

The Ghriba Pilgrimage in the Island of Jerba

The semantics of otherness

This article examines the Jewish pilgrimage to the Ghriba Synagogue on the island of Jerba (or Djerba) in Tunisia, with a focus on the semantics of otherness as it is condensed in the devotion to the *Ghriba*, the eponymous local saint of the synagogue. (To make clear the distinction between the saint and the synagogue, when referring to the saint I will use italics.) Claims and evidence exist for the synagogue's being in some degree a shared shrine between Muslims and Jews and I have examined this in another study (Carpenter-Latiri 2010) where I argue that although the ritual of the pilgrimage is rooted in traditions shared by Jews and Muslims alike, the perception of the mixed status of the shrine is inflated to re-enforce a state-controlled representation of Tunisia as a multi-faith and multicultural space.

In this article I shall explore the semantics of the pilgrimage to the *Ghriba* (the 'stranger saint') and in particular, the polysemy of the name and the ambivalence of otherness in the Tunisian context, in particular in representations through discourse in the Tunisian Arabic language as shared by Muslims and Jews. I will argue that this complex and ambivalent representation is the central meaning of the ritual of the *Ghriba* pilgrimage, as the negative connotations of otherness are reversed and amplified into the affirmation of a positive, healing ritual, dedicated to the stranger saint as a symbolic allegory of the otherness of the Jewish community as a whole, or as an allegory of the alienated, exiled, marginalized self. The main healing being performed is the auto-celebration of the local Jewish community; the restoration of the broken link between the migrant Jews from Arab lands and the land of their recent past; the reaffirmation of similar modes of practice between Jews and Muslims, thus validating their religious practices for the majority Muslim community. My research has been informed by fieldwork during the pilgrimage in Jerba in 2007 and several interviews collected during further visits to Tunisia in 2008 and 2009.

The pilgrimage yesterday and today

The local Jewish community—a surviving minority in Muslim Tunisia—and the synagogue date back to early times and came to international attention in 2002 after it suffered a terrorist attack by Al-Qaida. Locally the pilgrimage is known as ‘ziyarat el *ghriba*’ (the visit to the *Ghriba*; *ziyara*—visit—being the word used for pilgrimages to local saints—Muslim or Jewish—in Tunisia) and is dedicated to the local saint, the *Ghriba*, who is credited with many miracles amongst the locals and the visiting and returning pilgrims. It also celebrates the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai on Lag Ba-Omer and commemorates Rabbi Meier Ba’al Haness (lit. Rabbi Meir, Master of the Miracle). The drawing together of these three saints during the pilgrimage amongst the Jewish minority in Jerba deserves analysis. Along with the *Ghriba*, the two other patron saints of the pilgrimage are two mystics who lived in Palestine in the second century and who are also credited with many miracles. Their cult is so strong among Tunisian Jews that they are often taken for local saints: Tunisian Jews celebrate them together¹ as they are both associated with the writing of the Mishnah. During my fieldwork, the celebration of Rabbi Meier was taking place shortly before the procession celebrating both Rabbi Shimon and the *Ghriba* and seemed to attract a more religious, more private crowd (this would need further exploration). As a festival of a highly mediated popular religious culture, the pilgrimage put emphasis on Rabbi Shimon and the *Ghriba*. Rabbi Shimon is more specifically associated with the Cabbalistic book of the Zohar. ‘Djerban Jews, like many other Jews, believe the Zohar was composed in the second century by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai; in fact it is documented to have been written in thirteenth century Spain by Moses de Leon as a collection of Bar Yohai’s lectures’ (Stone 2006: 10). Naomi Stone (2006: 88–101) stresses the similarities between the narratives of the death of Rabbi Shimon and the *Ghriba*, as both are engulfed in fire with their facial features intact, a proof of their sainthood. Stone argues also that the Shimon-*Ghriba* paradigm extends to the incorporation of the cabbalistic conception of the Shekhina, understood to represent feminine, protective and mediating forces for a community in exile from its Promised Land and waiting for a messianic redemption:

The Ghriba, as an associative correlate of the Shekhina, may allow the Djerban Jews an access point to the movement towards redemption, a

1 http://www.harissa.com/D_Religion/rabbimeiretrabbichemaoun.htm.

more tangible means of interacting with the Zoharic imagery. In participating in a deeply distinctively Djerban rite, namely supplication of the Ghriba, the community expresses its commitment to both the rich legacy of Djerban Jewry and to an age in the Promised Land, in which the Shekhina reunites with God. (Stone 2006: 101.)

It is the combination of the celebration of the three saints and more specifically the combination of the celebration of the *Ghriba* along with Rabbi Shimon that confer its specificity on the pilgrimage. Indeed the important pilgrimage to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon at the same time in Meron in Israel, does not present the same attraction to Tunisian Jews, even to those living in Israel:

In Israel, Jews from throughout the world celebrate Lag B'Omer with a pilgrimage to the actual tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron, in Northern Galilee. Yet Israeli Jews of Tunisian descent, rather than making the simple journey up the road, prefer instead to undertake the circuitous journey via Paris, Marseille, Frankfurt or Istanbul to their diasporic homeland, to celebrate the hilula of Rabbi Shimon at the shrine of the Ghriba. (Davis 2010.)

The pilgrimage past and present

According to the brief inscription near its tribune, which reads: '586 before the common era', the Ghriba synagogue is thousands of years old. It is recognized as Africa's oldest synagogue. Its architecture today is in the Arab-Moorish style: the synagogue was restored in 1920 and rebuilt in the same style after the Al-Qaida attack of 2002. The fame of the Ghriba Synagogue of Jerba is based on numerous traditions and beliefs that emphasize its antiquity and importance among the local Jews, as well as those of the former Jewish communities of Tunisia and neighbouring Libya. The reputation of the Ghriba and its eponymous saint reaches out also to the Tunisian Muslim population, although in recent years the reinforced security that followed the Al-Qaida suicide attack on the synagogue has alienated the Muslim local population from the festival (Carpenter-Latiri 2010). Interviewed by the French agency AFP in 2008, Perez Trabelsi, the President of the Ghriba Committee, mentions that the pilgrimage dates back to 1828, and that the procession originally had the purpose of collecting oil for the lamps burning in the sanctuary. In the early days, the 'ziyara' attracted only Jews from Tunisia and Libya and

it was a rare opportunity for young people to find a soul mate amongst co-religionists. (AFP 2008.)

The Tunisian government advertises the pilgrimage to foreign tourists of 'all faiths' and invites them to come and discover this religious and cultural festival as well as to visit the island. Locally, after the Bourguiba era, which was characterized by a desire for modernity and a rejection of religion and superstitions, the Ben Ali era is encouraging a state-controlled revival of the cult of saints in which the celebration of the saint is closely associated with hyperbolic praise of the president. The change in attitude and context may be illustrated by an anecdote which tells how the fiercely rationalist Bourguiba, in his retirement, on seeing a recently-built hospital in Sousse bearing the name of the local saint Sidi Sahloul exclaimed 'You've gone back to *ra'wani* healing', *ra'wani* being a disparaging term for non-scientific quack medicine. In many shrines dedicated to local Tunisian saints, portraits of Ben Ali are now also displayed; during the Ghriba pilgrimage they were everywhere in the area surrounding the synagogue including the *founduk*, the caravanserai opposite the synagogue reserved for pilgrims and for the festive part of the celebration, but not inside the synagogue itself.

In the international media today, the description of the pilgrimage puts great emphasis on the international dimension and on the participation of Jews from Israel; the local Tunisian media report the international dimension but avoid highlighting the presence of visitors from Israel. Indeed there are no official diplomatic relations between Tunisia and Israel and no direct flights between the two countries. The pilgrimage evolved from the local to the international in the early 1990s. Since President Ben Ali came to power in 1987, both Tunisian and Israeli governments have been keen to promote the Ghriba as a symbol of peace between Jews and Muslims, although trends in attendance show a correlation with the state of tensions between Palestinians and Israel. No officially verified figures are available, only media estimates. A collection of media archives reporting the pilgrimage is available on the Jewish website elghriba.com. Reports speak of 5,000 Jewish tourist-pilgrims (with 500 Jews from Israel) following the events in Gaza in 2009. At the start of the decade, in 2000, there were 8,000 pilgrims, falling as low as 200 in 2002 after the attack on the World Trade Centre and the attack on the synagogue itself. By 2005, 4,000 pilgrims were present, mostly Jews now living in France, but a thousand from Israel. In 2007, there were 5,000 pilgrims, around 700 of them from Israel, mostly from families who once lived in Tunisia or North Africa, with numbers in 2008 similar (Beaugé 2008) or slightly higher according to the Ghriba committee (AFP 2008). The pilgrimage remains popular

amongst Tunisian Jews living in France or Israel and attracts also Jewish pilgrims originating from North Africa.

The Jews in the island: a minority amongst other minorities

The country known today as Tunisia is on the Eastern side of North Africa and accessible from the Holy Land by land or by sea. The Jewish presence there predates the arrival of Islam, and there have probably been Jews on the island of Jerba since at least the time of the destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple in 70 AD. The Pentecost story in the Bible (Acts 2:10–11) mentions Jews from 'the districts of Libya around Cyrene'—a large stretch of North Africa taking in present-day Libya and southern Tunisia and reaching to the island of Jerba and sometimes also called Cyrenaica (Carpenter-Latiri 2010). It is difficult to establish a date for the arrival of the first Jews, and there is a possibility that some of the indigenous Berber population might have converted, as discussed by P. Sebag (1991: 35–6) and mentioned by Ibn Khaldun in his *History of the Berbers*. More controversially, Shlomo Sand suggests conversion on a larger scale (2009: 199–210).

Historically, the Jews of Tunisia are mainly made up of two communities: the Twansa Jews who settled in what is now Tunisia before the Arab-Muslim conquest and whose ancestors have lived in the area at least since Roman times, and the Grana Jews, who settled in Tunisia mainly from the seventeenth century onwards, descendants of Portuguese and Spanish Jews thrown out of the Iberian Peninsula and previously settled in Italy (Sebag 1991: 74–5). The island of Jerba is in the Mediterranean, off the south-eastern coast of Tunisia. According to local Jewish tradition, the Jews present themselves as coming from two separate groups: the first group, settled in Hara Seghira, claims an early origin from the Holy Land and the first diaspora; they are *kohanim* (a Jewish priestly class). The second group, established in Hara Kebira, claims a later, western origin (Udovitch & Valensi 1984: 30–1). In the 1970s the Hara Seghira was renamed Er-Riadh, 'the gardens' and the Hara Kebira Es-Sewani, 'the orchards'. The locals use both names, although the Jews keep strictly to the old names. This renaming, especially the choice of Er-Riadh—like the Saudi capital—is still perceived as insensitive by the local Jews. Nevertheless, in the broader picture of the Bourguiba era, the change of names reflected not only the pan-Arabic movement hitting the Arab world more strongly after the 1967 defeat, but also part of the desire for modernisation, translated into secularisation and de-ghettoization. The change of

names also reflects the demographic changes in the population of the two villages, which having once been exclusively Jewish are now mixed; the Muslim population moved in following the waves of Jewish migration (Stone 2006: 33) mainly after the 1967 Middle East war and also after the installation of the PLO headquarters in Tunis in 1982. The departure of the PLO (1994) and the Arab League (1990) allowed the Tunisian State to distance itself from Arab nationalism and to build up an international image of peace and tolerance, and under Ben Ali, it has been keen to advertise its religious tolerance internationally, especially after the 9/11 attacks and also after the Al-Qaida attack on the Ghriba Synagogue in 2002. Promotion of the pilgrimage has played a part in this (Carpenter-Latiri 2010).

Today, referring to figures published in the media at the time of the Ghriba pilgrimage, the estimated Jewish population of the island fluctuates between 800 and 1,000. According to René Isaac Chiche (Balta *et al.* 2003: 252), in 2001 the population in Jerba is 900; 500 in Tunis and a few dozen in Sousse and Nabeul. Referring to the Jerba Jews, Stone (2006: 18–19) defines them as a ‘minority within a minority’, the larger minority referred to being the Berber minority, a Muslim minority within Tunisia. In fact rather than ‘a minority within a minority’, Jerba Jews are today rather a minority amongst other minorities. The majority of the Muslims on the island would define themselves either as Berber and Ibadi, or simply as Ibadi. Ibadis are a heterodox rigorist sect of Islam and Ibadism is recognised in Tunisia as the distinctive feature of Islam in Jerba, whilst the most common form of Islam practised in Tunisia is orthodox Sunni (followers of the Maleki tradition). While the Berbers are acknowledged as the original population of North Africa as a whole, in Jerba today the Berber identity would be only claimed by the small surviving Berber-speaking groups, mainly in the area of Guellala. It appears then that although the construction of the other on the island is binary (‘us’ versus ‘the others’), the semantics of otherness is actually multilayered and more complex. Amongst the Jews in Jerba, the differences between the two Jewish communities of Hara Kbira and Hara Seghira are themselves highlighted. Historically, the island’s population is an intricate network of different communities: Sunni Muslims, Ibadite Muslims, Maleki or Hanéfi (of Turkish descent) Sunnites, Berber-speakers, and Jews from different waves of diaspora (and possibly indigenous converts). Jerba also has a black community, descendants of slaves freed in the nineteenth century. (Mourali & Heyer 2001.) Therefore the island of Jerba concentrates in its enclosed space a multifaceted display of identities and particularisms. ‘The Jerbian Jews emerge as an ethnic group among the other communities of the island, each having at its disposal for internal and

external use an entire array of signs, gestures and words which fashion their identity and govern their interaction with others' (Udovitch & Valensi 1984: 25). In the enclosed space of Jerba, the Jewish minority is more visible, firstly and locally as one of the multiple identities that define the island and secondly and internationally as part of the claimed heritage of the nation. This second element has been put forward in the Ben Ali era through the instrumentalisation and the mediatisation of the Ghriba pilgrimage (Carpenter-Latiri 2010).

The Jews on the island: a similar and different other

As part of a set of different minorities, the distinctiveness of the Jews of Jerba comes firstly from their religious identity, but as much as their distinctiveness is emphasized and displayed for recognition by the others in the island, their similarities with the other Muslim groups are also emphasized within a generic Jerbian identity. Significant features are shared by the Ibadis and the Jews, for example an attachment to tradition and the same formula to express strict religious practice: *nshiddu el din*—'we follow the religion strictly'. I heard this expression, unusual for a Sunni Muslim, used by an Ibadi during a recent visit to Jerba in 2009 and the same expression was also used by Stone in 2004 to fit in with the Jewish community in Jerba:

Although not half-Tunisian, I am Jewish and had lived in Djerba at length. My legitimacy was granted immediately: I spoke in Djerban Arabic dialect, and we knew many families in common. . . . I was often queried about the level of my religiosity; I replied with the Tunisian Arabic phrase: *Nshid a'deen* (I practice or "hold fast to" the religion), providing immediate reassurance to any who questioned my intentions. (Stone 2006: 37.)

Within the Jewish community another differentiation is set up and fragments the Jews into two sub-groups, one rooted in Hara Kebira, the other in Hara Seghira. Analysing the differences between Jews from Hara Kebira and Jews from Hara Seghira, Abraham L. Udovitch and Lucette Valensi (1984: 31) highlight that the inhabitants of Hara Kebira occupy the 'masculine pole, that of civilization and high culture' whilst those of Hara Seghira occupy 'the feminine pole, that of nature'. The interdependence of the two Jewish communities is highlighted as well as the interdependence with the Muslim communities in the island. Trade and, more recently, tourism (including religious tour-

ism) are important sources of income and interdependence for the islanders, although with the heavy security involved in the pilgrimage today Muslim islanders have complained that they are no longer allowed to benefit from the pilgrimage.

Trade has traditionally been one of the keys to the good relations between Jews and Muslims in Jerba: everybody sees the Jews as excellent craftsmen, honest and totally trustworthy for the buying and selling of gold and silver, as condensed in the expression *haqq al-Yahud*, cited and rendered by Udovitch and Valensi (1984: 117) as ‘the law, the justice, the honesty of Jews.’ This is confirmed by another repeated expression collected during my own recent fieldwork, *nass thiqa ou khaddama*—‘these people are trustworthy and hard-working’, which echoes the first expression. A Jewish source explains that the craft of jewellery associated with the buying and selling of gold and silver was for a long time exclusive to the Jews, but I cannot find an explanation as to why Muslims kept away from it.² Asked about this, a Muslim jeweller in Jerba told me that, amongst the Muslims, dealing with silver and gold was once seen as taboo in Jerba and associated with usury. This reputation of trustworthiness and reliability for the Jews in an Arab land is worth exploring further. In Tunisia and Morocco, I have heard people trusting only a Jewish doctor or a Jewish goldsmith. Recently, a Libyan flight passenger sitting next to me told me that his mother would only leave him with a Jewish neighbour when he was little. Perhaps, as a minority under scrutiny, the Jews in Arab land could not afford to be otherwise than trustworthy. Colette Fellous in her novel *Avenue de France* (2001: 94) gives a literary account of a dramatic transition by her grandfather: her Tunisian Jewish ancestor does not speak French and does not know if a French *colon* is thanking him or calling him a thief.

- 2 V. Cohen 1992: ‘Les Juifs furent aussi des orfèvres réputés, métier qu’ils pratiquent jusqu’à ce jour. Chose curieuse, jusqu’en 1959, les Arabes se refusaient à exercer l’art de l’orfèvrerie ou tout autre métier lié aux travaux des métaux : il existait en effet dans le monde musulman une croyance répandue selon laquelle il pouvait arriver malheur à celui qui exerçait ce métier. Habib Bourguiba, premier président de la Tunisie, s’employa à abolir cette croyance primitive. Il invita un orfèvre de Djerba (Mordekhai Haddad) à venir enseigner son art aux jeunes arabes.’ (Jews were also famed goldsmiths, a craft they practice to this day. Strangely, until 1959, Arabs refused to practice the art of goldsmithing or any other trade connected to metal work: there existed a widespread belief that ill-luck would befall the one who plies this trade. Habib Bourguiba, the first president of Tunisia, tried to abolish this primitive belief. He invited a goldsmith from Jerba (Mordekhai Haddad) to come and teach his art to young Arabs.)

He then decides to drop the Arabic language and learn French to know what he was called. Metaphorically this tale of a family myth condenses a symbolic choice between 'honesty' and 'dishonesty' that French secularism, assimilation and modernity would allow, because it allows a non-religious individuality to emerge. Implicitly this would not be allowed to him in a Tunisian context because a Jew in Tunisia would be representative of his whole community and therefore should be responsible for all.

The mixed connotations of the Jewish jeweller (usury and honesty) in Jerba are an example of a mixed and ambivalent representation of the Jewish community, which can be generalised to an ambivalent representation of the Other in Tunisian discourse.

Ghriba, the name of the saint and the semantics of otherness

The word Ghriba refers to both the synagogue that carries this name and a young woman in various legends about the building of the synagogue and the founding of the Jewish community on the island. The classic legend of the *Ghriba* presents her as a solitary young woman that the people of the island allowed to be burnt alive in her hut, before realizing that she was a saint, the proof being that the fire had not disfigured her. This legend creates a link between suffering through abandonment by others and sanctity, as well as one between the supernatural and sanctity. So it is that the Ghriba Synagogue comes to be built on the site where the saint died and the scrolls of the Torah are housed just over the grotto where her body was supposedly found.

In Arabic, spoken by Jews and Muslims alike in Jerba, the word *ghriba* is a polysemic term and an exploration of its connotations and values gives a perspective on some fundamental attitudes. *Ghriba* is a nominalised adjective meaning first of all 'strange' and by extension the (female) 'stranger'. The term is derived from the radical *gharb* meaning the West and which forms a complementary term with *sharq*—the East, which is the direction of the holy places for both Jew and Muslim. In this context *ghriba* acquires a sense of 'going away' which gives it another sense, that of the (female) 'exile' or the 'solitary one'. Within the same lexical family, there is also *ghorba*, 'exile', a term with a deep connotation of psychological suffering. Exile is often seen as the price to be paid for improving one's material well-being, an experience shared by many Muslim Jerbians, who traditionally migrate either to the mainland or to Europe, or who may have left because of being banished from the group. Exile is also a characteristic religious feature of the Jewish community in dias-

pora from its Promised Land and in post-modern times it is a newly voiced feeling shared by many Tunisian Jews in France or Israel (their main lands of migration) who are nostalgic for their past in an Arab land. There is a proverb: *el 'ojja tjib el hijja*, literally 'the omelette leads to exile' which expresses the ambivalence of the conditions leading to exile. The term *'ojja* is polysemic and means both the economical egg dish—therefore a metaphor for poverty—and problems. So the exile is either a person of courage and ambition endeavouring to improve their economic condition, or one rejected by their group and under suspicion of being at fault. When applied to the Jewish community in Tunisia, this proverb recalls the tensions between Jews and Muslims following the birth of the State of Israel and the wars in the Middle East. The novelist Colette Fellous remembers the sudden feeling of becoming an alien in her own country during the anti-Jewish riots in Tunis after the beginning of the Six-day War:

Les hommes sont venus de partout, des banlieues, de la médina, de l'Université, ils crient qu'Allah est grand et que les juifs doivent mourir, ils agitent des drapeaux et des foulards, ils sont de plus en plus nombreux, ils courent et la colère les unit, . . . je ne veux plus rester dans mon pays.
(Fellous 2005: 60, 66.)³

Today, when the Ghriba is mentioned as a place of pilgrimage, the word *ghriba* has also become a synonym of 'miraculous'. Tourist Offices and guides usually translate *ghriba* as marvellous, or miraculous and—as their profession demands—only mention the highly positive connotations of the word. There is a concession to the sense of strangeness when *ghriba* is translated as 'the mysterious one', which has a particularly positive connotation in the context of the pilgrimage, religious tourism and exotic destinations. In contrast, *ghriba*, when the sense of strangeness is present (strange, foreigner, solitary, exiled) has somewhat negative connotations for Tunisians. In Jerba, as elsewhere in Tunisia, near and similar are qualities more highly valued than distant and different. This shows in many proverbs, including the eloquent tautology *al ghrīb ghrīb*—'the stranger's a stranger', or *a'mal kif jarak wa illa baddil bab darek*—'act like your neighbour or else move', or *kif qandil Sidi Mahrez, may*

3 The men have come from everywhere, the suburbs the Medina, the University, they are shouting that Allah is great and the Jews must die, they are waving flags and scarves, there are more and more of them, they are running and anger unites them . . . I no longer want to stay in my country.

dhaoui ken 'al barrani—‘he’s like Sidi Mahrez’s lantern, it only lights the way for strangers.’ This last proverb is used to criticize someone who fails to look after members of his family but is careful about appearances and his reputation by behaving well towards those outside his group. According to tradition, Sidi Mahrez is the saint who allowed the Jews to build their quarters within the walls of Tunis and was venerated by both Jews and Muslims. The proverb does not mention the Jews explicitly and brings a certain ambivalence to the attributes of the saint. Nevertheless, Sidi Mahrez remains the patron saint of Tunis and to this day is the most important saint in the capital. For Tunisian Jews, Sidi Mahrez is indeed the Saint who protected them and when President Bourguiba visited the ghetto in 1957 he was presented with a gold and silver reproduction of Sidi Mahrez’s mausoleum, with the inscription ‘De Sidi Mahrez à Bourguiba—La Communauté juive reconnaissante—1157–1957’—‘From Sidi Mahrez to Bourguiba—a grateful Jewish community’ (Haddad De Paz 1977: 156). One tradition actually presents Sidi Mahrez as a Jewish saint (V. Cohen 2001).

Endogamy is rated more highly than exogamy, and the proverb *khirna ma yemchich il ghirna*—‘what’s ours is not going to others’, is often used when people are defending endogamy. Some proverbs however do urge mistrust of family members: *al akarib 'akarib*—‘close ones are scorpions’ and advise against marriages within a family: *ib'ed mildam layshawhek*—‘keep away from blood if you don’t want taint’. Thus, in Jerba and in the south of Tunisia where traditional values are staunchly upheld, a recent family planning survey showed that the true rate of endogamy was 10 per cent but that the rate of endogamy declared was 50 per cent: for the sake of the survey, being married to a blood relative seemed more prestigious than being married to a ‘stranger’ (this data was provided by the Family Planning authorities in Tunis from internal survey in 2001). The rate of endogamy for Tunisia as provided by the World Fertility Survey was 36 per cent in 1990 (Courbage 2007: 49). Exogamy is valued when it leads to material well-being and as long as there is no transgression of barriers of colour, language or religion: *lik al ardh alqariba wil mra liba'ida*—‘for you the land next door and the wife from afar’, one you are not related to. The notion of proximity is relative however and it can be stretched: *ma thamma barrani ken the shitan*—‘the only stranger is the devil’. This proverb is the popular counterpart of the famous saying of Terence, the Carthaginian poet of the second century BC: *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* ‘I am human, I reckon nothing human strange to me.’⁴

4 The Self-Tormentor (*Heauton timorumenos*), act 1, sc. 1.

Other Ghribas in North Africa and Israel

One of the songs sung during the Jerba pilgrimage mentions two other *Ghribas*, in Annaba and le Kef, which live on in the memory of Tunisian Jews.⁵ Long ago, Ghriba was the title of seven Jewish sanctuaries in North Africa: in Tunisia, the one in Jerba, probably the most ancient, one in Le Kef and one in Ariana; in Libya, in the Djebel Nefoussa, Disirt and M'anım; in Algeria, in Annaba and Biskra (Taïeb 2000: 185). Today, the only Ghriba to live on in the pilgrimage of North African Jews is the one in Jerba. However, in 1956 a replica of the Ghriba in Jerba was built in Ofakim, in Israel and another later in Netivot. (Davis 2010.) In 2000, following an initiative by émigré North African Jews in Israel, there was call to raise funds to build a Ghriba in Jerusalem. This project has since been abandoned. In 2007, during my fieldwork in Jerba, Victor Trabelsi, one member of the family who looks after the Ghriba synagogue and organises the pilgrimage dismissed the idea, insisting that the Ghriba could only be in Jerba. The ethno-linguist David Cohen points out that the name *ghriba* is traditionally explained by their geographical situation, far away from populated areas (D. Cohen 1964: 89, note 3). Despite considerable urban sprawl, Jerba's Ghriba is still somewhat apart from the inhabited areas of the island, still some way off from the little Jewish quarter of Hara Seghira/Er-Riadh. The synagogue has a cemetery next to it. One reply to the question of why the shrine is at such a distance from the Jewish quarter was simply 'Only God knows.' Indeed after the 2002 attack, the official government version claiming it as an accident was quickly discounted because of the isolated position of the synagogue. There was no reason for a truck carrying gas canisters to be there.

The *Ghribas* are reminiscent of the many Muslim marabouts all over North Africa called *Sidi Ghrib*, once the rallying point of nomadic tribes. These shrines are probably built on ancient roadside cairns, known as *kerkour al ghrib* (the stranger's cairn), and which have been turned by villages into *kerkour Sidi Ghrib* (cairn of the foreign saint) (Cohen 1964: 89, note 3). The transition from outsider to saint deserves to be explored. The meeting of these two elements is all the more striking, given that North African society overall is built on a very strong communal solidarity which must be paid for by a degree of renunciation of individuality and difference. In this respect the *Ghriba* shares the paradoxical situation of other Tunisian saints notable for their marginality (or eccentricity), which becomes a sign of divine election. This is

5 Available on CD: Djerba La Douce NFB 160868 'Ghribat el Kef H'ibitna.'

for example the case for Saïda Manoubia, the most important female saint in Tunis. In the narratives concerning her, the recurring traits that define her are ‘son autonomie et son refus d’enracinement, communautaire ou familial’—‘her autonomy and her refusal to take root, be it in the community or the family’ (Boissevain 2007: 88). Saïda Manoubia is depicted as mad and powerful, caring and vengeful, mystical and promiscuous (Larguèche & Larguèche 1992: 126). The saint—and his/her sanctuary—are the refuge for the weak, the persecuted and the marginal. The miracles attributed by folk tales to these saints become the proof of their ability to intercede with God and confirms that devotees can have recourse to them in situations—and they are many—where the individual feels marginalized. Prayers for marriage, fertility and the birth of a male son are common and acknowledged miracles would incorporate these. It should be pointed out that these miracles are not investigated in any way by the religious authorities and that orthodox Islam—like orthodox Judaism—does not recognize officially the cult of saints. In North African maraboutic cults the emergence of a saint on the scene is truly the expression of the people.

The cult of the Ghriba

The Ghriba saint is renowned amongst pilgrims for her healing miracles. She enjoys particular favour amongst young women wishing to marry or to have a child, preferably a boy.

During the pilgrimage, and whenever a special favour is sought, women or men from all backgrounds light a candle or an oil lamp in honour of the *Ghriba*, and place an egg under the shrine holding the Torah under which there is the grotto of the *Ghriba*. Although during the pilgrimage, the eggs are simply placed in the Ghriba grotto and discarded later, the tradition is that the egg would be eaten by the woman praying for a husband or a son and should have her prayer answered by the end of the year. Reverence for the *Ghriba* is shown and kept alive in the many popular songs in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic which tell of the *Ghriba*'s miraculous powers, and which belong to the shared heritage of Jews and Muslims. Apart from its reputation for miracles, the popularity of the *Ghriba* cannot be dissociated from the semantics of her name. Indeed with its senses of strangeness and marginality, the name of the saint itself could offer an intimate experience of reconciliation; the potential marginality of being single or barren could be easier to accept in a place which sanctifies difference, strangeness and solitude. This healing ex-

perience would be of course transferable to the whole community and could act out a call for understanding and empathy addressed to the surrounding Muslim community:

The Ghriba/Shekhina is also perhaps a stand-in for *the entire community*: she is the stranger in an unknown land. Do the Djerban Jews, on some level perceive themselves as this stranger, this private, virtuous young girl who feels to be surrounded by an unwelcoming and indifferent majority? (Stone 2006: 100.)

At the community level, the cult of the *Ghriba* and the whole ritual of the pilgrimage and the visibility of the procession attached to it in the larger Muslim community is also a self-celebration of the community. Analysing a Tunisian Jewish pilgrimage in honour of Rabbi the Ma' rabi d' The Hamma transposed to Sarcelles in France, Laurence Podselver (2001) wonders if this is a nostalgic group engaged in its self-celebration, with the community presence carrying within itself a share of the sacred.⁶ Indeed this self-celebration seems present during the pilgrimage with the local community reuniting with members who are now living elsewhere; and with visiting pilgrims nostalgic for North African Jewish modes of celebration. The ritual also resolves the complexity for the Jews of Jerba of claiming two homes: Jerba and Israel (either as the State or the Utopian Promised Land):

in Lag B'Omer, the Jewish community showcases itself *with pride* to the surrounding Muslim community. . . Ultimately Lag B'Omer is an opportunity for the Jews to celebrate their distinctiveness, and the duality of their Jewish and Tunisian identities. . . . During the festivities, the Djerban Jews *both firmly situate themselves in Djerba and celebrate their connection to Israel*. In this, perhaps they resolve the paradox of their identities by claiming two homes. (Stone 2006: 86, italics in the original.)

This is also important for the migrant Jews from Israel, in diaspora from Tunisia or—more broadly—North Africa, who reconnect with their recent Arab past as 'for many North African Jews, the reality of immigration to Israel, whether voluntary or forced, meant not only a physical abandonment

6 S'agit-il d'un groupe nostalgique procédant à son auto-célébration, au point que l'on peut se demander si ce n'est pas justement la présence communautaire qui porte en elle la part du sacré?

of place, but a denial of centuries-old communal lifestyles and traditions—a denial which, even as they sought to reinvent themselves as Israeli Jews, they experienced as exile and loss’ (Davis 2010). Indeed, this experience of exile and loss is also strongly expressed amongst Tunisian Jews having migrated to France, the other main land of migration for Jews from Tunisia, and more particularly women (Conord 2001). This last dimension of healing through the reconnection of the roots in the Arab land echoes with the seme of exile also present in the name of the saint.

Finally, another bolder hypothesis, which would connect the semantics of the name and the miracles associated with the saint, could be that praying to the *Ghriba* implies praying for a difference to emerge: the birth of a male child from the body of a woman. Given the anxiety produced by the capacity of a female body to give birth to the same (a girl) and to the different (a boy), a prayer to the *Ghriba* is a sort of prayer to the foreign (and therefore different) saint for difference (a boy) to come from a woman’s body. Jews and Muslims prefer the birth of male children, with both cultures accentuating the differences between the two genders. In relation to this last point, the evocation of the mystery of the female womb might also be symbolically featured in another ritual of the *Ghriba*’s pilgrimage: the penetration into the *Ghriba*’s grotto.

For those who know Jerba, the features of the *Ghriba* ritual are strikingly Jerbian, and at the same time Jewish. The commemoration of Rabbi Shimon



Meditation by the *Ghriba* grotto and the *Ghriba* lamp. Photo © Dora Carpenter-Latiri 2007.

during the pilgrimage which celebrates his *hilula*—the mystical union with his Creator—is performed like a traditional Jerbian wedding. The ritual visit to the shrine of the *Ghriba* involves a penetration into her grotto—the *maghara*—and is reminiscent of the ritualized penetration of the clay mines practised by the potters of Guellala, an important Muslim and traditionally Berber speaking community on the island: the work in the mines can be dangerous and is conducted through strict procedures and rituals, such as forbidding entrance into the mine in daylight. The texture of the walls of the grotto and its damp darkness are also similar to those of the clay mines. This would explain why the grotto element in the vocabulary of the



Prayers inserted in the wall of the Ghriba grotto: a new ritual and another bridge between Jerusalem and 'the Jerusalem of Africa'. Photo © Dora Carpenter-Latiri 2007.

Ghriba pilgrimage seems to be unique to Jerba even if there are other similar commemorations. During fieldwork amongst Tunisian Jews in Israel, Stone (2006: 103) notes that: 'In Ofakim, a small village in the Negev, the Jews constructed a replica of the Ghriba in 1956 and maintain a yearly pilgrimage on Lag B'Omer'. As in Djerba, 'a large menara is brought in procession around the town and prayers are auctioned off. People come from all over the place. Though here, they don't have the cave of the Ghriba with the eggs; that is only in Djerba.'

Amongst the pilgrims, many (locals and visitors) return. As in Muslim *ziyaras*, the tradition is to make a prayer with a promise to return to visit the saint when the prayer is answered. At the individual level, and in similarity with what happens with many Muslim North African saints, the cult of the *Ghriba* addresses the need for acceptance and healing for the exiled, the isolated, the marginal; it also addresses the anxious desire for a male child. Through the pilgrimage, the local Jewish community reaffirm their similarity

with the Muslim majority while performing a religious rite that states their Jewish difference, thus allowing them to proclaim their complex identity. Symbolically, subconsciously and through different layers of meaning and representation, the pilgrimage rituals display a belonging and reaffirm a local and dual identity. More recently, the pilgrimage has attracted a new category of pilgrims: migrant Jews from Tunisia or North Africa nostalgic for their past in an Arab land. The complex semantics of the name of the *Ghriba* and the diasporic dimension embedded in Jewish self-representation allow for a polyphonic pilgrimage to take place, in which the enacted diaspora is the exile from the Utopian Promised Land or/and from a lost Arab land located in nostalgia. Today what also seems to be in process is the transmission of a tradition for the children of migrant Jews who would have no direct memories of a past in North Africa. The question remains of what might become of this North African Jewish identity in assimilationist Israel or France.

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