAmm Fathi) would not give up on the idea of a state as a desirable actor (Aretxaga 2003; Jansen 2015; Obeid 2010, 2015; Street 2012; Vetters 2014) that could possibly mediate, redistribute resources (especially land), and enable better working conditions on the farm.

1.1. Exclusive networks: state land as denied political belonging for smallholders

Ideas of what the state should be and how it should perform are constructed on imaginaries embedded in social actors' past experiences (Thelen et al. 2014; Vetters 2014). In this section, I first situate smallholder relations vis-à-vis the history of the reclamation of state land in the region.

As seen in Chapter 5, the availability and ownership of land was an ever-present issue for smallholders in the region. Years of expropriation and dispossession of smallholders brought farming families like ʿAmm Fathi's from the more fertile

plains where they might have originally settled to hilly, marginal lands. Partly also connected to local inheritance practices through which land is divided into smaller parcels among brothers, access to land becomes a central issue for those households who still relied on agriculture as a main source of income.[120] For farmers in the region, access to state land to rent (more than half of the land in the region belongs to the state) was conditional on age, educational qualifications, and experience, as well as their ability to demonstrate future success (investments, business plans, etc.). As 'Amm Fathi explained on our way to visit one of the local landowners who he worked for during the busiest times of the year in the nearby district of Souef, some of the state lands in the area had been redistributed to local young farmers. Nevertheless, most of the land, he claimed, was earmarked for people who could invest. He had spoken to the local administration and asked for more land to rent many times, but there was no way he would be granted any, as he did not meet the eligibility criteria.

Figure 51: View of private olive groves (delimitated by prickly pear bushes) from the Zriba Alia village

[120]While on rain-fed farms 20 hectares are needed to secure a household's livelihood, 5 hectares of irrigated land will guarantee a secure living. Of the 470,000 hectares of land owned totally by smallholders, only 16% have access to irrigation technologies (83,000 ha) (Ayeb and Bush 2019).

Central to this reflection is how specific social networks (the state, agri-business farmers, traders and middlemen, political actors) were built throughout the years by excluding those reputedly not competent for the job. Modern parameters of productivity (the volume of production per hectare, standardisation of the practices of production, quality related to certified criteria of the seeds) constructed smallholders in Tunisia as undeserving of being members of the networks, simultaneously denying them political belonging (Biehl 2005; Thelen and Coe 2019). As also discussed in the previous chapter, an exacerbation of the divide between the agriculture practiced by farming families and the growing high-capital agriculture emerged in connection to the country's general transition towards market deregulation from the 1980s forward. In those years though the withdrawal of state 'interferences' in the free market (Gana 2012; Hibou 2011a; King 2003) was not characterised by a crisis of legitimacy of the Tunisian state. Rather, a reconfiguration of power relations was achieved through a 'personalistic management of the country's resources and their distribution to supporters of the new president, Ben Ali, and his family[121]. In this context, the distribution of state land was reconfigured into an important tool of the country's crony management: land was redistributed according to its 'utility' to the Ben Ali clan or his family more directly (Elloumi 2013; Gharbi 2002). Echoing the practice of the Bey of Tunis who offered land to his administration in pre-colonial Tunisia, the CNICM (the National Commission for Investigating Corruption) reports that during the rule of Ben Ali (1987-2011), more than 12,000 hectares were granted to family members alone, who often did not even pay the expected rent (Elloumi 2013; Russo 2019).

As noted in the literature (Elloumi 2013; Fautras 2015; Gana 2012; Russo 2019) land inequalities were not generally related to land scarcity: inequalities need to be contextualised in relation to the political projects (see thesis Introduction) through which sections of population were differently included in the state (Fautras 2015; Pontiggia 2017). The blatant state cronyism, coupled with enduring hardships related to access to funding, irrigation schemes, the rising prices of inputs, a lack of infrastructure for product transformations, and mounting unemployment in recent years that prevented off-farm employment from sustaining farming operations – all

[121] Far beyond the 'traditional patronage logics', the state's business predation during those years became a tool of control of the socio-economic life of the country (Hibou 2011a; Russo 2019).

accumulating with the international food crisis of 2008 – fuelled dissatisfaction with and resentment towards the system. That same year, in different parts of Tunisia including Zaghouan, smallholders protested by refusing to pay their debts and demonstrating in front of courts that had decreed their land dispossession (Fautras 2015) - protests that rural Tunisians considered the beginning of the revolutionary process. After the revolution, with a series of legislative acts directed at demonstrating a rupture with the politics of the past, the government confiscated a total of 22,377 hectares of land[122] (land previously managed by 33 Agricultural Promotion and Development Companies (SMVDAs), and which was distributed among Ben Ali supporters). However, the political instabilities of the transition slowed on the possibility of advancing clear policies on the matter (Elloumi 2013; Russo 2019).

The contextualisation of the issue in Zaghouan becomes significant for the analysis. In the region the pre-revolution narrative for smallholders reflects similar dynamics, revealing the almost total impossibility of continuing farming in such a context. The lack of political connections[123] precluded farmers from becoming involved in SMVDA (*Société de mise en Valeur et de Développement Agricole*, Agricultural Development Companies) or leasing state land.

After the revolution, in the region out of the total 156,389 ha belonging to the State, 14,013 ha of land are managed by SMVDAs, 2,223 ha are currently earmarked for allocation to young farmers in the area, and the remaining significant amount of state land is still inactive and unallocated. Russo (2019) notes how the most productive lands are currently still under the control of state administrators. In this sense, the events that followed the allocation of the land confiscated[124] from the agro-industrial society managed by Sakher El Materi (Ben Ali's son-in-law) are quite

[122] Which was later returned to public competition for leasing.
[123] Prior to the revolution, in Zaghouan, access to state land (or land not directly controlled by the Trabelsi or Ben Ali clans) was managed through the circuit of SMVDAs (Agricultural Development Companies) created to encourage private investors to lease state lands whose access was still conditioned according to proximity to the governing party or the president's family. For those who were unable to trigger the right contacts, the path to employment within SMDVAs was mostly impeded (Russo 2019), let alone direct access to leasing the land.
[124] Particularly well known was the case of the farms allocated to Ben Ali's son-in-law in Zaghouan, which (as seen above) came to be confiscated in the aftermath of the revolution. On an area of more than 1,300 hectares, a colossal olive oil export project was initiated, consisting of 1.9 million olive trees and involving the diversion of water resources from the modest Bir M'cherga dam (located in the district of the same name, 18km from Zaghouan town), to the detriment of other farmers in the area (Elloumi 2013). As mentioned in the Introduction, the proximity of Zaghouan's farmland to Tunis has historically meant the subordination of the area to the different situated interests connected with the political games of the centre.

revealing. Put under a judicial supervision in late 2011, since then farmers employed by the former venture have continued working the land in an unclear legal context. As an example of the heavy interference of the state in the matter, in 2012 the society began to be operated as a 'special' SMDVA (Agricultural Promotion and Development Companies), and its budget needed to be approved by the Minister of Finance. As powerfully expressed by Ghilès, referring to the stalled land redistribution plans across the country, 'thus the old and the new mingle and fight each other, and the government dares not usher in a new age of rational decision making' (2016: 4). Such accounts on post-revolutionary management of state land (Gana and Taleb 2019; Rijkers et al. 2017), accruing throughout the years, contributed to reproduce images of a colluded state. For many Tunisian smallholders, the state is still experienced through its 'absent-presence' (Street 2012:1): while still failing to follow through new promises of inclusive development it actively feeds 'networks of privilege' (Heydemann 2004:1).

1.2. Unreciprocated exchanges

The material above has demonstrated how over the years the management of land by the state became a further conditional instrument for consolidating exclusive networks and cementing political alliances between rural elites and state representatives, while restricting access for the country's farming population. As seen above, despite his numerous requests, ʿAmm Fathi was denied access to state land or loans to certify his land as organic. This section will argue that ʿAmm Fathi's requests to regional representatives of the Department of Agriculture in Zaghouan can be interpreted as a relational modality (Thelen et al. 2014; Vetters 2014) available to farmers to claim social incorporation (Li 2013) which, as we will see, failed to be reciprocated by the regional administration.

ʿAmm Fathi had, for a long time, attempted to compel the state to recognise his political and social value as a food producer who had run a cereal business in the area for more than 30 years, feeding and supporting his local community while raising four children (Ferguson 2013; Li 2013; Thelen 2015; Vetters 2014). According to local systems of values that blend mutual help, self-interest, and social obligations, ʿAmm Fathi's hard work should have granted him access to state land, certification, or some funding. Relying on his credentials as a wheat producer to negotiate access to resources at the local regional CRDA (Regional Administrative Department for

Agricultural Development) was hence not seen as morally improper behaviour; rather, it was an underlying part of everyday life in the countryside.

Figure 52**: Checking on the wheat**

Through his continuous requests for access to state land or connections to enlarge his business, he also continued to construct the state, which he simultaneously disparaged, as a site 'for political desire and identification' (Street 2012:1). In ʿAmm Fathi's case, this desire for the state was not discursively expressed, but rather it materialised through his reflections on his interactions with state officials representing the regional Minister of Agriculture. 'I chased state lands for so long, and they instead held a meeting telling us to join forces in the *majmaʿ* (farmer's association) at the village', he told me shaking his head on a hot summer day.

In continuity with the years of contempt towards the smallholder population, the local administration did not look at ʿAmm Fathi's wheat cultivation efforts as anything worthy of investment. Like many, he was a smallholder, and his requests for land, bio-certification, or training for his son Yasser were left unanswered. Two employees [125] from the regional CRDA, discussing the future of smallholders cultivating indigenous landraces in the area, instead viewed local issues from a different perspective. As one explained in detail:

> 'We could give farmers cultivating indigenous seeds collective assets [certification or funding for new projects in the area] if they would join forces. They could share the cost [of the certification, or of new project, or renting more land]. But they cannot agree among themselves on the leadership, so the place [a physical place that could

[125] One worked at the organic department, the other as head of the funding department.

function as an association's base] is closed. They choose this for themselves: in the meeting they say "yes, yes", but then they don't agree on how to work together. This is a problem of creativity and mentality (mindset), a general problem in the whole of Tunisia: people have trouble deciding about leadership or even working with each other, trusting each other. It is like in a family, we eat together, but we also fight.'

The two state employees, like some of their other colleagues at the regional Department of Agriculture I spoke to, identified a lack of creativity, trust, or education among farmers as the major factors in smallholders' unwillingness to cooperate, and to be entrepreneurial. As an individual producer, a smallholder with limited assets such as land and money to invest, or un-certifiable seeds,[126] was not a 'visible actor in the state's eyes (Hirsch 2001; Reed 1999; Street 2012). Their disadvantaged position in their society shaped their ability to negotiate commitments and elicit reciprocal exchange (Street 2012; Thelen and Coe 2019). For ʿAmm Fathi instead, the issue at the root of the CRDA proposal was not so much a lack of cooperation or trust among his neighbours,[127] rather it was more the risky nature of the project, with an uncaring state inviting producers with limited assets to join in a dubious venture:

> 'But Sara', ʿAmm Fathi argued, 'How would we organise? We work with our family, that's it. Everybody around here does that. The CRDA wants us to work together, but after we sign the deal they will disappear. Who will guarantee that my neighbour will be a good worker? My neighbour has few resources, like all of us, what will happen if something goes wrong, who will be able to take risks? Who will provide us with contacts for selling? They (the administration) will leave us here.'

Many of the farmers I spoke with, both smallholders such as ʿAmm Fathi as well as large landowners trying to insert themselves into the export circuit of organic wheat and olive oil, had in fact stated that what their businesses needed the most in order to thrive[128] were vertical connections, opportunities or funding for enlarging their business, and contacts to scale up their operations. Sedimented through his

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[126] As seen in Chapter 5, indigenous seeds were exchanged informally between farmers or through the local market.

[127] I knew for example that he trusted his neighbours, or at least some of them, as he had explained to me while talking about land inheritance issues: 'You know most of the time, you don't need rental contracts. Here you rent the land and they trust you with paying the land value after the harvest.' Similarly, when I inquired about his work with the tractor on his neighbours' land, he simply answered that if he knew his neighbour was in a position to pay for his work and gas, he would accept money, otherwise it would have been up to God to make up for it.

[128] With land and state incentives.

personal history with the CRDA - and perhaps also through the history of (forced) cooperatisation back in the late 1960s - ʿAmm Fathi's aversion toward the CRDA's deal pointed at the lack of care of the local administration: 'They don't care about us failing or what, they care about us stopping knocking at their doors for a few months'.

As noted by Thelen, 'making claims on state care reveals ideals about what political belonging should be' (2021:9). Farmers such as ʿAmm Fathi were hence insistently seeking paths that would secure their social incorporation (Li 2013). In ʿAmm Fathi's vision, his commitment to his land over more than 30 years in the wheat trade[129] should have granted him a successful application for state land, or at least farming training for one of his sons. His 'relational work' with the regional administration should have materialised as a source of relational power (Brković 2022; Street 2012; Venkatesan 2010).

As underlined by ʿAmm Fathi himself after hosting state representatives one morning, what was hard to ignore was not only the lack of material reciprocation, but also the existential one. 'A yogurt for the kids would do it', 'Amm Fathi commented once, after hosting CDRA employees at his house after an interview. A failed exchange at many levels (Strathern 1988, 2000), ʿAmm Fathi's 'hospitality' (food offered, information about his business and over 30 years of work as wheat producer) was not reciprocated by a state that, as he put it, 'leaves farmers there (uncared for)', as shown by its exclusionary funding policies, lack of response to requests about state land, training, and organic certification, and its social contempt towards smallholders' ability as food producers. A field of ritualised exchange (Shryock 2004), hospitality was instead expected to preform increased self-worth and respectability, a leverage to negotiate social hierarchies, enlarge alliances, and claim a richer social-economic life. ʿAmm Fathi's moral reasoning around 'broken hospitality laws' particularly highlighted the lack of that 'fellow feeling and mutual esteem between social peers' (Henig and Makovicky 2017b:6), hence positioning years of exclusion from the country's resource distribution as a lack of recognition of smallholders' political belonging as proper food producers.

In conclusion, the two sections above show how the 'relational modalities' and their underlying ideas (moral obligations for mutual support, and hope for political

[129] Over the years, 'Amm Fathi hosted innumerable state representatives or agronomists sent over by local administrations for research and policy-making purposes.

inclusion in 'networks of proximities' for deserving, hardworking individuals), through which farmers in contemporary Tunisia continue to seek social incorporation (Li 2013; Vetters 2014), have permeated Tunisian social life at different scales. I argue that, in rural Tunisia, farmers distinguish between legitimate claims (morally framed to reclaim participation in a social-economic project of nation-building on the basis of deservingness, hard work, and commitment to food production) and un-caring practices that are judged to be blatantly corrupt (exclusionary policies of land distribution, and a lack of financial support for those who need it the most). Hence, the distinction between patronage practices, *de facto* opening up opportunities for some while denying them to others, and practices of relational modalities (Thelen et al. 2014; Vetters 2014), although always potentially ambiguous, was contingently outlined by smallholders like ʿAmm Fathi through claiming inclusion by virtue of their contribution to feeding their communities and the country (Li 2013; Street 2012).

As ʿAmm Fathi's relational work with the regional administration representatives failed to grant him more land to rent or funding to start up organic certification on the farm, in an attempt to escape the bare self-subsistence cycle he was trapped in, he turned to other relations he had simultaneously cultivated. Retaining the processual character of care that connects 'a giving and receiving side in practices aimed to satisfy recognized needs' (Thelen 2015:509) (see also Tronto 1993), the material below will show how, for ʿAmm Fathi, turning to interlocutors whose interests aligned with his production of indigenous wheat and trade was the starting point for constructing a productive food network and making himself visible as a worthy food producer (Hirsch 2001). In surveying how this food network was formed, I will especially note how relational modalities based on reciprocity were determinant for establishing commitment and care for participants of networks *vis-à-vis* life on the farm.

2. Claiming political belonging through re-vitalising the indigenous seeds

As discussed in Chapter 5, ʿAmm Fathi continued to plant indigenous varieties of wheat, passed down from his father and father's fathers, as such varieties were more responsive to drought and the lack of mechanical irrigation. Also, with the land

he cultivated, conventional wheat production would have not covered part of his operations, especially the cost of transport to the government silo. So, he continued to plant indigenous varieties, selling the harvest locally and informally to farmers he came to know through the Gene Bank.

The National Gene Bank of Tunisia (NGBT), a research institution under the authority of the Ministry of Local Affairs and Environment, was responsible for coordinating and supporting the conservation of the country's bio-diverse heritage,[130] and began its activities in November 2007. Since then, it has been coordinating a national network, bringing together public and private research bodies, organisations, as well as individual stakeholders working on national biodiversity safeguarding and conservation issues. Biodiversity, emerging as a historically constructed concept within conservation biology[131] in the late 1980s and early 1990s, indexed the failure of techno-science in its attempt to stabilise, 'collect, systematise, sanitise, and centralise germplasm of crops in gene-banks' (Nazarea 2013:21). Re-articulated as a discourse that points to interrelations 'between nature and society in global contexts of science, cultures, and economies' (Escobar 2008:55), biodiversity has been re-contextualised innumerable times at the service of multiple knowledge power circles (Escobar 2008).

Relevant to this discussion is how, in the wake of the international commitment to plant genetic resources conservation, the Tunisian Gene Bank also set up several preservation programmes. Acknowledging the importance of harmonising ex-situ institutional approaches with more informal and local in-situ activities coordinating with farmers, one of the projects was directed at safeguarding and enhancing local landraces of durum wheat and barley. To start up the in-situ side of operations, the Gene Bank thus coordinated with local agricultural administrations in each governorate, attempting to track farmers still working with *'al-budhūr al-*

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[130] The NGBT has a capacity for ex-situ conservation of 200,000 seed varieties, 300,000 samples in cryopreservation at its headquarters in Tunis, and a 20 hectare field gene bank in Takelsa (Governorate of Nabeul, north-eastern Tunisia). Currently, the seed gene bank conserves about 40,000 varieties, including a large diversity of crop species such as cereal crops that have historically been staple crops in North Africa.

[131] In the wake of conservationist ideologies that pushed for the so-called 'miracle' varieties (the breeding of modern high-yielding seeds, opening up what as the Green Revolution in agriculture), in Tunisia a 1999-42 law certified a list of tradable seeds that excluded traditional varieties. The law in particular identified and isolated seeds and plants that displayed a certain productive and commercial value (homogeneity, morphological uniformity, and stability). While many farmers across Tunisia since the time of colonisation had mainly utilised seeds produced by crossing Tunisian traditional varieties and foreign varieties (Ben Krima et al. 2020), others had continued cultivating traditional varieties (varieties developed prior to the 1930s by mixing indigenous seeds).

qadīma' (indigenous or old seeds), and approaching them to start up a process of 'cooperation'. It was through this conservation programme that ʿAmm Fathi met Rachid, a young associate researcher in charge of the project aimed at boosting the conservation of indigenous wheat and barley.

Figure 53: The Gene Bank's stand at the seeds festival, showing samples of seeds

The discussion below will show how the indigenous wheat network was established in everyday practices and discourses by leveraging on its 'distinct' characteristics: indigenous seeds (instead of conventional ones); exchanges of mutual care among actors (instead of uncaring state representatives); honourable and hardworking farmers (versus compromised and colluded investors); and a caring community of consumers (instead of an impersonal market). As Lammer (2017) suggests, by analysing how these dichotomies constitute the specific food network as an alternative to conventional exclusionary ones, I will 'unpack the nature of food network phenomenon, which combines necessary entanglements with constant efforts of differentiations' (Lammer 2017:7).

Building on the work of Lammer (2017, 2018) and Pontiggia (2017, 2018) I propose to look at the contingent '(un)caring relations' among actors in the indigenous wheat network as practices determining their inclusion (or exclusion): the caring conservationist, the resilient and ingenious farmer, the interested cooperative leader, the uncaring state representatives. By focusing on concrete and ever-evolving social relations, my material will account for how social actors – including farmers, state representatives and 'civil society' actors – are implicated in the construction of such ambivalent images by distancing their activities from the practices of social

actors that were considered 'uncaring or exclusionary' and damaging to the construction of 'alternative food networks'.

2.1. Rachid the '*rājil*' (honourable man) from the Gene Bank

The renewed interest in the indigenous landraces of wheat brought to the foreground the thorny issues of the marginalisation of the farmers who had continued to cultivate them, who had been overlooked in the Tunisian post-colonial policy-making. As seen especially in Chapter 5, in addition to the lack of policies supporting smallholder operations, the 1999 law, and its economic and social valence – identifying the 'good, desirable modern engineered seeds' by separating from the indigenous ones and from the farming knowledge that surrounded them – contributed over time to the 'social alienation of their producers' (Aistara 2011:505). This was very clear for Rachid, the 35-year-old Gene Bank employee who worked on cereal varieties conservation in-situ (with farmers) and ex-situ (on the Gene Bank experimental plots). With a pen, agenda, and phone in his hands, throughout one of our first conversations he clearly framed many of the current impasses within the agriculture sector, and specifically the marginalisation that many smallholders were subjected to. He also highlighted how the Gene Bank as a public institution was not allowed to remunerate producers[132] who were willing to cooperate with them.

> 'It is quite hard if all we can do is tell the farmers, "please save your seeds and do not sell them", with the promise of doing something together in the future, and give them some advice when they call up'. He added, 'You know, everybody [farmers] is cultivating old seeds for different reasons: for covering costs like with 'Amm Fathi, because of their quality for food production, for nostalgia. But this doesn't detract from the fact that the next generation of youth won't stay on the land for these reasons, it is not viable and does not allow a decent living. Without farmers, the varieties in the Gene Bank don't make much sense, because they adapt and modify to climate and time passing'.

From these reflections, it was clear that the young man was quite aware of his job's mandated political implications, showing the social-environmental and

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[132] Farmers willing to cooperate with the Gene Bank were not paid for their time, land, and work on the experimental seed plots, as the Gene Bank was a research-oriented state organisation operating under the Minister of the Environment.

economic entanglements of reality. The wellbeing of the farming family was a clear moral concern for Rachid, and he helped as he could. 'Farmers want to sell, and want to sell well', Rachid often remarked. Despite it not being part of his job, Rachid has supported farmers' cultivation of indigenous wheat varieties, re-connecting them with other networks of producers and buyers interested in trading indigenous landraces. Farmers also called him up if they were seriously concerned about their wheat, and Rachid would call the farmers back from time to time to get updates on their families and on the wheat.

Mutuality and sociability, together with self-interest, were at the core of Rachid's reciprocal relationship with smallholders, as an 'inherent part of a universal competition for social recognition at the base of all the forms of exchange in modern society' (Henig and Makovicky 2017b:7). As a result of this, in the words of all the smallholders I met and worked with, Rachid was portrayed as a 'real man', a *rājil,* or a 'man of honour'. Alongside the farmers, he selected, compared, gathered, stored, and distributed indigenous seeds from farm to farm, contributing to preserving both the genetic make-up of plants and ecosystems, and the social reproduction of households. He certainly had his own stake in developing good relationships with farmers (work-wise as a fieldworker for the Gene Bank, and also as researcher), but he also expressed care through his actions. The existential and material care expressed through Rachid's behaviour - returning farmers' calls, discussing marketing ideas, connecting them with potential buyers - contributed to solidifying in the farmers' minds the boundaries of an indifferent state, unresponsive to their demands and who often blamed them for their lack of entrepreneurship. Rachid's (personal) involvement and social recognition of the farmers' work and troubles made of him a proper, respectable man. When he visited 'Amm Fathi's farm, the two men would salute with each other with a friendly '*Shnaḥwālik yā khūya, ʾinti lābās?*? (how are you my brother, is everything well?)', in a demonstration of intimacy reserved only for friends or family. His welcome at the farm was quite different from the deferential and subtly resentful way the family would welcome state representatives from the regional CRDA to the house: '*ʾAhla bīk* (welcome to you)'.

Mutual support, material and existential reciprocation underlying caring relations - or their absence - could be noted at different scales, starting within the family, moving to the neighbourhood and networks constituting larger social groups, and finally intersecting with state institutions. As ʿAmm Fathi explained in frustration

on a long July summer's day, when he was quite upset by the behaviour of those from the local Department of Agriculture he had received on the farm throughout the day:

> 'Has anybody ever listened to me, with all the people from the Department I fed? Once we received 30 people - bread, food, Samira and another woman's time - no way anybody ever acknowledged the effort afterwards. This is not like it is supposed to be. They leave happily with their information. Do you think one of them came back to say thanks or to ask how is the work, giving me some information on how to improve my yields? Nothing, of course. I'm doing it for Rachid. But I'm so tired, so tired of it'.

Through evaluating caring behaviours and practices of social actors crossing paths on his farm, ʿAmm Fathi set boundaries (Lammer 2017; Mitchell 1991; Thelen et al. 2014) differentiating between social domains: an uncaring state versus inclusive networks made up by honourable men.

Figure 54: Activists connected to the Gene Bank visiting ʿAmm Fathi

Rachid himself, in addition to acknowledging the lack of formal opportunities for compensating farmers cooperating with the Gene Bank on the seed conservation project, and hence trying to support them by providing marketing contacts, also made clear his position in relation to the present political approaches that continued to ignore the urgent need for change in the country's farming sector. '*Hamdūllah* (Thanks God) the Gene Bank operates under the Minister of Environment', remarked Rachid on different occasions. Despite his obvious entanglements with the state, as Rachid worked for a state-related institution, he was evidently relieved not to belong

to the notorious 'corrupted gang'[133] operating under the direction of the Ministry of Agriculture, and he often openly criticising their short-term vision of the future of farming in the country. On the other hand, Rachid did not consider his personal relatedness with the rural producers as a form of colluding behaviour, but rather saw it as inserted among those 'mutual support' practices in place among hardworking people. Rachid's work within the smallholder communities - social spaces in which needs and hardships are overcome by relying on each other - simultaneously served his interests as a researcher and conservationist, and constructed him as a moral subject.

It was by leveraging one of the Rachid's connections that, by the end of my fieldwork, ʿAmm Fathi had managed to scale up his farm operations, joining forces with a cooperative of producers operating in a neighbouring region. Rachid had earlier introduced the Slow Food foundation to ʿAmm Fathi. By performing his rightful 'relational work', ʿAmm Fathi had befriended a woman who was part of the Slow Food network in Tunisia, and who led a well-connected rural association in the neighbouring Mannouba region. The details of this network's production will be discussed in the next section.

2.2. Slow Food and Madama Safra: which care?

The Slow Food foundation,[134] and its Tunisian 'representation' (*Presidium*), [135] although marginal to my account, represented one of first important food network nexuses in the picture. In the wake of the connections developed with the Tunisian Gene Bank, it came to intersect the local discourses and practices surrounding ancient wheat cultivated in Tunisia and in the Zaghouan region specifically. This allows me to briefly interrogate and open up the discourse about ancient wheat at different scales, detailing how 'international discourses about the environment, sustainability or climate change entangle with local context, often in unpredictable ways' (Farmer and Barnes 2018:377). Processes of food heritagisation, such as those led internationally

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[133] See the recent wave of arrests, including the former Agriculture Minister (Reuters 2021).
[134] Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity is the operational branch of the Slow Food movement. It works in partnership with small-scale producers across more than 100 countries to protect food biodiversity, providing them with support in their operations.
[135] The Presidia are Slow Food Communities committed to protecting local varieties of fruit and vegetables, indigenous seeds and livestock breeds. Their work includes also the safeguarding of traditional knowledge around food processing and cultivation.

by Slow Food, raise questions around the meanings of heritage and tradition in relation to local food systems. If food heritage can be thought of as ‘the set of material and immaterial elements of food cultures that are considered a shared legacy or a common good’ including ‘agricultural products, they symbolic dimension of food and in its more material aspects, cooking artefacts and the table setting’ (Matta 2013:2) then heritagisation highlights the process of ‘updating, adapting and re-interpreting elements from the past of a given group (its knowledge, skills and values)’ (Bessière 1998:27). The process often includes entanglements between conservation and innovation, reproduction and creation, giving life to new social meanings. Further, food heritagisation initiatives often take shape in between the local and global, emerging situationally and bounded by specific political institutions, regulatory systems, and trade agreements. In the process and as a result of such enmeshment, local knowledge and heritage products are often exposed to differently positioned social actors’ intentions and interests (see also Bowen and De Master 2011). In what follows below, focusing on 'Amm Fathi and his family’s perception of reality, I do not describe the events that brought together a group of Tunisian farmers and activists with some Italian activists concerned with seed heritagisation issues and their developments. Instead, I reflect on how a smallholder family came to understand such a heritagisation project surrounding the ancient wheat trade, and how they accepted some aspects of that project.

Figure 55: GFDA couscous winning a second-place competition

When I first met ʿAmm Fathi and Tātā Samira in 2017, he had just returned from the food festival organised by Slow Food in Italy, which gathered food communities from around the globe showcasing their local knowledge and food products for a week of celebrations of biodiversity. While they were excited about the travel, the warm welcome, and the new experiences as food producers, ʿAmm Fathi and Tātā Samira were not overly enthusiastic about the experience. There had been no opportunity to sell their products in Italy, as the festival was directed at mainly showcasing and raising awareness around local knowledge and practices. Also, Slow Food had not been able to sponsor them much beyond their travel and accommodation costs. 'They did not even give us pocket money to help buy gifts for the kids', commented ʿAmm Fathi sourly to one of the Slow Food local representatives once back in Tunisia, 'We could not afford to buy anything there in euros, so we came back with nothing'. That trip was hence quickly packaged as a one-time thing, a partially pleasant experience, but one that was led by people who did not really care. As the civil society actors active in alternative food networks had appeared on the farm one day asking them to join the festival in Italy, they also quickly disappeared from their lives. Similarly to how farmers thought of state representatives who came and went on their farms without thinking much of the humans inhabiting them, those food activists were also seen as not caring much. As we have seen, care was instead constructed across time as long-term reciprocal relationships that performed political belonging. After the trip, ʿAmm Fathi and Tātā Samira were not involved in any of the activities of the local presidia, which were aimed at opening vital spaces for sustaining rural communities and their practices around food while safeguarding local landraces of wheat, and which were mostly organised (as we will see, not without complications) by farmers in the neighbouring Mannouba region.

The Slow Food project itself in the Mannouba region, which was supposed to include in its activities the constitution of a local cooperative transforming ancient wheat into good food for local consumption,[136] in addition to the possibility of exporting the transformed products to Italy, did not last long. The implementation of

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[136] While the best intentions might have moved the actors who planned the Slow Food initiatives in Tunisia, it is possible to observe how gazes from the metropolis, formerly entangled with the colonial imagination of the region as environmentally degraded, are currently reframed into discourses that now uphold 'development as environmental redemption' in the area (Farmer and Barnes 2018:375).

the project met local resistance, as the two actors in charge of producing and gathering ancient wheat (smallholders and their representatives) uncovered disagreements with the group in charge of processing the wheat (the association of women producers led by Madame Safra). The Mannouba smallholder farmers continued with an independent project with the support of the Italian Rotary Club, managing to create a supply chain directed to Italian markets. The group of women producers continued to search for another interlocutor to replicate the Slow Food project, trying to find farmers who cultivated premium wheat and remarketed it as chemical-free and environmentally fit. It was through a convergence of mutual interests, then, that ʿAmm Fathi and Madame Safra established a business agreement.

'Thank God Madame Safra came to us', said ʿAmm Fathi on my last visit to the farm at the end of my fieldwork. He brought me to the back of the house to see the foundations of a new building that would host the new processing space. While he checked out the foundation and the pile of dirt gathered around it, ʿAmm Fathi looked more relaxed than I had seen him in previous months. 'Now we are set. Before, I was stuck, but now I'm ok'. At the time, he did not explain much of the context of the deal he had struck with Madame Safra, sharing only that he would produce wheat and then the women of his family would transform it into couscous and other products to be sold through Madame Safra in Tunis, in Italy, and who knows where else. ʿAmm Fathi was proud. His new partnership with Madame Safra, a politically connected woman, gave him hope for the future. He had managed to establish that vertical connection that he had been chasing for so long, with somebody who rendered his hard work visible (Street 2012) and who acknowledged the potentiality of indigenous wheat cultivation. ʿAmm Fathi did not concern himself much about Madame Safra's activities outside of their business deal, as her evaluation was instrumental to 'Amm Fathi's visions and goals for the wheat business. Madame Safra's reputation within civil society, however, was far from benign. Other informants of mine active within the field of alternative food networks (including Youmna as well as the Italian coordinator of the Slow Food foundation in Tunisia) painted her as an opportunistic and unscrupulous entrepreneur, and worried for ʿAmm Fathi's business. The material benefits for ʿAmm Fathi overcame those other considerations: once the wheat was sold to her, his worries were over.

Two years later, when I had the chance to return to Tunisia to retrieve some items I had left behind, I stayed at ʿAmm Fathi's house, which gave me the chance to

follow up on the development of the project, among other things. The processing space was almost complete, a huge 20 by 10 metres brick construction. ʿAmm Fathi pointed out the six small windows built high on each wall, which would allow air to circulate and conferred the space with a factory-like, or professional, semblance. ‘Madama Safra told us to cut an exit door through the back wall as the product needs to come in and go out from a different door’, he added. Those days, after finishing the sowing, he was working on gathering irons bars to build the entrance door.

ʿAmm Fathi told me that Madame Safra often came to the farm, bringing gifts for the children, checking on the project improvements, and sharing her knowledge about the medicinal plants that Tātā Samira could eventually invest in for processing and sale. ‘She is so busy and she works so hard, she is on the phone constantly, people won’t leave a minute for her to breathe. So when she comes to us, she goes in the kitchen and wants to cook with Samira, she doesn’t really want to be on the phone anymore’, ʿAmm Fathi told me. Present on the farm and able to perform not only the ‘good guest’ (giving gifts and time), she acted as one of the ‘family’, cooking with the farmers. Her performance on the farm was quite striking, as she came not only to consume their food or gather information about the business, but joined in with life on the farm, projecting a paternalistic image of a caring business partner. Like Rachid above, Madame Safra’s care - enacted through everyday business operations - was also a matter of the ‘style of the exchange and the appropriateness of the performance’ (Smart 1993:93).

Returning to the house, ʿAmm Fathi and I passed through another storage space, where they would usually stock seeds for the following years. Tātā Samira told me how Madame Safra had just come to gather all the couscous and pastas that she and her relatives had processed. ‘Somebody pays me to do the *ʿūla* (wheat processing stockage), I’m happy if she does’, his sister-in-law had commented randomly the day before. ‘How much does she pay you for a kilo?’ inquired Youmna, who had accompanied me to ʿAmm Fathi’s that afternoon, visiting his farm for the first time. ‘A kilo of this quality couscous in Tunis sells for 6 dinars. That woman is a trickster’. ’You know she buys *bi-l-gro* (in bulk) from us’, replied Tātā Samira, with a telling look.

Figure 56: Checking couscous drying for the ʿ*ūla* (wheat processing stockage)

Can the story narrated above be read as a story of the appropriation of local knowledge and experience, strength, hardships, struggles and vulnerability? I argue that partially, it can. It does show how heritage and tradition arrangements can easily be subsumed, benefiting powerful actors who are not necessarily embedded in local socio-economic and environmental dynamics. Tasty and good food *de facto* ended up in the capital city and possibly reached European shores, due to the presence of some socially well-positioned local actors interested in the trade. Considering the pervasive grasp of the current industrialised food system and its attempt to co-opt food heritage for its own benefit, doubts can be raised over the food network's long-lasting benefits for ʿAmm Fathi's business.

The emphasis on care as an analytical tool pushed my analysis forward in this section, reconnecting the overlapping relations between the national and international economy, the state, the environment, civil society, and the farming family. While discursively constructed by differentiation from the market and the state, my observations point to the entanglements in the construction of the food network, and at the very real consequences for my informants' struggles for good lives. For farming families, the ancient wheat food networks worked only if some politically well-positioned actors cared to include them and trade their wheat at a larger scale. In our case, Rachid from the Gene Bank and Madame Safra from a well-connected farmer's association came to enact these 'caring' actors. Both were embedded in wider webs of institutional networks, but they nevertheless constructed their social positioning *vis-à-vis* an unreliable state (Lammer 2017, 2018; Thelen et al. 2014), distancing

themselves and hence reworking state boundaries through performing care in relation to the creation of an indigenous wheat network. At the same time, by performing reciprocity and responding to ʿAmm Fathi's expectations around 'good food', both Rachid and Madame Safra managed to carve a space for cultivating their own individual aims.

3. Conclusion

The chapter followed ʿAmm Fathi's many attempts at seeking social incorporation (Li 2013) as an honourable food producer through his indigenous wheat trade. It described how his requests for inclusion within networks connecting state representatives with food producers were not accepted, and how this translated into his exclusion from renting state land, being granted organic certification for his land, or receiving a loan to invest further in an irrigation system, etc.

Combining observations of everyday dynamics and practices on the farm, the material hence highlighted the emergence of the boundary work of a variety of social actors. While 'uncaring state representatives' did not reciprocate the ʿAmm Fathi's years of cooperation with the local administration, his 'relational work' with civil society actors and Gene Bank officers enabled the formation of an 'alternative food network' around his indigenous wheat trade. Good or bad years and good or bad harvests came and went, but personal relationships - both horizontal and vertical [137] (Rebhun 1999) - constituted a reliable social insurance, where asking and giving support was a morally valued and socially recognised way to act within a group (de L'Estoile 2014). Seeking social incorporation (Li 2013) through personal relatedness hence was not seen as an improper practice: rather it was inserted into a moral frame upholding reciprocation and mutuality as 'caring practices among hardworking - and hence deserving - individuals.

Care practices, emerging from and measured in relation to local systems of values, thus played a key role in articulating farmers' evaluation of the social actors crossing paths on their farm: researchers, state representatives, international and national civil society representatives, etc. In ʿAmm Fathi's case, this chapter has

[137] As we saw, ʿAmm Fathi's relations of proximity that spanned horizontally (reciprocation with extended family and neighbours) were essential for the day-to-day operations on the farm. In Tunisia, however, where (as seen) obligations and mutual help are a natural part of social life, framing the exchange of resources and aid in moral terms, we also saw 'Amm Fathi claiming his entitlement to reciprocation vertically as well.

described how his aspiration for inclusion finally overlapped with two social actors' interest in indigenous wheat, both simultaneously inserted within state institutional networks (Rachid working for the Gene Bank and Madame Safra as leader of a farmer's association). Finally, observing the boundary work constructing the alternative food network around ʿAmm Fathi's indigenous wheat cultivation has foregrounded the network of power relations in which differently positioned care agents are inserted. More specifically, looking at care as an ever-evolving evaluative process sheds light on the open-ended character of network formations – and at the ever-shifting configuration of hierarchies and power asymmetries within them.

'Are you renting more land now, ʿAmm Fathi?' I asked while descending towards the house from the new storage place. 'A little bit more,' ʿAmm Fathi answered with a large, sly smile. 'What about the contract for the project, what about this new construction [the processing space where women will turn wheat in couscous or traditional hard wheat pasta], did you sign a contract with Madame Safra?' added Youmna, who was visiting with me. 'A contract? I haven't signed any contract', ʿAmm Fathi now laughed loudly. Though not getting involved in long-term formal agreements, ʿAmm Fathi managed nevertheless to scale up his operations. As long as the deal met his own aims, ʿAmm Fathi would stick with it: and should things take a turn for the worse, he was free to walk away with the improved assets – the processing space, new connections, savings, etc.

Whereas the material highlighted how care practices, situationally conceived as reciprocal relations at work among unequally positioned social actors, were able to include and create opportunities for a smallholder family, could they also be thought of as practices fostering ambivalent short-lived inclusion, at times also supporting the reproduction of existing hierarchies? ʿAmm Fathi seemed to be aware of this possibility, and by not signing a formal contract with Madame Safra – he acknowledged that she had been 'caring enough' at the moment - he remained conscious of the unpredictability the future holds, especially when power asymmetries are clearly involved in these transactions. It was similar with his relations with Rachid. Despite being aware of how central the relationship with the Gene Bank representative had been in developing his business, ʿAmm Fathi was of late quite upset about the constant requests from Rachid or colleagues he brought to the farm to experiment with different landraces of seeds on his land. 'What will I do with the little wheat that I plant on one hectare? Give me wheat for five hectares and then we

talk. I will say no to him this year.' The game of personal relations worked hence as a sequence of opening and closing synapses (Pontiggia 2017, 2018): reciprocity and mutual support that would supposedly lead to long-term relationships, often employed contingently and situationally triggered, remained inherently precarious (Bachelet 2019).

The commitment to producing *good food* for ʿAmm Fathi and Tātā Samira was in the end intrinsically linked to the possibility to live a good, normal life on the farm - as unpacked in detail in Chapter 5. It was not so much connected to the care for the 'conservation of exotic species or pristine nature' (Hamouchene 2022), but rather it voiced a fight against social exclusion at different scales.[138] ʿAmm Fathi's claims for and work towards reconnecting vertically and finding space in the state's political agenda can be seen as common to other pressing issues 'such as jobs, development of urban and rural infrastructure, distribution of wealth, and democratisation of decision-making' (Hamouchene 2022:16) for which people had fought against the regime 10 years prior. It can be thought of as being part of those social mobilisations described as 'ephemeral, localised, lacking solid organisational structures and without a strong popular base or a clear political horizon' but which were nevertheless inserted into 'a historical trajectory of class struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination' from which my observations departed at the beginning of this chapter (Hamouchene 2022:4). As Pontiggia (2018:162) powerfully put it: 'If we abandon the paradigm of resistance, we can shed a light on the way people reveal their desires, hopes, expectations and moral judgments about the structural dimensions that characterize their world'.

[138] Locally at the regional CRDA, at the national levels through years of exclusionary policies, and at a global level against the pervasiveness of the capitalist reach.

Conclusion

Since I returned from my fieldwork in Tunisia in the autumn of 2019, the Covid-19 crisis has weighed heavily on the country. The ongoing war in Ukraine has exacerbated the situation even further, with inflation and food prices spiking. Distinctly manifesting the features of a long-term socio-economic structural crisis shaking the country, as of today milk, sugar, and water are missing from supermarket shelves across the country. Flour-based products have been subject to rationing since 2020, enraging Tunisians who once more had to fight for basic items of consumption. In February of 2022, while people struggled to access bread and flour, ships carrying imported wheat[139] were stuck at the port of Tunis due to a delay in payments. While the State's Grain Office (OdC) declared that the impasse had been promptly solved, these events call into question once more the interconnections between Western financial interests and the severe social and political crisis across Africa. As highlighted throughout the thesis, Tunisian dependence on the northern shores of the Mediterranean has been perpetuated through disadvantageous trade and political agreements (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Pontiggia 2017), and a series of foreign loans binding the country in a cycle of indebtedness. With recent data reporting (Fadil 2022) that in 2021, 12% of the Tunisian GDP was directed to servicing its foreign debts, in 2022 Tunisia was forced to request another IMF loan. IMF representatives conducted the negotiations over this new request reluctantly, demanding further restructuring of the Tunisia economy, especially pushing for spending cuts and the privatisation of the remaining state-owned enterprises. Early in February 2022, a document (cnf. Fadil 2022) issued by the Tunisian government to prepare for the agreement negotiations reported a clear outline for fiscal restructuring, including a cut in energy subsides (raising energy prices and removing subsides for other sourcing), capping salaries, and further privatisation of state-owned enterprises. More vague are the parts in which the Tunisian government proposals account for developing strategies for actual trade, and development of the industrial and agricultural sectors (Fadil 2022). Research institutes across the country (The Truth and Dignity Commission, the Tunisian Observatory for the Economy, the Food Sovereignty and Environment Observatory, The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's office for North

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[139] In 2020, Tunisia became the 30th largest importer of wheat in the world, and wheat was the third most imported product in Tunisia, with Ukraine and Canada as the main providers of cereals (Fadil 2022).

Africa), reacted strongly to these proposals. They have instead insisted on (Fadil 2022) the need for reforms that could address causes of structural dependence underlying the relentless cycle of socio-economic crisis. Debt cancellation on the basis of past human rights abuses and the Covid-19 crisis, the termination of disadvantageous trade agreements, tracking illicit financial flows in the country, auditing the debt, and stressing the role of Tunisian agriculture in feeding its own population were all different proposals outlining solutions that pushed for radical political, social, and economic change (Fadil 2022).

As articulated throughout the thesis, many of my low-income interlocutors' mundane demands were driven by similar needs for societal change. The thesis has detailed how my interlocutors' claims, prompted by unstable relations with their worlds, kept pushing against dispossession and social political marginalisation across different scales, demanding full social inclusion that would enable them to live normal, good lives (*ḥayāt ʿādīyya*). While a few of my informants have been losing hope in their country and seeking different migratory routes toward Europe, most of the people I met in Zaghouan – whose social reproductions battles were anchored around food production or trade – have been attempting to deal with everyday life's ups and downs.

Following what relations constituted around food reveals about people's life-worlds in contemporary Tunisia, and upholding food as a 'potent symbol of culture and lifestyle' (Naguib 2015: 122), my observations have shown how my interlocutors' imaginaries for normal life in a highly stratified society were products of different ideational entanglements across lines of social difference. The tensions and ambiguities inherent in people's navigations of different social, political, and religious moral rubrics, based on specific discursive traditions, hence displayed the multiple and unstable meanings underpinning ideas of good living.

While some prevalent features underlying imaginaries of good life were shared by wider segments of the population,[140] my analysis, focusing on my low-income interlocutors' battles for social reproduction, argues that a good, normal life was often imagined in contrast to the hardships currently constraining their reality. Demonstrating my low-income informants' awareness of their disadvantageous

[140] Such as the possibility to grow one's life projects, or the desire for material prosperity often oriented toward middle-class lifestyles.

positions in their society, normal life was often conceived as being free of the threat of material deprivation, balancing one's family's wellbeing with the wider community's. Hence, a proper life blessed with household material success ought to be balanced with moral orientations towards reciprocal social redistribution (as one ought to be generous toward others) and modesty of behaviour (thrift with consumption and not displaying one's success). Moral personhood was similarly constructed on the basis of one's material success granting household autonomy (being able to provide for one's family through honest and hard work) and one's contribution to their social group, and to the country more widely. Reciprocity and mutuality were indeed central characteristics that constructed one's honourability, and a more inclusive society more broadly.

Further, immersing myself in the minutia of my informants' daily food affairs, my interlocutors' struggles for social reproduction revealed important messages about people's relations with each other. I documented how my interlocutors' everyday vulnerable lives around the preparation, sourcing, trading, and production of food were *de facto* also sustained by their 'relational work'. Observing how my informants relied on proximate people for mutual support - leveraging connections to access job opportunities and negotiating loans or access to state services, etc. - directed my attention towards how people constructed what I have called 'networks of proximity' around food to face life's hurdles. Revealing much about how my interlocutors imagined the economic and the political in their lives, observing network formation shows how situated choices emerged from people's ethical reflections, ambiguously blending personal interests and situated constraints with different systems of values and norms.

Simultaneously, following the construction of networks of proximities around the production, trade, or preparation of food in the everyday and at different scales revealed their limited and partial reach. People's struggles for social reproduction in the everyday were embedded in local hierarchies and situated power configurations that were historically sedimented and which intersected at different scales nationally and globally. Sustaining such networks often failed to perform support, instead contributing to recreating existing hierarchies and re-positioning social actors in the same (unequal) positions they had attempted to move away from.

My approach in the thesis thus demonstrates the complexity surrounding change in a rural region, where social dynamics around food contributed to

(re)constructing situated social spaces and people's positions within them: their families, their neighbourhoods, the food trade in town, smallholder farms, and the state. Meanwhile, attending to the everyday lives of families involved in food matters and observing the inherent relation between food as a means of social reproduction and their claims for better inclusion in their society, revealed my low-income informants' ideas about what was a life worth living, highlighting the potency of food as a window of investigation and the connections it allows the research to make. Contributing significantly to the anthropology of food, this thesis - a partial account of post-revolutionary Tunisia in complex times - also contributes to the study of social transformation in the region following the Arab Spring. Further, attending with ethnographic rigour to the multiple 'social lives of food' allows me to add through individual chapters to anthropological discussions on several transversal themes: kinship and gender, food heritagisation, economies of favours, masculinities and femininities, agro-ecological challenges in the region, and the productive work of care.

My gratitude for how my family life bonded with some of the Zaghouanian families that I met during fieldwork cannot be rendered through words. This work, possible only thanks to the generosity of those families in opening up their lives for my inquiry, has hence humbly attempted to bear witness to my interlocutors' struggles, strengths, and perseverance during a complicated transitional time in contemporary Tunisia.

Epilogue

ʿAmm Fathi was not there when we visited the farm late in the afternoon, just after the harvest had been completed. As a purple sunset illuminated the valley below, we waited for him, enjoying the farm with his brother, Tātā Samira, and the boys. When he finally approached the farm, ʿAmm Fathi was not alone. A tall, well-set man, who had just parked his pick-up truck on the edge of the courtyard, accompanied him. It was almost dark outside at that point, but it was possible to discern from the two men's features that they were laughing as they approached the courtyard, lightened by the interior of the house.

Later, sitting around the tea, I glanced at ʿAmm Fathi and his friend, resting their backs against the wall of the barn. They were long-time friends, both born in Jouef. Life's path took ʿAmm Fathi's friend away from the farm life: he had worked for the Civil Protection Unit in the neighbouring town of Zriba for all of his adult life. They chatted softly while watching the children draw with sticks in the dust, until Tātā Samira finally joined us to sit down, bringing bread and vegetables with her. Dipping the bread into the sauce, in a rare moment of calm on the busy farm, life seemed easy, as if we had all it took to be content: simple food, fresh air, good friends, and family.

'He studied differently from me', admitted ʿAmm Fathi when his friend left that night. We all waved goodbye from the top of the hill, watching the pick-up's lights cut the darkness. 'I call him up when I feel worried, and we go for a car ride together until I feel better, then we have tea, and we go back to sleep. And there will be another day'.

Many of the conversations I had with ʿAmm Fathi ended up being a reflection, a meta-discourse on life's purposes and what counted in our fleeting existences. Everyday circumstances brought us to ponder on how the weight of material resources was conditional for the maintenance of a good life. ʿAmm Fathi's pressing material concerns, however, were always entangled with local moral frames, both informing his expectations and hopes for the future. Through his everyday work on the farm, or while visiting his neighbours or friends, imaginaries of proper life emerged. They delineate the intimate connection between a life unrestrained by the constant need to assess and reassess one's strategies and risks (Jansen 2014), a life that could also concede moments of contentedness and a sense of accomplishment

(Montgomery 2013), and the lives of others.

Figure 57: Blessed by the rain and the sun

Good relations were undoubtedly key resources in ʿAmm Fathi's navigations to build a good life for himself and his family. As for the night spent dipping bread under an immense starry sky, contentment was experienced through collective moments sharing food, hopes, troubles, and accomplishments. Long-term relationships, based on mutual aid and respect, also constituted one of the few resources to rely on in times of crisis or uncertainty.

As seen throughout this thesis, ʿAmm Fathi's relations of proximity, spanning horizontally (reciprocation with extended family and neighbours), were essential to the day-to-day operations on the farm. However, in Tunisia, as in many of the countries facing the Mediterranean's shores where socially sanctioned obligations frame the exchange of resources and aid in moral terms, we also saw ʿAmm Fathi claiming his entitlement to vertical reciprocation. ʿAmm Fathi reclaimed his right to be acknowledged as a proper food producer by more powerful social actors: state institutions or other organisations. By virtue of his unending hard work on the farm, ʿAmm Fathi sought full social inclusion (Li 2013), and the possibility of enlarging his field of opportunities (de L'Estoile 2014).

Similarly Rachid, the Gene Bank researcher, morally framed a good life in terms of self-worth, caring relations, and reciprocity. Working with farmers across Tunisia, he became part of their social networks and systems of support, acknowledging the importance of reconnecting *networks of proximity* across the country, mingling that moral work with his own work duties and research interests. As he told me:

> 'You know, I would have had a better academic career at the *Polytechnique*,[141] but I returned because I wanted to do something with my work. I was excited to do this for my country. But then, here you have to deal with people or institutions that only care about having an easy life, spending money and showing off. And then they complain. What are they doing for their country?'

As seen throughout this thesis, honourability and self-worth were acknowledged on the basis of hard work and commitment to one's group. Although their relationship partially diverged over time, during my stay in Tunisia both ʿAmm Fathi and Rachid fought against the inertia of the state administration, seeking full social incorporation (Li 2013) by re-claiming the conditions necessary to improve their social reproduction and their contribution to their country. Likewise, throughout their mundane struggles, many of the people I met articulated earlier revolutionary demands, striving for to be acknowledged as women and men with self-worth in their neighbourhoods, in their communities, and in their society.

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[141] Years earlier, Rachid had decided to return to Tunisia from France where he completed his MA at the *Polytechnique* after receiving a call from the Tunisian Minister of Environment, asking him to join the newly established Gene Bank.

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