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HOUSEHOLDS AS HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY: PEOPLE IN MOTION AND ROADS TO SCHOOL

With heartfelt appreciation, the author recognizes the editors of this special issue for generously welcoming her into these evocative, multisided conversations devoted to a field (or fields) of timely, indeed fraught, importance. This volume not only rides cresting waves of research into, and thinking about, children, those deemed young, but also channels our imaginative energies into uncharted territory. There we witness or glimpse how cumulative, small movements redefined notions of childhood and youth, often recognized only belatedly.

What follows is a fragment of a larger work in progress that weds the notion of "internal migration," in many senses of the term, with children's schooling in colonial North Africa.[1] This research note argues that familial displacements across multiple registers, times, and spaces were often driven, in part, by educational aspirations for the next generation. As spaces of sustained, yet diverse, networks, households worked out strategies for children's learning that gestated physical movements.[2] Attention to domestic or internal migratory pulses, often small and transient, momentarily redirects the scholarly gaze away from the state, although this perspective never denies the power of colonial regimes, through border controls, to grant, forbid, or restrict opportunities for knowledge acquisition and accreditation. In addition to households and extended kin, individuals of disparate backgrounds operated as beacons for education or rendered future schooling a *dead end*. At the same time, school buildings moved about; their new spatial locations might offer unanticipated learning possibilities. My principal narrative frames and draws from life stories, memoirs, interviews, archival records, and documents in the genres of historical ethnography. Childhood stories and experiences intersect with many others, but the schooling-displacement nexus bids us pause to probe fugitive social forces.

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In the older scholarly literature on colonial education in Tunisia, modernity existed in the capital city's grid-like streets adjacent to the Bab al-Bahr, or the "Sea Gate," which intersected with the medina and casbah. Provincial towns and harbors, like Munastir or Le Kef, were accorded a minor role in the unfolding of the modern. But this figurative topography leads us astray. Given Tunisia's striking cosmopolitanism before, during, and after colonialism, and the daily or seasonal peregrinations of its heterogenous denizen-citizens, the Sea Gate was less an architectural or cultural marker than a series of multiple entryways. They opened, on the one hand, to mosques, synagogues, *kuttab*, and the beylical as well as colonial law courts in, or adjacent to, the medina; on the other hand, linear streets offered chic department stores, theaters, schools, bookstores, the port, ships, and trans-Mediterranean destinations. Among those passing by the Sea Gate on myriad occasions were children from the "provinces" whose residence in the capital for schooling betrayed collective familial verdicts about their destinies. But this youthful presence was not necessarily the consequence of French rule, with its attractions and dangers, because the Protectorate (1881–1956) overlay well-worn circulations. And people moved about in all manner of vessels (including trains) from Tabarka, straddling the frontiers with Algeria, to Djerba, on the southern reaches between the late Ottoman Empire and the Italian imperium.

What do these lives divulge about the triangulations between childhood, schooling, and internal migrations that might ultimately lead to "external" displacements over the Mediterranean Sea? Here it is argued that, in part, the arc of their journeys was both the product of long-patterned (including serendipitous) movements and untested trajectories tied to the lure of education, employment, or escape. To argue this, my project interrogates complex microlevel social webs—those of children, families, neighbors, teachers, and school friendships—to reconfigure larger "envelopes," such as migration, education, empire, and nationalism. Moreover, in twentieth-century classrooms, teachers and mentors—Tunisian, French, or those from far and wide—did not always impose a single, monolithic curriculum and pedagogy. Characterized by Albert Memmi (1920–2020) as "migratory birds," instructors at times deployed instructional and disciplinary methods informed by their own translocal or transnational itineraries.[3]

The fundamental questions are: Who and what were the gatekeepers for learning and social mobility at key junctures, and how did they shape migratory patterns from 1900 on, during a time of colonialism? Here the household, sprawling kinship filaments,

religious and work circles, the neighbors and neighborhood, come into play. Significantly, families of whatever means performed "triages" among offspring when deciding on marriage partners, schooling, work, and other life prospects. These triages were highly gendered. How did pupils, siblings, families, and mentors push up against colonial institutions—either to oppose, demand adjustments, or plea for expanded resources—thereby changing these institutions from below? Most importantly, how did colonialism, legal pluralism, and socio-gender norms configure initial access to the schoolroom? Entry itself necessitated several forms of "movement," especially in terms of religiously validated cultural dicta governing girls and women's physical liberty; secondary school could subsequently lead to higher education, even travel abroad. Life trajectories lay bare the ruptures in the nets of power woven by modern colonialism; through "internal" migration, families seeking education slipped into those spaces. Finally, wealthy Tunisians financed studies whether in country or abroad for non-kin pupils of strained financial circumstances through patronage networks, a fact not adequately explored.

Brief examples of four Tunisians whose childhoods helped configure my arguments follow (admittedly, they were selected for this research note due to name recognition, although many lesser-known individuals figure in the longer in-progress work). Later prominent, the veneer of seemingly inevitable adult fame has inflected their biographies or ego-documents which erases random but crucial facts. Habib Bourguiba (1903–2000), Tunisia's first president (1955–1987), hailed from the provincial town and port of Munastir. Yet in 1921, his elders considered removing young Habib from the Lycée Carnot in Tunis because of poor grades combined with fragile health; instead, he should remain home in Munastir and take up a manual trade. Bourguiba's life story highlights one of the numerous points made in this special issue's introduction: The vocabulary of schooling reflected one's grade or school level without a necessary correlation to chronological age.[4] Moreover, older siblings emerge as key in shaping educational migrations. In 1924, Bourguiba's family pressed him to matriculate at the University in Algiers where one of his siblings was enrolled, but he sailed to France instead, largely thanks to an older brother's financial largesse.

Tawhida Ben Shaykh (1909–2010), the first North African woman to earn a medical degree, graduated from the Paris School of Medicine in 1936 with a specialty in pediatrics. Returning to Tunis, she was denied a physician's post in colonial hospitals but established the country's first modern reproductive health clinic for indigent women

in the medina. Yet her girlhood demonstrates that in early twentieth-century Tunis, schools moved about. When still a child, Dr. Ben Shaykh's family had enrolled her, and her sister, in the elementary Ecole Millet when it relocated nearby the patriarchal household on Nahj Basha in the medina. This space was deemed "safe" for female schooling because the neighborhood and domestic compound discretely comingled. With their elementary certificates in hand, both girls were allowed to embark on another decisive spatial displacement—outside of the medina to the Lycée Armand Fallières in the modern city for girls' secondary level. These local intra-urban displacements were connected to her later relocation to the French capital.

A generation later, Gisèle Halimi, aka Zeïza Élise Taïeb (1927–2020), was born in La Goulette, a popular beach suburb sheltering heterogeneous lineages from around the Mediterranean, principally of modest substance. Little in Halimi's family background positioned her for schooling and advanced degrees. As was true for Bourguiba, colonial officials never envisioned an Arab-Berber Jew of humble substance—and a girl—as a viable candidate for education of whatever kind. Her initial, very short road to school came with an unanticipated relocation, the result of a dreadful accident in 1931 in the La Goulette household when Halimi was four years old. The parents abandoned the port for a downtown Tunis neighborhood where kin resided; only by chance did the household land near the Lycée Armand Fallières in existence since 1915. There she passed the "bac" in the 1945 examinations which held forth the promise, however slim, of study across the sea. At the age of eighteen, she finally enrolled at the Sorbonne but only due to complex international realignments of the post-war era in tandem with family obligations in Tunis. In 1949, she was admitted to an apprenticeship in the Tunis Bar after obtaining her law degree in Paris; she was twenty-one. Even then, few could foresee her future as a Tunisian and North African nationalist and a feminist lawyer of global repute.

Férid Boughedir's (1944) childhood echoes these earlier lives, although with nuances. His father moved the immediate family from the patriarchal compound in the medina's Halfaouine quarter to coastal suburbs, such as Hamman Lif, so that his son could attend schools in seaside villages boasting more advanced pedagogy. However, once the question of advanced studies arose, the family relocated to Tunis to allow young Férid to enroll in the Lycée Carnot. In 1996, his film *Un été à La Goulette* (Summer in La Goulette) was nominated for the 46th Berlin Film Awards.

Household displacements, such as the few touched upon above, bled into migrations between and among "colonies" and metropoles and back again. Thereby, domestic units forged layered, multitiered webs reaching from the tangled skeins of kinship, friendship, city quarters, and classrooms to national and transnational scales. Thanks to decades of revisionist thinking about colonial education, deeply inspired by women's history and gender theory, the household and children emerge fully as privileged research sites. This repositioning enlightens us about critical matters, such as the "female handicraft schools." Earlier dismissed as marginal, these institutions are now on the historians' radar because women artisans and their products directly shaped their mobilities, while nurturing trans-sea displacements, such as tourism.

Some scholars of colonial education cling to bounded paradigms of the colonial and post-colonial nation that are largely dictated by the location and organization of archives. One conceptual advance proposed here is the "transversal Maghrib" which dismantles the colony-metropole binary.[5] This optic compels us to retrace the microhistories of families and children as they journeyed between or among North African states, or along other routes, large and small. Circa World War I, intense, but gendered, displacements, between the Maghribi capitals, interior towns, and the Mediterranean had congealed. Families—not all bourgeois by any means—dispatched chosen sons from villages to cities for education, first in North Africa, and across the sea, if fortune smiled. Advanced studies in the metropole, interrupted by summer returns, thickened not only trans-sea ties but also heightened the appeal of ideologies, such as nationalism, Communism, and syndicalism, both for the sojourners and the people back home.

NOTES

[1] Julia Clancy-Smith, "Bab al-Bahr/Door to the Sea: Children, Migratory Households, and Education in Colonial North Africa c. 1900 – c. 1956," (forthcoming).

[2] The definition of "households" demands constant refinement in accordance with historical and socio-spatial contexts; similarities and/or differences mattered hugely because the household represented an interfacing but shifting membrane between the world within and without.

[3] Albert Memmi also used sexual metaphors, "whore of a city," when depicting Tunis in his *Statue de sel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).

[4] Ella Fratantuono and Lucia Carminati, "Introduction: Children and Youth on the Move in Middle East and North African History," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 11, no. 2 (2024): 8.

[5] The theoretical argument on the transversal Maghrib is elaborated upon in Julia Clancy-Smith, "The 'Son of a Slave': *Kulughli*s Abroad, Local Historians, and Ottoman Demographic Diasporas in North Africa, 18th–19th Centuries" (unpublished, cited with author's permission).