

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**‘Burning’ borders:  
Migration, death and dignity in a Tunisian coastal town**

Valentina Zagaria

A thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology of the London School of Economics  
and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, August 2020

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*To all the hrayer and ahrar  
staying or moving from, to, and through Zarzis*

## Abstract

This thesis interrogates what constitutes and delimits dignity, responsibility and belonging in a Tunisian emigrants' town in times of political change and illegalised border crossings. Zarzis, the southernmost Tunisian fishing and commercial port close to the Libyan border, is known for its generations of male emigrants to France and for the *harga*: the undocumented “burning” of the Mediterranean to reach “Europe”. During the 2011 revolution, it was the first city from which boats started leaving for the Italian island of Lampedusa. Young men especially continue seeking the *harga* and a future abroad, despite accusations of immorality waged at them – and at sisters, mothers, and wives-to-be – by older generations of men. While some local youth have gone missing on the crossing, their bodies never to be found, Zarzis, like many other Mediterranean coastal cities, hosts a cemetery of unknown migrants, testimony to ever more deadly European Union border policies. Also not unlike other Mediterranean seaside towns, Zarzis is a destination for retired Europeans, some of whom, particularly women, marry younger Tunisian men, in what are often viewed as “visa weddings”. Being simultaneously a place some wish to leave, others move to, some visit as tourists, others inhabit only temporarily on their way north, and where the bodies of unknown would-be migrants are laid to rest, migration in all of its various configurations is part of everyday life in Zarzis, while still remaining a morally difficult matter for all, albeit for different reasons.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Zarzis between August 2015 and October 2017, the thesis traces different notions of what is worth living for, and, conversely, what is worth dying for. Strategies for enacting dignity result in temporary, collective ways of fixing meaning and place in a context perceived as unstable and unjust. By exploring what the search for a dignified life through mobility means to different people, and what dignifying the dead involves for the living, responsibility for the care of others at local, national, and transnational levels is negotiated, as is what it means to belong and to stake claims to places and people.

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## Glossary

‘Akkara: name of the tribe who call Zarzis their home

‘amal insani: humanitarian work

‘arish (singular), ‘arushat (plural): tribe, tribes

‘ayn fi: to see something and to want it, to want what others have

baladiya: municipality

barnus: part of the wedding celebrations happening at the groom’s family’s house, usually on the second day of festivities

bled: term that can be used to mean both town and country, often implies one’s hometown or country of origin

centre ville: town centre

clandestino: Italian word for irregular migrant. While in Italy the word has a derogatory connotation, in Tunisia it is used and reclaimed by young men and song writers who made the journey to define themselves

clocharat: from the French word *clochard*, meaning homeless person. In *derja* the term relates to the actions of (especially) young men who misbehave, who get up to immoral or illegal business

expersé: repatriated to Tunisia (often forcibly, against one’s will) from Europe. The term comes from the French word *expulsé*, meaning expelled, pushed out, sent back.

fonctionnaires d'état: civil servants

frega: separation

gauri (masculine), gauriya (feminine), gurra (plural): foreigner, foreigners

ghira: jealousy

ghodbena: being angry at one's husband, and leaving his house to take refuge with one's family and seek resolution through their mediation

guna: waiting house where passengers gather (and at times live for a few days) before *harga* departures

habs: prison

hanut: corner shop

harga: the "burning" the border by crossing the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa to Europe without travel documents

harraga: the "burners" of the border, used in the singular and in the plural

henna: one of the wedding ceremonies happening at the bride's home

hogra: disdain

huma: small cluster of streets and businesses, one category below that of neighbourhood

iftar: first meal after breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan

jabbana: cemetery, Tunisian dialect term

jil: generation

kanun: small coal stove

karama: dignity

kiswa: one of the ceremonies of wedding festivities, involving the groom's family carrying presents for the bride to the bride's family's home

louage: minibus travelling between cities

mahbul (singular), mhabbal (plural): crazy

maktub: "it was written", destiny

marid (singular), morda (plural): to be ill

mashmum: small jasmine bouquets often sold to tourists or strolling couples and families by street vendors, can be held or placed behind one's ear

meskin (singular), mseken (plural): poor

mlawah: tossed aside, discarded

mufqudin: the disappeared

passeur: people smuggler, organiser and at times conductor of *harga* boats, also called *rais*

rais: people smuggler, organiser and at times conductor of *harga* boats, also called *passeur*

rojla: the qualities of a good person – a trustworthy, honest, generous pillar of society. The word is also used to mean masculinity

rumi (masculine), rumiya (feminine), rumieen (plural): foreigner, foreigners – comes from the word Rome, from Rome

sadaka: religiously motivated charity

sdeg: the ceremony of the signing of the marriage contract with the presence of the municipal authority

sebkha: marsh

usif (singular), wesfan (plural): derogatory term to refer to black people, literally meaning servant, used widely in southern Tunisia despite its use being now punishable by law

wa'r (masculine), wa'ara (feminine): strict

zone touristique: the tourist neighbourhood, where hotels and restaurants for tourists are located – many Tunisian towns have a specific neighbourhood where most hotels and restaurants are located

### **Note on transliteration and use of names**

Throughout the thesis, I have used a simplified transliteration of Arabic in an attempt to remain faithful to the pronunciation of Tunisian dialect (*derja*) as spoken in Zarzis. The ayn (‘) and hamza (’) are marked by a single quote. Short and long vowels which would normally be transliterated from classical Arabic as “a” have been at times transcribed as “e” to reflect local pronunciation.

Some song lyrics have been reported with numbers standing in for letters that do not exist in the Latin alphabet but that do in Arabic – such as 5 for “kh”, or 3 for ayn. Text messages and informal emails in Tunisia are often written using the Latin alphabet supplemented by these numbers. I have occasionally maintained this way of expressing oneself in written *derja* when relating song lyrics so as to give readers a visual taste of what Tunisians’ spoken language looks like in everyday written communication.

I have retained French and Italian spelling of words, names and places, unless they are consistently pronounced differently locally, in which case I have adapted their spelling to make them closer to their sound in *derja*.

For names of renown persons, places or entities – such as Tunisia’s second President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the city of Ben Guerdane, or the Neo-Destour party – I have kept the French transliteration of Arabic, as this spelling has become standard in academic literature. I have also opted for a simplified French transliteration of proper names – relinquishing the signalling of the ayn and the hamza only in the case of persons’ names – since this spelling is more familiar to Tunisians. The names Sa’id or ‘Afifa, for instance, are simply spelt Said and Afifa, while the names Chamseddine or Moufida – which in English would be transliterated as Shamseddine and Mofida – feature in this thesis through their French spelling to match the way in which these names appear in people’s identity documents.

I have changed all names of persons to protect the anonymity of research participants, unless their real names already feature in publicly available sources – such as documentaries, or journalistic articles.

## Maps



Map 1: Tunisia and the Mediterranean.



Map 2: Southern Tunisia.



Map 3: Zarzis.

## Introduction

### The ship from Paris

*Mid-afternoon, September 2017, Zarzis*

<i>Babour min Paris bil karkara</i>	The ship from Paris towing its cargo
<i>u rasa 'ala Jerjis u al fanara</i>	docked in Zarzis with headlights on
<i>Babour min Paris jey hey!</i>	The ship from Paris came, hey!
<i>Babour min Paris fih amara</i>	The ship from Paris is a token
<i>u farhan besh yrasa 'ala al 'Akkara</i>	and is happy to have docked among the 'Akkara
<i>Babour min Paris jey yhayal</i>	The ship from Paris came with joy
<i>u ysa'b 'ala madnun wein yqayal</i>	and it is difficult to find where to nap <sup>1</sup>
<i>Babour min Paris bi kanawita</i>	The ship from Paris with its trunks
<i>u rasa 'ala Jerjis u bnawita</i>	docked in Zarzis and its daughters <sup>2</sup>
<i>Al bnawit jab al darbuka</i>	The girls brought the goblet drums
<i>'ala khatir farhaneen al babour jab al krahib</i>	because they're happy the ship brought cars
<i>Babour min Jerjis bil 'alamathu</i>	The ship from Zarzis with its flags
<i>Mashallah 'ala al 'abed 'ardathu</i>	how wonderful that so many people welcomed it
<i>Gallik 'arb Tunis mush taykeen</i>	He told you that other Tunisians don't like this
<i>Babour min Paris hau jana</i>	The ship from Paris, here it is, it came to us
<i>'arb al janub muta'asiba ghodbana</i>	other southerners went back to their fathers angry <sup>3</sup>
<i>Babour min Paris ha hua jana</i>	The ship from Paris, here it is, it came to us
<i>inshallah mabrook 'ala al 'Akkara</i>	God willing it will bring good things to the 'Akkara

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<sup>1</sup> Going to take a nap by the seaside, enjoying a light breeze and the shade of palm trees, is one of the joys of summer in Zarzis. With the commotion and excitement caused by the ship's arrival though, Umm Akri poetically imagines that it might be difficult to find quiet for those who wish to rest by the water.

<sup>2</sup> Two well-known songs use the phrase "Jerjis u bnawita", Zarzis and its girls, namely the wedding song *Zawali* and *Nari 'ala Jerjis u bnawita*. The latter will be discussed in chapter 1 due to its fraught historical significance.

<sup>3</sup> The word *ghodbana* is used to describe the sentiments and actions involved when a wife gets into a fight with her husband or in-laws and goes back to her father's house. Umm Akri uses it here to depict the jealous attitude of other Tunisians and southerners towards the 'Akkara receiving this ship from France by painting them as women angry with their husbands.

“My son Salem said this last one is the best line.” Sat on a thin mattress placed on a straw mat in the shade of her home, making red tea on the *kanun* (small coal stove), Umm Akri<sup>4</sup> played with these rhymes while reminiscing over a momentous summer. On July 5, 2017, the ferry Carthage from the Compagnie Tunisienne de Navigation travelling from Marseille moored in Zarzis harbour for the first time, inaugurating a new line connecting France directly with south-eastern Tunisia. On board were mostly Tunisians from different southern governorates, who make up a large proportion of the substantial Tunisian diaspora residing in France and in other European states. Prior to the summer of 2017, these men and families were in the habit of disembarking in the capital Tunis, to then face an eight to twelve hours ride home. A friend who grew up in the outskirts of Paris recalled with dread the yearly packing of the car with presents and household appliances, the drive from Paris to the port of Marseille (in the south of France) or of Genova (in north-western Italy), the interminable boat journey to Tunis, followed by what was for her teenage self the last straw: the drive down to Zarzis. In her youth, only the initial part of this final land journey was on a motorway, after which her younger brother invariably became car sick. The first passengers to disembark on July 5, 2017 were thus filmed by local media and YouTube enthusiasts with beaming smiles as they drove their cars out of the hull of the ship to find themselves almost home.

The day of the arrival of this first ship, hundreds of people gathered at the port to witness the event, which the then Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, who was also there for the occasion, qualified as “historical”. Other politicians present were the Minister of Transport, the Minister of Health, the Secretary for State Property and Land Affairs, and representatives from the moderate Islamist party Ennahda, popular in Zarzis and in southern Tunisia more generally. Local authorities and associations had worked for weeks to prepare a welcome parade featuring children dressed in traditional clothes from Gabes, Tataouine, and other southern cities – some of whom had at first not been entirely keen on the choice of Zarzis over other coastal towns for the docking, as Umm Akri’s poem above cheekily implies. Musicians and flag-throwers from

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<sup>4</sup> Except for individuals known in public sources by their real names, most names of persons have been changed to protect the identity of research participants. Akri is an old-fashioned woman’s name in Tunisia, and is related to the name ‘Akkara, that of the Zarzis tribe. *Umm* (mother) and *baba* (father) are used out of respect when referring to elderly people and grandparents.

Gbilli and from Zarzis itself also entertained the large and festive crowd. As the ship approached, the buildings of the port glowed in alternating colours, while volunteers in yellow bibs stood stationed at strategic points, ready to hand out *mashmum* (small jasmine bouquets) to passengers as they disembarked. In a brief speech, the Prime Minister stated that

We had promised this four months ago in Medenine [the capital of the governorate that Zarzis is part of], and today this promise has been actualised! Starting from next year, we should have a ship every three weeks. We will keep our promises! This region deserves the government's attention. We can see that people have gathered here from all over the South to celebrate this event. I will say it again, our will is sincere, and we will keep our promises!

(Achouri 2017, my translation)

Umm Akri had not been able to witness all of this herself as she needed to rest often when walking, and preferred to move with a wheelchair, but she had heard countless retellings of the docking and entertainment from the family members and neighbours who came to see her for tea in the afternoon breeze of her garden. This summer had been an eventful one for her also because two of her grandsons had celebrated their weddings. One grandson, who was born and had lived his entire life near Paris, had married a second cousin from Umm Akri's husband's branch of the family. The other grandson had been previously married to an elderly French tourist in order to secure papers. This summer, after working in France for eight years, he had been able to remarry a younger woman from Zarzis. Being ninety-one years old, Umm Akri had seen many generations of men, and later whole families, live between (especially) Paris and Zarzis. She herself had pushed her husband, Baba al Hajj, to go work in France. While he was abroad, she took care of their seven children and of her two older children from a previous marriage. She worked odd jobs like selling carrots at the market, labouring in the fields in a nearby locality as part of the wheat harvest, and collecting branches and leaves during the olive picking season to sell as animal fodder. It had not been easy, but the hardest moments now were the days of *frega*, separation, from her loved ones.

The holiday season for this year was coming to an end: tourists were becoming a rarer sight around town, and most of the families who had arrived on the boat that Umm Akri had been praising that afternoon were already making their ways back to France, in time for the start of the school year. Umm Akri wondered when she would see some of her sons, daughters, and

grandchildren next. She wondered when the ship from Paris would return, and if those promises from the powers in Tunis would be kept. From the ferry, her thoughts drifted to another kind of trans-Mediterranean movement, one that many of her other grandsons had embarked upon: the crossing of the sea without papers to get to Europe, the *harga* – literally meaning the “burning” of the border. Her neighbour the previous day had told her that yet another boat had left for Sicily the night before from a nearby beach, and that her son had been pressing her to leave. “*Heblu ‘ala al harga*” – they have become crazy for the *harga*. “*Jil hadha sa ‘iba*” – this is a difficult generation, she concluded.



Figure 1: A typical tea-making set-up around which families – and especially women – socialise in the afternoons, evenings, or after dinner. The *kanun* (small coal stove) is usually fuelled with coal made from olive tree wood, prepared by the men of the family and some expert helpers after the olive harvest. June 2016.

## Zarzis in between

### *Migratory trajectories*

Zarzis, like many other Mediterranean coastal towns, is a place where diverse migratory trajectories intersect. Local youth devise projects to move abroad in order to pursue lives that are difficult to envisage if staying put. Young people from the global south find themselves here while *en route* to other destinations. Meanwhile, elderly people from northern Europe move in to retire in the sun. Tourists from different parts of the world, as well as members of the diaspora residing in Europe, converge here on holiday. Zarzis is simultaneously a place from which some seek to take off, and where others wish to settle. Taking further Gardner's injunction that we focus on "how inequality between places – the geography of power – is actually expressed within migrant communities" (Gardner 1995: 16), this thesis seeks to examine how these inequalities and geographies of power play out *within* a place like Zarzis itself. They do so through the living together, separations, encounters, weddings, repatriations, political mobilisations and burials of these different groups of people.

Given the town's particular setting at the cross-roads of different geopolitical divides (between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, between Libya and urban Tunisia) and across temporal transitions (between colony and post-colony, between authoritarianism and revolution) the thesis tracks the trails of mobility that shape it. These pass in, through, and around Zarzis, or simply stop there. The thesis also gives an account of those who have returned, settled, or remained.<sup>5</sup> It explores the viewpoints of Zarzis's older inhabitants, many of whom like Baba al Hajj mentioned above were migrants in their time; its desperate-to-leave youths; its transitory passers-by, be they citizens of other African countries on their ways north, or Europeans involved in humanitarian work or news reporting; and its pensioner settlers. These different life trajectories come together in the emplaced transnationalism of a site that is rarely considered as being part of a cosmopolitan Mediterranean. The latter, whilst heralded in the past (Braudel 1972), is often understood to have dissolved in modern times (Chambers 2008),

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<sup>5</sup> For ethnographies of emigrant towns in other parts of the world that also take "stayers" as their focus for approaching the study of migration, see: Gaibazzi (2015) and Chu (2016).

or at best to have left its traces only in more important port cities.<sup>6</sup> Both temporary and rooted residents of Zarzis, however, feel that while being a marginal and marginalised place, the town is deeply enmeshed in global, transnational, regional<sup>7</sup> and national power-dynamics creating inequality and injustice related to social and physical mobility, borders, and wealth distribution.

This research thus explores how people understand these scales of pressures that render a dignified life (*hayet karima*) difficult to sustain, from the vantage point of a middle-sized, “provincial”<sup>8</sup> coastal town, which is somewhere in between a collection of neighbourhoods operating as villages and a more cohesive “secondary city” (Hilgers 2012). By focusing on Zarzis, a site geographically congenial to both documented and undocumented, and land, air, and sea arrivals and departures, the thesis investigates what leading a dignified life, and honouring the dead, might entail in a post-revolutionary Tunisian environment marked by both uncertainty and possibility.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Hannoum (2019) for the Moroccan city of Tangiers. For a more nuanced understanding of what cosmopolitanism entails in different Mediterranean port cities, see Driessen (2005).

<sup>7</sup> I am referring here to Ben-Yehoyada’s (2017) historically grounded use of the concept of “transnational region formation”, which he developed working with fishers between Sicily and Tunisia, so as to emphasise the ways in which people understand themselves to be related, and not just connected, across transnational living spaces such as the ones travelled by “the ship from Paris” Umm Akri refers to above.

<sup>8</sup> As Deeb and Winegar point out in their review of anthropology of Arab majority societies, while secluded, rural and peripheral sites were privileged in anthropological works before the 1980s – due to an at times orientalist focus on desert life, segmentary politics, and tribalism (Abu-Lughod 1989) – current anthropology tends to focus more on urban centres and capital cities (2012: 538, 539, 540). Melliti and Moussa (2018) argue this to also be the case for Tunisia, where research is mostly carried out in the capital of Tunis, or has more recently concentrated in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, the marginalised governorates situated in the interior of the country where the revolution took off in 2011. Ethnographies of “provincial” areas (Deeb & Winegar 2012: 540), such as the one carried out in this thesis, can, in line with these different authors’ propositions, give space and importance to working class understandings of processes of political, social and economic change. They can add to and complexify views coming from political “centres” that often slip into being regarded as representative of whole populations.



Figure 2: Evening view of a sea-side neighbourhood close to Zarzis town centre. June 2017.

### *A double border*

Zarzis, a city spread across a wide, sandy peninsula some 80 km from Libya, has in the past thirty years been increasingly confronted with the affective and material consequences of the European Union's border. During this period, the latter has developed into an extensive zone that encompasses seas and lands beyond what is commonly imagined as its geographical perimeter.<sup>9</sup> EU border management is often outsourced to countries in North Africa and the Middle East, turned into migration "buffer zones" (Del Sarto 2010) through overlapping regional, bilateral, and at times informal and "opaque" agreements (Cassarino 2014, 2020).

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<sup>9</sup> Andersson's "extended field site" ethnographic approach to the study of the European business of illegality unveils its operation in territories well beyond the EU's jurisdiction (2014b).

“We don’t want to become Europe’s migration dumpsite”<sup>10</sup> is a common refrain among civil society and local humanitarian actors in the south-eastern governorate of Medenine (of which Zarzis is part), on the border with Libya. It is believed that “under Ben Ali, Tunisia’s sea border was the most secure in the entire Maghreb region” (Pro Asyl 2014), with EU-funded and equipped patrol boats operating from ports like Zarzis. Yet, despite the changes in political leadership in the country since the 2011 revolution and its transition to democracy, successive Italian governments and the EU have remained constant in the nature of their demands to Tunisia when it comes to border control. Consequently, while in the months following the revolution Zarzis became one of the main points of departure for Tunisians wishing to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa, this period of openness did not last for long. Coastal towns like Zarzis soon reverted to being heavily implicated in the production and policing of Europe’s border. Its inhabitants have thus been living with a fluctuating “sense of border” (Green 2012) and have had to engage with its effects.

As well as local young men finding that the *harga* might be their only way to get to Europe, residents live with the presence of those who die trying to make that same sea crossing from neighbouring Libya, most of whom are buried without a name. Zarzis’s proximity to Libya has also made it – similarly to other areas bordering Libya and Algeria – historically more policed than the coastal regions of the north, as both these countries have constituted a source of security anxiety for the Tunisian state since independence (Dakhli 2011: 36). From 2011, as Libya’s revolution turned into a long-lasting civil war, the militarisation and surveillance of the governorate of Medenine and of the neighbouring one of Tataouine have only increased.

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<sup>10</sup> This statement will be explored further in chapter 2.



Figure 3: The rescue boat of the Sea Eye, a German organisation operating in the Central Mediterranean, leaves Zarzis port after having taken shelter from bad weather, while a group of friends continue their diving contest. August 2017.

### *The coast and the interior*

Regional disparities have plagued Tunisia since colonialism (Clancy-Smith 2014), with both Bourguiba and Ben Ali – Tunisia’s two dictators since independence – focusing on developing the tourism sector and the northern regions over the rest of the country. This remains an enduring social problem that succeeding post-revolutionary governments have yet to address head-on. The gap between richer urban and coastal cities of the north and a marginalised and exploited rural interior and south continue to fuel protests and sentiments of injustice (Feltrin 2018). Indeed, it was these deep regional inequalities between the coast and the interior, between the north and the south, and between urban and rural Tunisia that formed the impetus behind the 2011 revolution. Most of the social movements and protests that preceded it, but

that went virtually unreported in international media, happened in marginalised cities such as the Gafsa phosphate region, and the border town of Ben Guerdane, neighbouring Zarzis (Dakhliya 2011; Allal & Geisser 2018; Mabrouk 2011). The revolution itself began at the close of 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, an impoverished city of the interior suffering from high levels of youth unemployment and scarce work avenues.

It is not straightforward to locate Zarzis within these larger, country-wide disparities. Generations of emigrants to Europe have made Zarzis relatively prosperous compared to other towns of the interior and of the south of the country. Zarzis attracted workers from other parts of Tunisia, filling jobs in the few tuna canning, olive oil bottling, and textile factories, as well as in construction work, fishing, and in the guardianship of properties belonging to ‘Akkara (the tribe that call Zarzis home) families living abroad. The controversy over the choice of Zarzis for the docking of “the ship from Paris” over other coastal cities mentioned above should therefore be read in this light. As many ‘Akkara would themselves point out, places as different as Zarzis, Tataouine, Gabes, the island of Djerba or the border town of Ben Guerdane should not be simplistically understood as being all “in the same boat” vis-à-vis a wealthier north.

Nevertheless, ex-Prime Minister Youssef Chahed’s assurances of state presence were important given that many in Zarzis, as well as in other peripheral and border regions of Tunisia, felt disregarded by central government in Tunis, and had mostly felt this way since independence from the French in 1956. Not unlike Zarzis, the economies of other cities of the south too<sup>11</sup> relied on remittances and work generated by generation after generation of emigrants to Europe. The ‘Akkara were adamant – as will be discussed especially in chapters 1 and 5 – that their relative prosperity depended on their own hard work and initiative, and not on the state’s.

### **“The *harga* has gone bad”**

*Mid-afternoon, March 2017, Zarzis*

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<sup>11</sup> See Boubakri & Mazzella (2011) for the case of the city of Ghomrassen.

Half a year prior to the events outlined above, Umm Akri sat making red tea with her *kanun* on the same thin floor mattress, except this time placed indoors on a thick carpet, due to the colder season. Her husband Baba al Hajj was resting next to her, lying on an analogous mattress under several woollen blankets. I had passed by their house for an afternoon visit with one of their grandsons, Lotfi, who had recently returned to Zarzis after six years of absence, having been *expersé* (from the French word *expulsé*, meaning expelled, deported) from France. He had left at eighteen as a *harraga* (burner), making the journey to “Europe” via sea without a visa, in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution. He had been living in Paris undocumented since, unable to travel back to Zarzis for visits. He was now dedicating as much time as possible to his grandparents and family, while trying to find a way to either make a living in the *bled* (hometown), or to attempt the crossing once more.

Lotfi’s younger brother, Ghali, at the time twenty-two, had gone to live in the capital Tunis with a couple of friends from the neighbourhood three months earlier, with the aim of finding a way to get a boat to Italy. As soon as we sat down next to Umm Akri, she enquired after Ghali. “I want him to come back. He is intelligent, he is a good mechanic. If there is a possibility to do the *harga* within the next days then so be it, but if not, he must come back.” She remembered how living in France had been no easy feat for her husband and sons:

All my sons are good, I praise them all. They are hard-working and they earn a lot of money, they are all abroad. But the *harga* is something that’s gone bad (*al harga ‘afna*<sup>12</sup>). Listen. It’s better to spend 15 or 20 thousand dinars<sup>13</sup> [to pay for the visa] so that your son can leave [Tunisia] with his head high (*rashu marfu’a*). Otherwise you will burn and over there your life will be burnt (*enti harig u eddinia mahruga*). Who will welcome you over there? What kind of work will you find? All my children had to do difficult work in the beginning, they suffered poor things, they worked with the *traks* [construction work with heavy machinery]. The man who built this house [Baba al Hajj, her husband] worked hard day and night in France, it was dangerous. One of my children told me mother, I saw some people... if you return home carrying two loaves of bread,

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<sup>12</sup> The term *‘afna* is used to describe food that has gone off, food that is not good to eat anymore.

<sup>13</sup> Approximately 5800 euro, and 7700 euro.

people take the bread by force, they say we are hungry and you have money.  
Hundreds of thousands of people left Zarzis for France.

Tilting her head in Lotfi's direction, she added:

But tell me: isn't it better to work here for 20 dinars a day,<sup>14</sup> and you can rest at night with a full stomach without worrying?

Moving her gaze back down to pour us tea, she concluded:

*Hia harga ya kibdi*<sup>15</sup>, *harga 'afna*: this is the *harga* my child, the *harga* is something that's gone off. *Al harga sharga*: the *harga* makes me choke, I can't swallow it, it goes down the wrong way.

“*Harga sharga*” here is a play on words on the part of Umm Akri, who, as seen above, enjoyed using her language creatively. Young men would often describe their determination to migrate by pointing out that they had nothing to lose, that they were already dead in Zarzis. “*Ya harga ya sharga*” for them meant that they either succeeded at the *harga*, or they choked, drowned.<sup>16</sup> Umm Akri instead used this same combination of words to mean that the *harga* itself was something she felt choked by.

She then went over an episode that had happened to Ghali some weeks before in Tunis. He had travelled there with 13 thousand dinars<sup>17</sup> that his brothers – some working in France, others in Zarzis<sup>18</sup> – had helped him gather. Together with his friends, they thought they had found a solid lead for the crossing. After making arrangements with the *rais* (smuggler), they had been put

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<sup>14</sup> Approximately 8 euro.

<sup>15</sup> *Kibdi* translates as my liver, and in Tunisian dialect also means my child, or my flesh. It is an expression used to refer to people one holds dear, to family or to people who are so close they are like family.

<sup>16</sup> This statement, and young men's feeling of being socially dead, will be explored in more detail in chapter 4. Variations on the saying “*ya harga ya sharga*” included “*ya gharga ya sharga*”, meaning we either drown – *gharga* – or we burn, and well as the French “*ça passe ou ça casse*”, an equivalent of the English saying “make it or break it”.

<sup>17</sup> Approximately 5000 euro.

<sup>18</sup> The life trajectories of Ghali and his four brothers, including Lotfi, will be described in chapter 5.

up in a house with several other men from different regions of Tunisia. The house looked fine from outside, but inside it was dirty and miserable. They were then betrayed by somebody, perhaps a neighbour, perhaps the *rais* himself, and the police came to take them. Some of the men had hidden all their money in their underwear. When the police could not find the money, they made them undress. Thankfully Ghali had only taken part of the sum with him, leaving most of the amount with a friend in Tunis, who had been tasked to pay the smuggler only if he managed to get to Italy.

This was a crucial reason why, in Umm Akri's view, migrating to Europe had become an issue for her grandsons' generation, compared to what migration had comprised for her husband Baba al Hajj and for her sons – who had instead reached France on ships or planes. What was different with the *harga* was that, since it often involved underground arrangements, the misery began in Tunis, before even getting to Italy. As Umm Akri put it: “because of France, Ghali is *mlawah* (thrown away, tossed aside like something without any value) in Tunis.”

### **Dignity and disdain**

Remaining faithful to Umm Akri's and other research participants' ways of expressing sentiments related to dignity (*karama*) and disdain (*hogra*), this thesis will explore what being able to hold one's head high (*ras marfu'a*) and, conversely, what being devalued (*mlawah*), entail in Zarzis for both people pursuing different migratory projects and for those who either decide against, or are unable to move.

When I started fieldwork in the summer of 2015, Tunisia was working through its democratic transition, which constituted a temporal kind of “in between”. Within the family sphere or one's neighbourhood (*huma*) people in Zarzis often expressed feeling *mirtah*, relaxed, calm and emplaced, surrounded by people for whom they had a value and whom they valued. Comfort and security were, however, the first two things that come to people's minds when asked about the difference between the pre- and post-revolutionary periods. A lack of stability, ambient uncertainty, a considerable rise in the cost of living unmatched by people's salaries, terrorist attacks, curfews and invocations of states of emergency, and a general sense of lack of safety and of safety nets pervaded conversations on life beyond the revolution. A problematic aspect of continuity, however, between Ben Ali's rule and the current transition to

democracy, was that people in Zarzis and in many other peripheral regions did not feel *mirtah* (at ease) in their own country. Beyond one's *huma*, beyond the town, beyond the region, and at national level, increasing possibilities emerged for being treated with disrespect, for feeling *hogra* (disdain, humiliation), for being made to feel dispensable, like rubbish thrown on the side of the road (*mlawah*). The latter term is interestingly often associated with the *barrani* (foreigner, a term used in Tunisia to refer to people from elsewhere within the country),<sup>19</sup> who, being outsiders (*al barra* means the outside), remain abandoned (*ga'd mlawah*) unless locals offer them hospitality (*karam*), and thus treat them with dignity (*karama*) as valued guests.

Both *karama* (dignity) and *hogra* (disrespect) had come to be politicised by the revolution. Both are intersubjective sentiments that involve another person's or another agent's (such as the state, the police, the ruling class) actions towards oneself, whether the latter be conceived as an individual or as a collective.

“Work, freedom, and national dignity” – *karama wataniya* – was one of the driving slogans and demands of the 2011 revolution (Dakhli 2013) – itself officially memorialised as the Revolution of Dignity and Freedom. This demand for collective dignity is also common to the revolts that ensued in other countries as part of the Arab Uprisings (for Egypt see: El Bernoussi 2015, 2020), as well as to protests and campaigns emerging in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis in southern Europe (for Spain see: Narotzky 2016; for Italy see: Muehlebach 2018). In Tunisia, through these calls, dignity came to stand for the fundamental baseline of a decent life that Tunisians were being collectively denied. “*Karama wataniya*” expressed a demand to be treated in a dignified way as a people, as a nation, by its rulers and the powers backing them. It was a collective sentiment that politicised those economic conditions that had been pushing Tunisians to “run after the *khobza* (bread)” for years during Ben Ali's regime (Meddeb 2012). Growing inequalities in Tunisian society, coupled with Ben Ali's attempts to appease the population's frustrations at a lack of freedom by pushing for consumption and propagating an image of economic growth (Hibou 1999, 2011) only exacerbated discontent, as in many regions citizens were having trouble making ends meet. They felt increasingly undignified in their own country, having to rely on contacts, patrons and hand-me-downs to get by. The transition from the revolution to the construction of new institutions and ways of governing, including the writing of a new constitution and the

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<sup>19</sup> As can be heard in Tunisian rapper Balti's famous song *Galouli matji*.

devolution of more political power to municipalities, involved questioning the content of the “social contract” with the state (Melliti & Moussa 2018), and what kind of society people wished to build out of the dictator’s departure and the revolutionary impetus.

The youth had been the motor of the 2011 revolution. Much academic writing about Tunisia concerns the feelings of desperation, injustice, hopelessness and revolt experienced by this part of the population, facing labour precarity, economic difficulties, a lack of prospects, and widespread unemployment (Allal & Geisser 2018; Cimini 2019; Honwana 2013; Mastrangelo 2019). The revolution itself was sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young informal street trader, in the impoverished central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. Bouazizi’s had been a political act of protest – a “suicide manifesto”, in the words of Mabrouk (2011: 629) – resulting from yet another incident during which he had been devalued, despised, and humiliated by the police, the state and society.<sup>20</sup>

In order to understand the link people make between inequalities and feelings of injustice, and to grasp when inequalities are evaluated as injustices, Tunisian academics Melliti and Moussa (2018) use both a moral economies framework and theories of recognition. The objective element of whether a certain situation is unjust in the eyes of the law is not what matters most, but rather taking young people’s perceptions seriously (2018: 31). It is in this vein that this thesis approaches the subject of the *harga*, a different, but no less political, kind of “burning”, carried out, in the words of many *harraga* (burners), for similar reasons to the ones that led to Bouazizi’s “suicide manifesto”.

The role of the other in preserving one's dignity, in making one feel valued and recognised, is fundamental. Retaining *karama* necessitates the dignifying actions of others, which in turn exist within larger structural conditions that also have an important impact on one’s ability to live and feel dignified, but that are somewhat beyond one's reach – these can perhaps only be addressed by mass protest and revolution.

The 2011 revolution brought about new solidarities between different generations of Tunisians (Allal 2011; Dakhliya 2011). The predicaments of the youth, who form a large part of the population, were finally publicly recognised, “seen” (Honnet & Margalit 2001). Their struggles

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<sup>20</sup> See Honwana (2013: 1, 2) for details of the nexus of humiliating events that led to Bouazizi’s self-immolation.

to become autonomous, dignified adults became understood by other citizens as stemming from deep-seated societal problems, and not from individual laziness or from a lack of education. Tunisians began vociferously acknowledging, protesting, and discussing the fact that unemployment and precarious labour conditions had excluded the youth from having a legitimate say, “not just politically or within workers unions, but within the family” (Dakhliya 2011: 91). Migration and the *harga* also started being more regularly and openly included within economic, social, and political mobilisations. While Tunisian citizens continued, despite much disillusionment, shaping these debates and struggles within their country, global migration management and border security paradigms (Cassarino 2020; Dini & Giusa 2020) remained constant in excluding the majority of its citizens access to dignified travel to and life in Europe.

It is within this climate of change, uncertainty, inequality and injustice that this thesis is situated, tracing different ways in which struggles, demands, but also intimate, quotidian, and familial feelings of being valued and devalued play out in a coastal town made by variously entangled geographical and temporal “in betweens”.

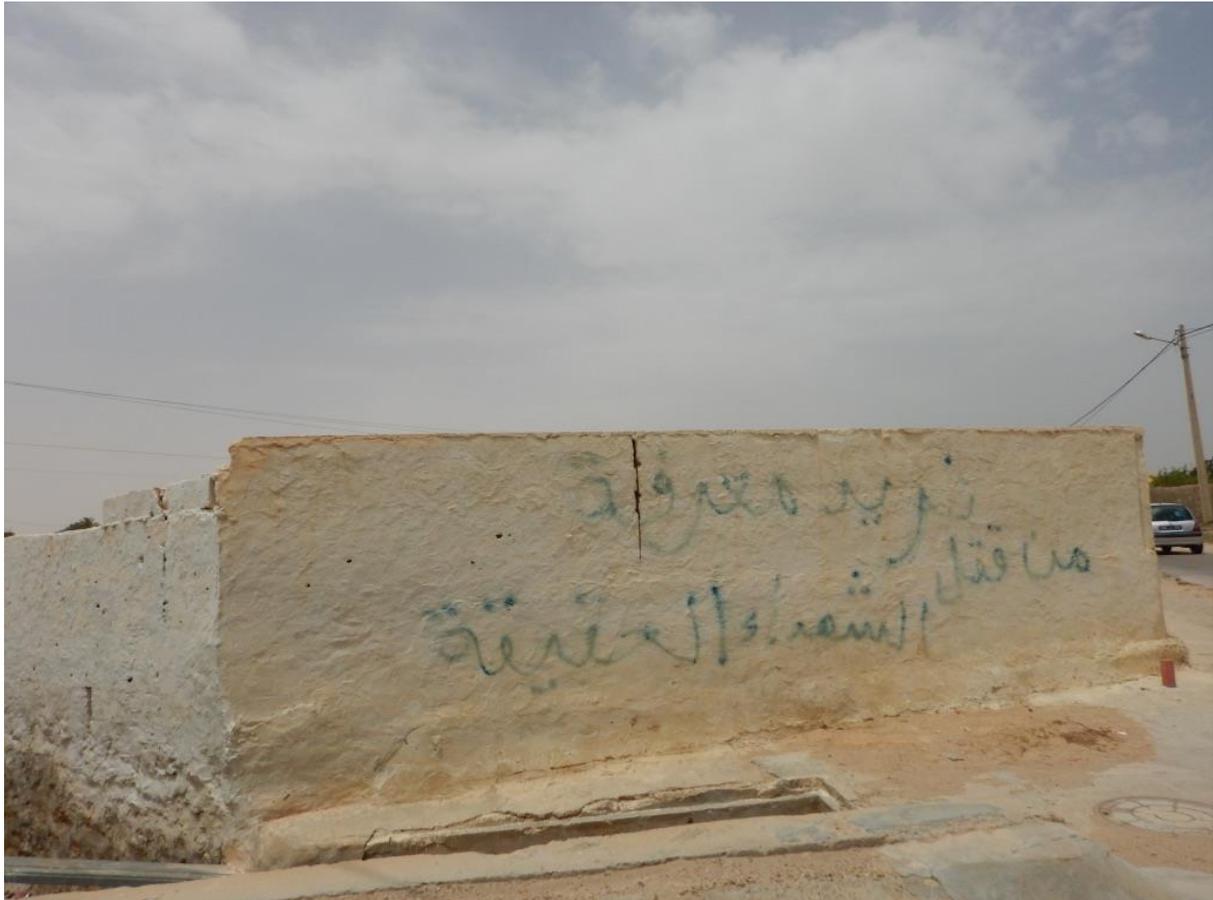


Figure 4: “*Nurid ma’arfa man qatil al shuhada’ al haqiqa*” – “We want to know who killed the martyrs the truth”. Graffiti written on the wall lining one of the many neighbourhood cemeteries of Zarzis where some of the martyrs from the 2011 revolution are buried. May 2016.

## Fieldwork

I landed in Tunis to begin fieldwork in late July 2015, coming from a “Europe” in “crisis”, ostensibly over the question of migration.<sup>21</sup> My original fieldwork plans were to carry out multi-sited research in Tunisia and Sicily, working with families of missing *harraga* (burners) in the former, and with people involved in the burials and identification efforts of the Mediterranean border dead in the latter. Between 2011 and 2013 I had already carried out ethnographic research in Lampedusa and Sicily on this subject, and I had heard about the

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<sup>21</sup> See De Genova (2016, 2017) and the New Keywords Collective (2016) for how the very idea of “Europe” was a site of multiple crises.

transnational mobilisations of Tunisian families of the missing demanding the truth about their sons' disappearances from the Italian and Tunisian states. The fact that Mediterranean crossings, both in the Central Mediterranean and especially through the Aegean and the so-called "Balkan route", had become a top concern for European politicians and publics during that time, however, gave me pause for reflection. The fact that a large number of journalists and researchers were arriving to Sicily during that time, several after having just obtained ESRC "emergency grants" for speedy research on the "refugee crisis", further confirmed my wish to rethink my plans.

Between August and October 2015, my fieldwork in Zarzis focused on following different actors involved in "migration management" in south-eastern Tunisia, such as volunteers and employees with the Tunisian Red Crescent (TRC), the municipality, and both local and international staff working for the IOM (International Organisation for Migration), MSF (Doctors Without Borders), and the UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency). These actors were to different extents implicated in the running of often temporary "hosting" facilities – one of which, close to the border town of Ben Guerdane, was in an old chicken house – for people either escaping Libya via the land border, or for those labelled "*rescapés*", due to having been rescued at sea in Tunisian waters by the coast guards, and having been brought to Zarzis port. The TRC in particular was also assisting the municipality with the burials of unknown persons who had died at sea, and whose bodies had been found near the shores of Zarzis. From those same shores, young men from Zarzis were also attempting the crossing to Lampedusa and Sicily. I also started working with families of disappeared migrants (*al mufqudin*) in Zarzis, most of whom had lost family members in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution, when a Tunisian military boat, the Horria 302, crashed and sunk a boat of *harraga*. As I started getting to know them, I realised that, on the one hand, the struggles for truth and justice of these families spoke to broader social and political issues in Tunisia, while on the other hand it became clear to me that understanding what was unfolding in Zarzis with regards to absent loved ones and the burial of unknown persons required a much longer-term ethnographic approach.

I therefore spent the next six months in the capital of Tunis to begin learning Tunisian Arabic. Being based in Tunis for half a year proved essential in helping me understand the broader relevance of Tunisia for Mediterranean border (and other) politics, as I was able to carry out interviews and attend conferences run by various international actors in this field. Living in the

capital also allowed me to grasp Zarzis's place in Tunisia, how life there (and language) differed from life in Tunis, and how its inhabitants, the 'Akkara, were regarded by other Tunisians.

From April 2016 to October 2017 I settled in Zarzis, making occasional trips to Tunis every couple of months. A friend I had made in Tunis, whose father was from Zarzis, accompanied me on my move, and put me in touch with one of her aunts whose husband lived and worked in France. This aunt, Afifa, turned out to be happy to take me in to live with her, her two teenage daughters, and ten-year-old son, so as to have more company and support around the house. The neighbourhood in which we lived was one of emigrants, and so for most of the year it was populated by mainly women, children, and elderly people, many houses remaining empty. When Afifa and her children moved to France in the summer of 2017 to join her husband, I lived for the remaining months of fieldwork in a different neighbourhood closer to the sea and to the town centre. Here, I lived next door to my landlady, who split her time between living in a northern suburb of Paris and Zarzis. Her husband had died, and so she lived alone, but kept her and her three grown children's large villas clean and ready for when they would visit for a handful of weeks over the summer. Splitting my time between these two neighbourhoods, and getting to know well different generations of emigrants and stayers belonging to different families in Zarzis, proved essential in order to approach the *harga* not just as an individual endeavour of young men, but as a community wide project.

I carried out additional fieldwork visits to Tunis and Zarzis in January 2018, April/May 2018, January 2019, and August 2019, at times getting involved in and following different trans-Mediterranean activist initiatives, as well as visiting my fieldwork family in Paris on several occasions, which allowed me to get a sense of their lives on the other side of the sea.



Figure 5: View from my room's window, in the house next to Umm Akri and Baba al Hajj's. February 2017.

### **Thesis road map**

The six chapters of this thesis explore what leading a dignified life entails in the midst of the variously entangled temporal, spatial, life-cycle, and affective in-betweens characterising post-revolutionary Tunisia. They address what pursuing, bestowing, and enacting dignity, responsibility, and care might mean for both migrants and those who remain, vis-à-vis the living and the dead, and in the face of precarious and uncertain presents and futures.

Chapter 1 provides historical context to these questions by exploring simultaneously recent Tunisian political history and that of migration to Europe. It shows how migration became integral to life in Zarzis – as well as in Tunisia more broadly – despite being morally contested. From colonial times, through to the authoritarian regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and

following the 2011 revolution, migrants have been the target of stereotypes and morally loaded accusations. The *harga* thus came to constitute a site of ambivalences and blame allocations, the inhabitants of Zarzis, on their part, being additionally accused of pragmatism and closeness to the former French colonisers, and of endorsing foreign values. These allegations came hand in hand with a deterioration of political and economic conditions in Tunisia, and the tightening of worker visa and border regulations first on the part of different European states, and from the 1990s onwards on the part of the European Union. The historically changing character of migration from Zarzis to (especially) Paris results in the *harraga* – the illegalised border crossers of today – attempting to follow in their fathers’ and grandfathers’ steps towards adulthood amidst ever greater danger and critique.

The next four chapters of the thesis come in pairs: chapters 2 and 3 focus on border deaths and on the cemetery of unknown migrants in Zarzis, while chapters 4 and 5 focus on the *harga*, and on different gendered and generational views on migration, social death, and dignity. The order of these chapters reflects the unfolding of my journey into getting to know Zarzis and its inhabitants’ concerns. I had initially chosen to carry out research in Zarzis to focus on the question of disappeared *harraga*, the missing sons whose families have been organising politically since the revolution. I also knew that Zarzis, being close to Libya, was a place where unknown deceased migrants were being recovered and buried. My research drives upon arriving to south-eastern Tunisia and during the first months of fieldwork were therefore to consider the presence of anonymous dead persons and the absence of missing loved ones in tandem, and to investigate how these led to different mobilisations, social and family relations, and understandings of migration and the border. As fieldwork progressed and as my Arabic improved, however, I became more and more familiar with the lives of various families, and with the relations and viewpoints of their different members towards bigger questions linked to social reproduction and mobility. The four central chapters of the thesis therefore move from the historical and transnational scales, explored through the question of the burial of unknown migrants, towards progressively more intimate layers of understandings of migration, revolution, and dignity among tightly knit individuals.

Chapter 2 introduces the current geopolitical relevance of Zarzis in the context of the European Union’s “migration crisis”, which was unfolding in the summer of 2015 when I started research. It does so by examining the reasons why a cemetery for unknown migrants in Zarzis – a locally marginalised site and plight – became mediatised during the time of fieldwork, and

how Zarzis became known to the outside world through the story of this cemetery. Those who were transnationally involved in efforts to “fix” the cemetery were engaged in trying to attach culpability and responsibility onto “Europe”, linking Mediterranean crossings and border deaths to colonial and post-colonial entanglements.

Chapter 3 returns to the same cemetery of unknown persons in order to this time explore what dignifying and honouring the dead involves, and how this troubling and undignified situation came to be in the first place. The mediatisation of the cemetery explored in the previous chapter, and how its story was portrayed, consistently left out the uncomfortable affects, small dilemmas, and reverberations these dead persons and burials had for locals. This chapter, instead, precisely aims to detail the process of dealing with these dead bodies by describing how people in Zarzis organise the burial of anonymous border victims, and questions how the materiality and significance of dead bodies locally constitute (or fail to constitute) “the human” – a presence calling for burial, respect, and dignity.

The second half of the thesis attends to the undercurrents of malaise running through the *bled* (hometown) with regards to the *harga*, as well as to people’s hopes and reflections on their place and value in the world, and that of others. Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the ways in which young men’s feelings of “social death” and search for dignity through migration are intimately linked with their desires to reaffirm and reproduce the patriarchal household in Zarzis, and honour values held dear by previous generations of migrants. Blame waged against especially mothers, sisters, and wives-to-be for driving young men to do the *harga* are part of the ways in which ideals of a “dignified life”, while constituting both a collective political claim and heartfelt personal and generational desire, are in themselves riddled with normative undertones.

Chapter 4 explores migration as an endeavour on the part of (especially) female family members to prevent the social death of young men, as well as the family’s collective loss of future prospects. These shared efforts are the subject of complicated moral economies that centre around women – in their roles as mothers, sisters and wives-to-be – being complicit in young men’s projects – by providing financial infrastructure and moral support – but who are also blamed for being those who drive the men towards the dangerous crossing, despite often labouring to upkeep the whole family’s sense of self-worth. Chapter 5 also approaches the *harga* from the viewpoint of border ‘burners’ and their families and social worlds, but places its focus on different generations, and takes them and a certain perduring vision of masculinity

to be generative of contrasting perspectives on migration and value. Zarzis emerges as a place where men of different ages certify to changing political economies of migration – seniors live on European pensions from their years of work in Europe, while young men plan the *harga*. Changes in the legal possibilities for crossing the border to “Europe” shape moral assessments pitting the youth against more senior family members and vice versa, and the ensuing generational tensions result in debates over the nature and temporality of change and revolution, and their moral merits and pitfalls.

Chapter 6 explores the lives of those who make, find, and leave “their place” in Zarzis through transnational weddings and funerals. It shows how the entangled presences and absences of various “locals” and “foreigners” form the “community” that provides the safety-nets and possibilities for social and physical mobility and belonging. The experience of migration – either personal, or of family members – is a tool used by people in Zarzis to rethink issues to belonging, citizenship, sovereignty, and obligations to others who are not part of one’s family, or who are unknown, or who are not Tunisian citizens.

The thesis ends with a transnational mobilisation that has Zarzis as its epicentre, and that hints that the concept of dignity could form a basis for a common political language and struggle across and beyond the Mediterranean, despite the notion of social reproduction that it “engenders” needing to be expanded in order to become truly universal and inclusive, or even “revolutionary”.

## Chapter 1

### Migration through the generations

#### **‘Eid al Kbir<sup>22</sup> between Zarzis and Paris**

*Early morning, 12 September 2016, Zarzis*

None of Baba al Hajj’s sons had been able to return from France for the ‘Eid this year. Just after the *salat al ‘Eid*, the prayer officially marking the beginning of the festivities, the family’s women and children started going from house to house in the clear early morning light, to exchange greetings, as well as big bowls and other utensils, in preparation for the tasks ahead. Baba al Hajj and his wife Umm Akri had each bought a ram for the sacrifice, which the Hajj was determined to carry out himself. Being in his late eighties, however, he would need his grandsons’ help with holding down the animals, and with the skinning and dividing of the meat straight after. While waiting for his family to gather, the Hajj meticulously organised the sandy patch he had chosen so that the sheep’ blood would not spoil the earth. For much of his life, he had worked as a gardener in France, and still enjoyed tending to the land. He watered down the soil with a plastic hose he had dragged over from the garage, his serious countenance provoking two of his teenage granddaughters to tease him. Held in the same pen as the Hajj and the Hajja’s<sup>23</sup> two white rams was also the buck that a nephew had acquired in the name of one of their sons living in Paris. This son’s six-year-old was looking attentively at every move of his grandfather and the sheep.

Afifa, with whom I was living, was the wife of the Hajj’s fourth son, Habib. Before the day got too hot and chaotic, and lest we forgot later, Afifa and I took time to go feed the chickens and their newly born chicks. Having been allowed to roam free for weeks to eat insects and scorpions, they had now been divided up between the sheds that Habib had built earlier that

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Eid al Kbir (the Grand Feast) is how ‘Eid al Adha (the Feast of the Sacrifice) is commonly called in Tunisia and in other North African countries.

<sup>23</sup> Hajj and Hajja – meaning, respectively, man and woman who have been on the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is a polite way of addressing elderly people in Tunisia, often regardless of whether they have actually done the pilgrimage. In the case of Baba al Hajj and Umm Akri, they had both indeed been on the *hajj*.

summer, when he'd come to spend the month of Ramadan with his family. On our way to the back of the garden we stopped to take the water bucket away from the young ram that Afifa and her ten-year-old son had picked two days earlier for the feast. As per Habib's instructions, they had spared no expenses: the cost of sheep around the time of the 'Eid varied between 250 and 600 dinars,<sup>24</sup> but Habib wanted them to choose a big one. He was looking forward to eating *cous cous* with *gdid* – the dried meat that Afifa would be starting to prepare later today – in a few months' time, when he was due to travel back to Zarzis again to work on olive-picking in his father's and brothers' various fields. This was a job which the Hajj's sons took on in turns.

After more than fifteen years working in France, Habib felt happy to be able to visit home more often, and especially to spend time with his elderly parents. He was reportedly disappointed, though, that he was unable to attend certain important occasions – like the one that was taking place today. In France he worked for a construction company as operator of tower cranes and heavy machinery, which gave him a fair amount of holiday leave. This job had also allowed him to put enough money aside to rent a bigger apartment, which was necessary in order to apply for family reunification and bring Afifa and their younger children over to France. The move now depended on Afifa obtaining at least several years' leave from her job as a middle-school maths teacher. Habib's new apartment faced his older brother's in a *banlieue* (suburb) south of Paris where numerous other members of the Zarzis diaspora had also settled. Today, the two men would be driving over to their younger brother's place in a nearby *banlieue* to celebrate together with his wife and four children, who were all born in France. This family was thus gathering in two places: one group in the outskirts of Paris, in neighbourhoods where analogous parts of families from Tunisia would also be assembling, and the other in the *bled* (meaning both country and hometown). The sheep, however, were being sacrificed only in Zarzis. Before heading back to the relatives, Afifa and I made sure to take photos on our phones of the ram, majestically standing next to the almond tree it was tied to, its horns catching rays shining through the branches. We sent these images to both Habib and to their oldest daughter, who had recently moved to north-eastern France to start a degree in medicine.

Despite his sons being absent, a larger number of Baba al Hajj's adult grandsons than usual were back this year. The Hajj and Hajja were among the oldest members of the neighbourhood. On this special day, this warranted copious phone calls from family living abroad and visits

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<sup>24</sup> Approximately between 100 and 250 euro.

from neighbours. The Hajj's yard – where the first sacrifice of the day was soon to take place – was filled with streams of kisses and of “*Eidkom mabrook!*”, “*alina u 'alikom!*” (“Happy ‘Eid!”, “To us and to you!”). The atmosphere grew even more festive with the arrival of the littlest of the couple's great-grandchildren: the four-month-old daughter of their grandson Said, whom the family were meeting for the first time. Said had left Tunisia for France in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, when the coasts of Zarzis had turned into a major point of departure for undocumented boat journeys to Italy – the “burning” of borders known in the Maghreb as the *harga*. Aided by Habib and by his other uncles, Said had found work in the Paris region as a driver despite not having any documents. He had then married a “daughter” of Zarzis who had lived her entire life in France, and was able to regularise his immigration status by virtue of being the spouse to a French citizen. This was the first trip the couple were making to Zarzis with their baby girl, who was now grabbing everyone's attention, a big red bow tied around her already full head of curly hair.

Finally, Said's brothers, whom everybody had been waiting for in anticipation to begin the sacrifices, arrived. They were the children of Hedi: the only son of Baba al Hajj's to have never emigrated. Hedi had died in 2010. A poster-sized version of his passport photo hung on the otherwise bare walls of the elderly couple's living room. One of his sons in particular, Kamel, resembled Hedi closely. Kamel, like his father, had also remained in the *bled* and continued to work in the small construction business he had inherited from him. Unlike Said and their other brothers, who were all dressed in shorts and t-shirts, Kamel appeared in a traditional *jubba* (men's ankle-length long-sleeved robe), matching his grandfather the Hajj. Holding various knives and a round tree stump, he looked confident and ready for the important role he was to fulfil today. After assisting his grandfather with his and Umm Akri's animals, he would be the one taking care of the sacrifices in the names of his various absent uncles, including that of our ram on behalf of Habib. Having become the head of his household after his father's passing, Kamel would then proceed to sacrificing two goats for his mother – who had high cholesterol levels and should not eat lamb – which they would prepare with Said and his wife, and their three other unmarried siblings who were, like him, still living in the family home.

“Hajj, here we are, shall we start?”



Figure 1.1: Mother and daughter picking a ram for the ‘Eid. August 2017.

### **Introduction – Zarzis *harga* central<sup>25</sup>**

On January 14, 2011 dictator Ben Ali fled Tunisia following the month of protests known as the Revolution of Dignity and Freedom. That same night, a wooden fishing boat carrying sixty-two men left Zarzis for the Italian island of Lampedusa. The beach from which this first boat took off, called Bennana, was soon nicknamed *Consoliyya Bennana*, the Bennana Consulate, since in a matter of days it had turned from sleepy mooring spot into a main point of departure for Europe. At first it was overwhelmingly men from Zarzis who left. Almost every family had several members living in France or elsewhere in Europe, and especially – similarly to Baba al

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<sup>25</sup> Parts of this section and of subsequent sections in this chapter were published in *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* (Zagaria 2019d).

Hajj's sons and grandsons – in the Paris region. Men of all ages seized the opportunity opened up by the revolution and the sudden lack of state authority to join them. But as the word spread, ever-increasing numbers of people – including some women, children and families – started arriving in Zarzis and other coastal cities from all over the country for the *harga*. During the first months of 2011, EU border agency Frontex recorded that 20,258 Tunisians reached Italy via these crossings (Boubakri 2013: 12), out of the 27,982 recorded for the whole of 2011 (Herbert 2016: 6) – these figures only reflecting the number of people who were apprehended.<sup>26</sup>

The term *harga*, meaning “burning”, is used throughout North Africa to refer to the symbolic “burning of the border” involved in crossing the Mediterranean Sea without papers. The *harraga* are “those who burn” their identification documents – some literally, most metaphorically – and who leave for Europe with neither passports nor visas. While the *harga* is a region-wide movement (see Pandolfo 2007 for Morocco; Souiah 2012 for Algeria) dating back to well before the 2011 Arab uprisings, it is no coincidence that Zarzis in particular became known for it in Tunisia during those times. The *harga* “business”, as locals call it, was difficult to prohibit in coastal towns like Zarzis that have a long history of emigration, gradually turned irregular due to ever more restrictive immigration measures imposed on non-European Union citizens by EU member states. Even during Ben Ali's years of strict maritime border guarding (Meddeb 2011: 7), a few boats still managed to trickle out of Zarzis, and it is those same small-scale networks that on the eve of the dictator's departure inaugurated post-revolutionary *harga*.

By 2015, when I began fieldwork, Zarzis and Tunisia as a whole had reverted to being a node in the production and policing of the EU border (Cassarino 2014; Dini & Giusa 2020). But new generations of men who had been too young to leave in 2011 were seeking to “burn”, if not from the coast of Zarzis itself, then from other Tunisian towns further north. When explaining their motivations and weighing up the risks, they often pointed to the lack of jobs and prospects in Tunisia, and to feeling already “dead” – a sentiment which will be explored in more detail in chapters 4 and 5. By the end of 2017, when I finished fieldwork, most young men I knew who had been wanting to leave had done so. Despite migration having been part of life in Zarzis

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<sup>26</sup> The Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) estimates the total number of Tunisians who reached Italian shores in 2011 to be around 35,000 people – this figure does not include those who disappeared or who died along the way (FTDES 2017: 6).

for generations, though, the emergence and persistence - and peculiarities - of this current irregularised<sup>27</sup> mode of movement had given rise to myriad moral anxieties and blame allocations among its inhabitants, and particularly across different cohorts of migrants. Older men at times were accusing younger ones of having caved in to immoral, foreign aspirations, and were differentiating their own earlier migration as being founded on more traditional and honourable moralities.<sup>28</sup>

As a corrective to negative media portrayals in Europe of “clandestine migrants” – reinvigorated after 2011, when arrivals from Tunisia and Libya to Italy were framed as an “invasion” – the *harga* has come to be depicted by a number of scholars as a courageous event, and even as a continuation of the revolution itself in the case of Tunisia (Garelli, Sossi and Tazzioli 2013). Some *harraga* themselves emphasise that their desire for freedom of movement and their enactment of it through the *harga* constitutes part of what they fought for during the revolution (Giusa 2018). Yet, at least in Zarzis, I found a more ambivalent and uncomfortable affective condition, fraught with backbiting, misunderstandings, and “ugly feelings” (Ngai 2005), existing alongside the excitement and hopes that also characterise the “burning”. The *harga* is far from being a morally straightforward matter for the community from which it originates. It is understood to be contagious – and at least during the revolution as euphorically so. It is also seen as the only way of escaping social death. At the same time, it is also likened to a disease, a virus, an unhealthy obsession, with the *harraga* often described as *marid*, ill.

This chapter will focus on the history of migration in the Central Mediterranean as remembered and experienced by people in and from Zarzis. It will work through the recent history of Tunisia and that of migration from Zarzis to Europe in tandem, so as better to grasp the spectrum of emotions held by different generations regarding the *harga* and *karama* (dignity). I begin by showing how Zarzis’s reputation as an emigration town with a history of particular relations to the former French colonisers makes it a target of resentment and stereotypes both prior to and

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<sup>27</sup> I use the term “irregularised migration” to describe the *harga* in order to draw attention to the fact that succeeding European Union visa regulations and border security measures have, over the past twenty-five years, shut off regular and safe travel options to the EU for the vast majority of citizens of African countries. For discussions on the use of this and other terms to describe this type of travel and travellers see: Andersson (2014); Schindel (2016); Stierl (2016).

<sup>28</sup> Generational clashes and continuities regarding migration and the notion of a dignified life will be explored in more detail in chapter 5.

within Tunisia's post-revolutionary political context. For their part, the residents of Zarzis invert these critiques to portray their migration as a survival strategy in the face of political, economic and social marginalisation. Moving in through concentric ripples of accusations, I turn next to generational dynamics within Zarzis itself. By focusing on the life trajectories of different generations of men from Zarzis prior to the tightening of European Union borders in the 1990s, the second half of the chapter explores the historical scales that have made migration integral to life in this south-eastern Tunisian town.

Debates over what leading a dignified life (*hayet karima*) means, and what forces might be encroaching on it, reflect broader political and moral discourses prevalent during different historical phases in Tunisia. From the subjection and exploitation of French colonisation, to independence and President Bourguiba's pragmatic, West-leaning, and yet relatively egalitarian ethos – accompanied by an effort to diminish the importance of religious and tribal affiliations in favour of the state's single-party-led “modernisation”, “development” and universal education – through to Ben Ali's predatory neoliberal, clientelist approach, to the 2011 revolution calling for dignity and freedom, the values and ideals defining a meaningful and dignified existence continue to be negotiated. The themes of (in)equality and (in)dependence, as well as struggles for recognition and responsibility allocation, emerge as central to different generations' understandings of themselves and of their drives for both political change and the right to undertake Mediterranean crossings.

Accusations levelled against young men for their presumed immoral motivations for wanting the *harga* – and, as will be seen in the next chapters, against mothers and wives-to-be who are believed to be pushing them to “burn” – uncover the moral policing decreeing what aspirations are deemed legitimate. Valuations as to what a dignified life, and consequently also what a “sufficient life” (Mehtta 2019), may entail, also arise as part of these accusations. These will highlight the moments of “moral breakdown” (Zigon 2007) that are at the core of the *harga* and that feed into young men's hopes of reproducing a socially acceptable way of life in Zarzis. By untangling how, when and by whom morally loaded accusations are deployed, and who is deemed a worthy migrant and member of the community, the *harga* is exposed as a potentially subversive act. Instead of accusations serving as “a nice little weapon of the weak” (Robertson 2001:1), responsibility for the *harga* is ultimately felt to fall on the shoulders of those who

desired it. This deflects critiques of structural factors<sup>29</sup> that curtail access to a dignified life, and that were at the heart of both different generations' migratory projects and of the Tunisian revolution.

## **Malaise surrounding migration and closeness to the West**

### *The cunning 'Akkara and other migrant stereotypes*

The focus of my research and my choice of field-site were unsurprising to Tunisians: of course I had gone to Zarzis to study migration, that's where the *harga* kicked off after the revolution, and the 'Akkara – the tribe that calls Zarzis home – had been migrating to France for generations.<sup>30</sup> Yet these frequent validations of my fieldwork strategy were often coupled with warnings on the part of other Tunisians, since, as I would soon learn, the 'Akkara had a bad reputation. “‘*Akkara makkara biya'een attmar bil hara*””: the cunning<sup>31</sup> 'Akkara sell dates by the four, meaning that they are calculating businessmen ready to cheat you and sell you a small quantity of goods for extortionate amounts of money. I was first told this saying by a retired engineer in the capital city of Tunis whose sister had married an 'Akkara, and who only half-jokingly wanted to let me know that he believed the other side of the coin of their reputation as successful migrants was these dishonest and conniving moral propensities. Other stereotypes that I heard about the 'Akkara involved their being vulgar, full of braggadocio, uncivilised and uneducated, their women loud.<sup>32</sup> These negative attributes were also attached to people from

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<sup>29</sup> Accusations of greed result in a similar dynamic of offloading of responsibility from the structural to the individual in the context of an Australian boom-and-bust mining town, see Dahlgren (2019). For an exploration of the politics of accusation, see also the Introduction to *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*'s Special Issue edited by Hughes, Mehtta, Bresciani and Strange (2019).

<sup>30</sup> Tunisia has a large diaspora. Official statistics for 2017 reveal that almost 12% of the country's population reside abroad, and around 58% in France. This data does not include undocumented persons living abroad, nor does it take into account Tunisian citizens who are not registered with their consulate, so it is to be understood as merely a baseline figure. See: <http://data.migration.nat.tn/fr/data/portal>; <http://www.ins.nat.tn/fr/themes/population>.

<sup>31</sup> The word *makkara* comes from the Classical Arabic word *makr*, meaning ruse.

<sup>32</sup> In Tunisia, stereotypes about different tribes, regions and cities abound. The inhabitants of Sfax, for instance, are said to be cheap and stingy, those of Gabes supposedly eat dogs, the people of Jendouba are seen as bandits, and so on.

regions of the interior and of southern Tunisia more generally by those from the wealthier coastal cities of the north,<sup>33</sup> not unlike the coupling of state-induced marginalisation with class and gender-based typecasting in the UK (Skeggs 2005).

As Mabrouk writes, before the term *harraga* started being used to describe irregular migrants in the early 1990s, the term *zmigri* – from the French word *immigré* (immigrant) – was used throughout Tunisia from the late 1970s to stigmatise poorly educated individuals who had emigrated to Europe (2010: 246). The *zmigri* in popular imaginary was an uncouth man who returned to Tunisia from France or Europe employing foreign words, dress and mannerisms and pretending to be of a higher status than he truly is. They were often accused of having become disconnected from local realities and of having bought into French ways of life, foreign values and concerns. “If the *zmigri* are successful abroad though, there is always a bit of jealousy among the community in the *bled*”, pointed out a friend from Tunis, implying that as much as people may criticise and ridicule the *zmigri*, they can also be somewhat admired.<sup>34</sup> In small villages, such as the one where Mabrouk carried out research in the governorate of Mahdia, situated on the coast in central Tunisia, he argues that the *harraga* have managed to shake off most of the downgrading stereotypes attached to their predecessors the *zmigri*, and have gained in social standing and respectability. The main difference between these two sets of emigrants, Mabrouk contends, is that the former – also known as the *jama't franza*, the French community, a group who in his field-site had left the village in the 1970s – view their migration as an individual initiative, while the latter feel, and are perceived, as part of a group with a collective identity and project by virtue of having done the *harga* (ibid).

Meddeb (2012: 333) echoes this argument in his discussion of the *harga* in the late 2000s from the south-eastern governorate of Medenine, of which Zarzis is part. In Zarzis, a much bigger town than the one where Mabrouk worked, whose population of 75,000 is estimated by locals to almost double in the summer months when families return from Europe for the holidays, I rarely heard the word *zmigri*. This is perhaps because a large number of ‘Akkara were or had

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<sup>33</sup> See Gherib (2017) for a historicized discussion of these inequalities. Both the introduction to this thesis and this chapter, however, aim to nuance this often taken for granted disparity between the wealthier north and coastal regions, and the marginalised interior and south of the country.

<sup>34</sup> Being Italian, this caricature of the *zmigri* reminded me of the young Neapolitan “wannabe” American described in 1956 by Renato Carosone in the famous song *Tu vuò fà l'americano*. Italians who dress and act American are poked fun at in the song, but are also somewhat admired, similarly to the *zmigri*.

been emigrants. So many men from older generations had worked abroad and so many younger men had done the *harga* that migration for both groups had come to be viewed as a generational movement, and it was difficult to draw firm lines between cohorts of migrants. It was challenging in Zarzis to ascertain if and when former *harraga* came to be viewed as being part of the *jama't franza* (the group belonging to France). As will be explored later, as well as in chapter 5, the two categories were not so clear cut in people's accusatory discourses nor in their expressions of belonging, and thus both categories remained powerful yet ambiguous referents.

The assumption that undocumented Tunisians in Europe were uneducated, however, stuck. “*Ma 'andhumsh niveau*”, meaning they don't have a decent level of studies, is a statement I often heard from people in Tunis with a university degree, alleging that the *harraga* had likely dropped out of school in year eight (at fourteen), or at most had barely made it through high school, but had probably failed their baccalaureate, and were definitely not members of the elite. Unlike the *zmigri*, the *harraga* are understood to be *hors la loi* (outlaws), *khuruqat* (violators of rules). The term *harraga* itself comes from the classical Arabic word *haraq*, to burn, which is used metaphorically in Tunisian dialect to mean both “a voluntary and intentional transgression of laws (*griller* [burning] a red light)”, and “the refusal of conventional rhythm, the usage of shorter routes to reach an objective, taking shortcuts (*brûler* [burning] the steps)” (Mabrouk 2010: 247, my translation). Thus, accusations against the *harraga* of being an ignorant group persisted despite unemployed university graduates – who played an important role in the 2011 revolution (Honwana 2013: 59) – also increasingly travelling to Europe via the *harga*, unable to obtain visas, while many others become undocumented in Europe after having overstayed their student visas (Natter 2015, Mabrouk 2010: 249).

### *Revolutionary expectations*

Men from other Tunisian towns who had done the *harga* in 2011 levelled additional accusations at the 'Akkara: the Zarzis diaspora in France were, according to them, stingy, exploitative, and inclined to fend only for themselves. Speaking from experience, these men felt that the 'Akkara who had lived abroad for many years had not been willing to help other Tunisian newcomers, whom they instead sometimes exploited by giving them lowly paid jobs in their pizzerias or restaurants – the 'Akkara in France being known for having specialised in the catering sector. The version I heard from the *Zarzisiens de France* was that in 2011 they

had been overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people arriving in a very short period of time. There were simply too many Tunisians in need of help, so they tried to do what they could for cousins and family members first. These accusations of not lending a hand to fellow Tunisians in need, though, weighed not only on the shoulders of the ‘Akkara community in France but also on those of the Tunisian diaspora more generally. The diaspora’s solidarity towards and readiness to help the mostly young Tunisian men who had done the *harga* in the immediate aftermath of the revolution was, in the opinion of some *harraga*, sorely lacking.<sup>35</sup>

These 2011 *harraga* themselves, however, had their own share of allegations aimed back at them by Tunisians wary of the *harga*, by the diaspora, and by European media and political discourse. More educated and wealthier Tunisians sometimes felt that the obsession of the lower classes with the *harga* was rather unpatriotic. They recounted to me that they were taken aback by the fact that the *harraga* and their families rarely seemed to express remorse for breaking the law and seemed to have no regard for the Tunisian state and the future of its people. Why did they leave after the revolution? Weren’t they interested in making a change in their country? These questions were echoed by numerous international commentators covering the events of the revolution and its aftermath, who often also amplified the opinions of right-wing Italian politicians portraying the *harraga* as “invaders, criminals, and even potential terrorists”, as opposed to depicting them as revolutionaries (Giusa 2018: 104).

In neighbouring Algeria, politicians have accused the *harraga* of being lazy youngsters lacking in patriotism, and have likened them to criminals and to kamikazes, with religious authorities going as far as issuing a *fatwa* (a religious legal judgement) on the *harga* equating it to suicide, and thus to a grave sin (Souiah 2012; 2014). Souiah argues that these political discourses place responsibility for the *harga* on the personal choices of the *harraga* themselves and of their families, in an attempt to divert attention away from the Algerian government’s failure to tackle youth unemployment and malaise. An analogous mechanism of offloading responsibility from the structural to the individual – or to the family, or to broad categories such as “mothers”,

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<sup>35</sup> The film *Emirs au Pays des Merveilles* by Ahmed Jlassi highlights the difficulties faced by the large numbers of young Tunisian men who arrived in France (via the *harga* to Italy) undocumented during the first months of 2011. Some of them voice not finding the support of the Tunisian community that they had expected once in Paris. Many resorted to living in squats or to sleeping rough for prolonged periods.

“wives-to-be”, or “young men” – also materialises in allegations of blame among the inhabitants of Zarzis, as will be shown in this chapter, as well as in chapters 4 and 5.

While in Tunisia condemnations of this sort by public and political figures have not been as intense as in Algeria, the *harga* was and remains criminalised and negatively portrayed by the media. In 2004, with the support of European states, the Ben Ali regime introduced Law 2004-6 to crack down on smuggling and irregular migration. This law resulted in criminalising anyone – including family members, lawyers and doctors – involved in aiding – even if unpaid or inadvertently – a person’s undocumented entry or exit from Tunisian territory (Natter 2015; Cassarino 2018: 299). Public discourse accordingly portrayed the *harga* phenomenon as something carried out by delinquents, and thus as necessitating sanctions (Mabrouk 2010: 10). From then on, similarly to the Algerian case, the fight against so-called “illegal” migration allowed the regime to re-direct attention away from the root causes of emigration – “under-employment, poverty, social discontent and political violence” – focusing instead on a “paternalistic and infantilising” image of the *harraga* as blinded by dreams of a European El-Dorado (Cassarino 2018: 298-299, my translation). The myth of Tunisia’s “economic miracle” depended, in part, on depicting migrating unemployed youth as lawbreakers and dupes, as opposed to their movement being read as proof of the hollowness of this discourse of financial growth, masking deep-seated corruption, patronage and economic malaise (Hibou 1999, 2011). Through this law, Tunisian authorities also essentially widened the scope for deviance, thereby extending their capacity for dominating the population through fear (Meddeb 2012: 389, cited in Cassarino 2018: 299).

The advent of the revolution allowed, on the one hand, for a more overtly politicised consciousness on the part of the *harraga*, while on the other it opened up the possibility for public debate in Tunisia to include migration alongside other calls for change and justice. These accusations of criminal, simple-minded, and potentially unpatriotic behaviour, however, continued to be levelled against those looking to make a living abroad via the *harga* even after the overthrow of Ben Ali.

### *Border zones and higher powers*

There was another set of allegations levelled against the ‘Akkara in particular which had deeper historical roots, and which was seldom spoken about in Zarzis itself. Older generations of

Tunisians I met in Tunis instead made sure to let me know that, under French colonialism, the inhabitants of Zarzis were at times seen as willing to sacrifice their integrity and compromise that of their women in return for political and economic favours. An old song,<sup>36</sup> which resurfaced in football stadiums during matches against the *Espérance de Zarzis* (Hope of Zarzis) team to provoke their supporters, insinuates that the ‘Akkara surrendered the *zewiya* (tomb) of their protector to the French so they could build their military barracks in its place, and did not fight for the honour of their women.

Zarzis had been an important military base and port during the French Protectorate (1881-1956) due to its geopolitical position in the Mediterranean opposite the Italian Pelagie islands, Sicily, and Malta (at the time a British colony), and bordering Tripolitania (which went from Ottoman rule to being an Italian colony in 1912). The land inhabited by the ‘Akkara during the 1800s comprised the coastal area between the peninsula of Zarzis, facing the island of Djerba, and the Bahiret el Bibane lagoon, where a small fort marked the last outpost of the Tunis Regency (Pellissier 1853: 165-167). The ‘Akkara had been given this land by the Bey for having been loyal during a period of succession feuds among the Husainid Dynasty – the family that had been governing Tunisia as part of the Ottoman Empire since 1705. The area where the ‘Akkara settled had long been a porous and fluid frontier zone between the spheres of influence of the Tunisian Beylicate and that of the relatively autonomous Qaramanli dynasty of Ottoman Tripolitania – occupied by Ottoman troops in 1835 to reassert Istanbul’s imperial authority (Perkins 2014: 17). It fitted perfectly Ben Slimane’s (2010) historical description of Ottoman peripheries as belts of land where people could switch allegiances between different powers, employed by Green to argue for understanding “shifting and multiple concepts of the border” as epistemological as well as ontological entities (Green 2012: 578, 580). In the mid-1800s,

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<sup>36</sup> The song is called *Nari ‘ala Jerjis u bnawita* – which can be translated as “my heart goes to Zarzis and its daughters” (*nari* means my fire, and is an exclamation used to express great emotion towards something). The song is thought to be about French colonisation in Zarzis and French men’s abuse of local women. The version sung by renown Tunisian singer Amina Fakheth includes the line “*jau al nasara u haddmu zewitha*”, “the Christians came and destroyed their protector’s tomb”. In Zarzis, however, some argue that the song was originally a poem written by a man from the neighbouring town of Ben Guerdane who attended a Zarzis wedding and was taken aback by the presence of French guests. The story has it that this visitor felt it was shameful for local women to be dancing in front of foreigners, and thus wrote this poem, which nevertheless also praises the riches of Zarzis.

led by a *sheikha* (female local political leader) called Ghalia,<sup>37</sup> the ‘Akkara were involved in struggles against the powers in Tripoli (Pellissier 1853: 165). A more definitive border in south-eastern Tunisia was established only in 1910,<sup>38</sup> while Zarzis continued playing a role in Mediterranean border politics, presently involving Italy and Malta, the European Union, and neighbouring Libya.

In 1881 the French army approached southern Tunisia, working its way down the country to quash the tribal uprisings that arose out of news of the Bey’s submission to French presence through the Bardo Treaty (Perkins 2014: 42) which initiated French colonial rule over the whole territory of the Regency. At this point neighbouring tribes are said to have converged in Zarzis in order to organise and challenge the French together. ‘Akkara notables and elders, however, ultimately decided to back out from trying to defend their territory through armed confrontation with the French, realising that it would have been an unequal battle leading to considerable loss of life and defeat, as had been the case especially in Sfax (Green 1978: 130). Some of the elderly and middle-aged men who recounted this history to me bemoaned that the song mentioned above depicts the ‘Akkara in a negative light, without acknowledging that this move spared many lives in the region and that it had ultimately been a wise call on the part of the ‘Akkara. The French thus settled in Zarzis by coming to an agreement with local notables, building their military base near the port, close to the *zewiya* of Sidi Kbir,<sup>39</sup> as well as building schools and a Christian cemetery<sup>40</sup> – vestiges of colonialism standing repurposed or abandoned to this day.

### *(In)dependence and pragmatism*

In post-independence Tunisian politics, these accusations of complicity with the French translate into some ‘Akkara politicians having a reputation for being pragmatic and

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<sup>37</sup> Historian Ahmed M’Charek, a native of Zarzis, pointed out in conversation that to this day Ghalia remains a popular name among ‘Akkara women, and for a time so was the name Chouikha – small *sheikha* – in honour and memory of *sheikha* Ghalia.

<sup>38</sup> Discussions with historian Chiara Pagano were crucial in helping me understand the history and relevance of the borderlands inhabited by the ‘Akkara.

<sup>39</sup> I was not able to establish during fieldwork whether another *zewiya* had indeed been destroyed in the process of building the French military base.

<sup>40</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 will explain in more detail the significance and afterlives of this and other cemeteries in Zarzis.

opportunistic. In contrast with politicians from the neighbouring island of Djerba, known for having contested the rule of Bourguiba by virtue of siding with his main opponent (and their fellow islander) Ben Youssef (see below), ‘Akkara politicians are viewed as coveting positions of power but failing directly to confront the rule of either the dictatorships of Bourguiba or Ben ‘Ali. The ‘Akkara are known for having been the only southern tribe to have sided with Bourguiba over Ben Youssef, although, as local historical turned (rather Arab nationalist) politician Salem Labiadh argues, opinions among the population of Zarzis were divided on the subject (2017: 176). ‘Akkara politicians are instead seen as pursuing agendas solely for the benefit of their own.<sup>41</sup> At national and international scales, Habib Bourguiba himself, Tunisia’s first president after independence, was also accused of cynical pragmatism by his chief rival, Salah Ben Youssef, and other opponents within the Neo-Destour<sup>42</sup> party and other Arab nations. He was seen as having pursued his country’s interests over solidarity with other Arab states, of turning his back on religious schooling and traditional ways of life, and of being suspiciously close to the former French colonisers.

Bourguiba remained in power from 1956 to 1987, when he was overthrown in a “medical coup d’état (...) summarily declared too ill to rule” by Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali, who in turn was ousted twenty-three years later by the 2011 revolution (Hibou 2011: xiv). Tunisia’s struggle for independence itself had been characterised by two opposing visions within the Neo-Destour party for the future of the nation, one of which, Bourguiba’s, “was laying the groundwork for the preservation of a strong, if decidedly altered, relationship between Tunisia and France” (Perkins 2014: 131). While Bourguiba, a native of the north-eastern coastal town of Monastir, was “disposed to promote social development according to Western paradigms”, Ben Youssef, from the southern island of Djerba, was drawn to Arab nationalism and was open to the party collaborating with the Islamic religious establishment (Wolf 2017: 22). In 1954, Bourguiba, who emerged on top in this leadership clash, started engaging in dialogue with the French to draft an internal autonomy convention, deeming it preferable to achieve this first so as to

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<sup>41</sup> The ‘Akkara politicians usually called out for this are Abderrahman Bouaouaja and Ahmed Friaa, although some inhabitants of Zarzis read these accusations as stemming from the jealousies of Tunisians from other southern cities who do not count prominent politicians in their midst.

<sup>42</sup> Destour – the French spelling of *dustur*, which has become the standard spelling for the Neo-Destour party – means constitution in Arabic.

progressively move towards full independence when circumstances allowed.<sup>43</sup> This “political realism” and “step-by-step” approach (Perkins 2014: 132) was promoted as an alternative to revolutionary insurrection, with Tunisia proposing itself as mediator for African countries that had not yet achieved independence (Roggero 2019: 129, 130).

Ben Youssef, who was popular throughout the country, but especially in the west and in the south, however criticised this approach. In Zarzis, Bourguiba is commonly believed to have sold off the riches of Tunisia to the French during independence negotiations. These included Zarzis’s saltworks, run by the majority French owned company Cotusal, which to this day pays a symbolic 1 French Franc per hectare to extract salt (Beji Okkez 2018; Blaise 2019).<sup>44</sup> Reconciliation between the two men and between the different futures they envisaged for Tunisia became increasingly impossible, leading the country to the brink of civil war. Crucially, “[i]t was no coincidence that the areas where the Yusufist threat lingered longest were the most economically depressed of the country” (Perkins 2014: 134). Yet the gap in prosperity between the wealthier capital and coastal areas of the north, and the impoverished interior and southern regions, was a severe issue that Bourguiba – and later Ben Ali – did little to address, and in some cases exacerbated.

### *Scales of accusations of betrayal*

Meanwhile, at international level, having taken his distance from Gamal Abdel Nasser – Egypt’s president and advocate of the socialist pan-Arab cause – Tunisia became somewhat isolated from the League of Arab States, which tended, in unison with other newly independent African and Asian nations, to criticise its President’s proximity to its former colonisers and to the USA. During the Cold War, the country had remained aligned with the West, whose leaders instead praised Bourguiba’s “moderate and liberal views, animated by a good dose of pragmatism” (Roggero 2019: 128, my translation). In 1961, unexpectedly for his Western

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<sup>43</sup> Bourguiba understood that events taking place in other parts of the French empire, such as “the French defeat in Indochina, the outbreak of revolution in Algeria, and the strength of opposition to decolonization” influenced France’s position vis-à-vis granting Tunisia internal autonomy instead of independence (Perkins 2014: 132), which led him to take the agreement. It is important to note in contrast that Algerian independence was achieved only after a brutal and lengthy war lasting from 1954 to 1962, see McDougall (2017).

<sup>44</sup> Chapter 2 will discuss in more detail the ramifications of this post-colonial injustice, and how it relates to the ways in which people allocate responsibility for border deaths in the Mediterranean onto Europe.

allies, Bourguiba decided, defining it a final anticolonial struggle, to expel the French from the naval military base they had retained in the city of Bizerte – a port city of great importance for France, situated on the north-western coast facing Sardinia, close to the Algerian border. This venture, for which Tunisians were ill-prepared, cost 700 lives. A month later, Bourguiba declared that the battle of Bizerte disproved the myth of his having sold out to the West (Roggero 2014: 131). He wished this gesture to be interpreted as a sign that Tunisia should be viewed as neutral rather than pro-West in the Cold War, and that he was not to be thought of as a friend of France turning his back on his Arab brothers. Economic assistance from France – which had already been suspended between 1957 and 1963 as a result of Tunisia hosting the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale, which on Bourguiba's part had in itself been intended “in part to outflank ben Yusuf” (Perkins 2014: 146) – was nevertheless much needed. A year after the Battle of Bizerte, relations with France were therefore re-established (Roggero 2019: 179), the Tunisian economy having managed to stay afloat in this period of rupture only thanks to funds coming from the United States (Perkins 2014: 146, 150).

Bourguiba, a paternalistic dictator referred to as the Supreme Combatant (*al mujahid al akbar*), or as the leader (*al za'im*), in turn used accusations of treason and nostalgia for the colonial past against any opposition to his all-encompassing leadership. He was simultaneously president, prime minister, and head of the *parti unique* (single party). Anti-French sentiment had allowed him to galvanise the population around the nationalist cause during independence (Perkins 2014), but had then turned into a way of justifying oppression as the only possible form of protection for the nation. As Hélé Béji argues in *Désenchantement national – Essai sur la décolonisation* (National disenchantment – Essay on decolonisation), Bourguiba embraced progress as an ideology, deeming democracy an impediment to development, and thus necessitating the re-direction of anti-colonial values towards authoritarianism. “We were prisoners of our national liberation, and whispering against it was necessarily seen as the symptom of betrayal in favour of the enemy, of a guilty nostalgia for the colonial order. To dare to critique the heroes of national liberation was lived even by the most rebellious of spirits with an irrepressible feeling of guilt, even when this critique slipped from judicial sanctions, or from the heavy punishment of the State Security Court (*Cour de Sûreté de l'État*).” (2014 [1982]: 12, my translation).

Jocelyne Dakhlia, in thinking through why the 2011 revolution in Tunisia came as such a surprise to the rest of the world, and why the country had been ignored for so long as a political

subject, considers the reasons that might have contributed to the refrain of the Tunisian diaspora in Europe, of which she is part, from “‘articulating’, verbalising” the dictatorship. Bourguiba and later Ben Ali were endorsed by European states and by the US, where their regimes were often praised, and rarely thought of as dictatorships. “Caution is a primary explicative factor, but considerations surrounding personal and national pride played a role as well, being particularly alive in a formerly colonised country and in the relationship to the ex-colony (...) To acknowledge the dictatorship was therefore to bestow a form of failure to the independent nation, which we refused to admit in the face of the world.” (2011: 13, my translation).<sup>45</sup>

As will be explored in the next sections, some of these stereotypes and negative affects surrounding migration and closeness to the French and the West discussed above are also part of the moral ambivalences that the ‘Akkara themselves hold about the *harga*. There is something about accusations of being vulgar, of showing off wealth, and of being selfish and cunning, which go against people’s sense of what it means to be a decent person and a loyal Tunisian. These accusations are not just about the moral worth of the ‘Akkara: they seem to point to an encroachment on the propriety of other Tunisians too, and have very much to do with the proximity of the former to more powerful foreigners and a willingness to be pragmatic and to seek futures and fortunes abroad.

### **The *longue durée* of Zarzis-Europe migration**

Min gabal al ista3mar manitini	During colonialism you kept my hopes up
U min ba3d al istaqlal khallitini	After independence you left me
U min ba3d al arba3tash suti b7a7	After the 14 <sup>th</sup> [the revolution] my voice became hoarse

*Chbik nsitini*, Yasser Jradi

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<sup>45</sup> « La prudence est un facteur explicatif premier, mais des considérations de fierté personnelle et nationale jouent aussi, particulièrement vives et sensibles dans un pays anciennement colonisé et dans le rapport à l’ex-colonie (...) Concéder la dictature était donc consacrer une forme d’échec de la nation indépendante, ce à quoi l’on se refusait face au monde. » (Dakhliya 2011: 13)

For their part, the ‘Akkara return the (non)compliment by arguing that Tunis and succeeding central governments have always hoarded wealth for themselves, and that they were never interested in developing the south and addressing the region’s dire economic situation.<sup>46</sup> People in Zarzis often complain about being discriminated against when they go to Tunis. They feel they are treated as inferiors and contend that people in the capital mistake them for Libyans because of their accent, and so try to over-charge and disrespect them – Libyans in Tunisia were often assumed to be wealthier and not necessarily knowledgeable about local prices. Very few young men from Zarzis would aspire to migrate to Tunis for work, or to other cities in Tunisia, although some do out of necessity. Their hopes and desires were directed instead towards France, following in the steps of the relatively well-established labour and life-cycle paths traced before them by their grandfathers, fathers, uncles, and at times even cousins and older brothers.

### *Grandfathers*

Zarzis sprawls on a wide strip of sand dotted with olive trees and elaborate villas: visual reminders that the town’s relative affluence stems from a rooted history of emigration. In the neighbourhood where I lived, half of the houses were either under construction, waiting for money to be sent from Europe to resume work, or lay empty for most of the year, waiting to be populated in the summer months by returning families. Baba al Hajj, the grandfather of the family I stayed with, like most of the elderly men of his generation who had worked abroad, drove to the mosque for his five daily prayers on a scooter fuelled by his French pension. Maghrebi emigration to Europe has a long history dating back to the colonial period and the World Wars, during which North African men were called to replace the French workforce or to join in France’s war efforts (Mabrouk 2010). Tunisians, however, unlike Moroccans and Algerians, did not begin emigrating to France in significant numbers during colonialism, while more French settlers started arriving from the opposite shores (Natter 2015).<sup>47</sup> The Hajj’s generation and several subsequent ones had been able to migrate to France – and, to a smaller

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<sup>46</sup> This knowledge that central government neglected the interior and the south of the country is also common in other parts of Tunisia, see for example documentary *Couscous: Seeds of Dignity* by Habib Ayeb.

<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that the pre-colonial period in the Central Mediterranean witnessed the migration of “tens of thousands of people, mostly of humble social status” from Sicily, Sardinia, Malta, and Greece to Tunisia and to other destinations in North Africa and the Levant (Clancy-Smith 2011: 3). The arrival of more French settlers during colonialism partly eclipsed this history of north-south migration in the Mediterranean.

extent, to other European countries – either spontaneously or thanks to bilateral post-independence labour agreements that Tunisia signed with different European states: “first with France (1963), then Germany (1965), Belgium (1969), and the Netherlands (1971)” (Natter 2015). Starting from the 1960s, migration to the more prosperous neighbouring Libya from Tunisia also became common, albeit mostly undocumented (Mabrouk 2010: 103).

Men of similar age to Baba al Hajj’s, born in the 1920s and 1930s under the French Protectorate, were thus the most senior substantial cohort to have started to emigrate. Since these men were able to come and go without visas, they could split their time between Europe and Tunisia as they saw fit, and their wives and children rarely joined them to live abroad. The Hajj was the oldest of six siblings, and out of four brothers, three had families in Zarzis but lived and worked for part or most of the year in the Paris region. Umm Akri, the Hajj’s wife, had been the one to push him to go to France.<sup>48</sup> In Zarzis he had been working as a caretaker in the primary school that her father – a local notable – had contributed to building, but his income was insufficient to sustain their family of nine. After the umpteenth dispute he had had with the headmaster over his request to be officially employed – he had been working there for years without being declared and thus without any social security – he was fired. One of the Hajj’s younger brothers was already working in France, so Umm Akri insisted and begged – in her words – that he go too.

While Umm Akri had travelled to France to visit him, they had never considered moving the family and bringing up the children abroad, nor had they needed to, since safe and legal circular migration between the two countries was made viable by the above-mentioned agreements. The possibility for this kind of documented migration to France and to most other European states, however, ended in 1973 with the oil crisis and the economic difficulties that ensued (Mabrouk 2010: 105). Many European states “restricted entry requirements for low-skilled workers”, thereby inaugurating the “increasingly permanent settlement” of Tunisians, aided in turn by freshly-drawn “legislation in European states [that] enshrined migrants’ right to family reunification” (Natter 2015). Circular migration remained popular between Tunisia and Italy up to the 1990s, as the two countries signed a labour agreement in 1984, transforming Italy into an important destination country, as opposed to a stop-over for migrants making their way to France, Belgium, Germany or the Netherlands (Meddeb 2011: 4). From Zarzis, however, it

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<sup>48</sup> More of Umm Akri’s memories related to her husband’s migration are explored in the introduction to the thesis.

was principally men who continued migrating – mainly to France – with the aid of established family networks. As I was told by an ‘Akkara friend whose father is a fisherman, and whose parents had thus first moved to the Sicilian-Tunisian fishing town of Mazara del Vallo,<sup>49</sup> and then to a coastal village of the Marche region in central Italy, “in Zarzis, Italy is viewed as second rate, an option for losers (*sfigati*) compared to France.”

### *Education migration*

Among the generation following the grandfathers’ were those who benefitted from President Bourguiba’s universal schooling efforts, which enabled them to first move out of Zarzis on scholarships to bigger nearby cities such as Gabes for high school, and then to Tunis or France for their university degrees. Despite Arabic being the official language of the new nation, “we were a francophone generation right from the start”, recalled one of these men, now a retired university professor residing in Tunis, thinking back to the French military schoolmasters of his all-boys primary school in Zarzis. The main drives of Bourguiba’s rule were modernisation and development. To this end, he sought to provide primary schooling to all children by building new schools, changing the curriculum, and training more teachers. Foreign instructors were needed after independence, though, to supplement an insufficient number of Tunisian teachers. As a result, a coupling of the Neo-Destour party’s recognition that retaining French as one of the languages of education would benefit economic development and would constitute “a bridge to the world”, and Bourguiba’s “disinclination to recruit educators from Arab countries with quite divergent political outlooks, made some instruction in French inevitable.” (Perkins 2014: 144).<sup>50</sup>

The renowned Zaytuna mosque-university – one of the oldest in the history of Islam, where prominent Arab thinkers such as Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) studied – was also placed under the Ministry of Education right after independence, to be then turned into the theology faculty of the state-run University of Tunis, thereby separating higher academic education from the

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<sup>49</sup> Mazara del Vallo has a large Tunisian population and was home to one of the Mediterranean’s largest fishing fleets. See Ben Yehoyada (2017) for the ways in which its inhabitants contribute to transnational region formation across the Central Mediterranean.

<sup>50</sup> This contrasts with how the education system developed in neighbouring Algeria, where teachers from Egypt and the Levant were recruited with an aim to foreground Arabic in schooling – see Benrabah (2013).

religious establishment. This, together with other major changes – such as the incorporation of *sharia* courts into the state’s judicial system, the state’s take-over of *habus* land, mosques, Quranic schools and property, and the introduction of the Personal Status Code granting more equitable rights to women<sup>51</sup> – rendered some conservative Muslims “alienated from the regime”, and made them “sullenly despise it, convinced that the abandonment of traditional values and practices lay at the root of all subsequent political, social, and economic troubles” (Perkins 2014: 211). Ben Ali continued upholding the previous regime’s stances with regards to women’s rights, the protection of Jewish citizens, development, and the fight against political Islam. This allowed for continuity in the eyes of supportive Western states, who carried on ignoring both dictatorships’ curtailing of their citizens’ freedom, human rights abuses, and brutal repression of political opponents such as leftists and Islamists.

As Dakhliya argues, however, Bourguiba was not pursuing *laïcité* (secularism) as an imitation of the West. Following in the steps of Atatürk’s reforms in 1920s Turkey, Bourguiba adopted “modernist authoritarian positions” vis-à-vis women and the role of religion in public life while engaging with debates unfolding within the wider Islamic world, justifying these positions as forms of *ijtihad* (interpretation of religious law) necessary to overcome what he viewed as underdevelopment (Dakhliya 2011: 45, 46, 47). Nor was he a feminist: women were being granted more rights only as part of the Supreme Combatant’s conception of the workings of social evolution, and his belief that “the emergence of a new citizen, dignified [*digne*] and responsible, passes through the education of the mothers of citizens” (Dakhliya 2011: 46, my translation). The project of developing Tunisia was therefore understood to entail extending education to women. As will be explored in chapters 4 and 5, women in Zarzis are often accused by older and middle-aged men – many of whom lived in France and left the care of their children to their wives back in Tunisia – of having spurred the *harga* obsession in the minds of their sons by failing to encourage them in their studies, instead urging them to get to France in order to make more money.

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<sup>51</sup> These included setting an age minimum for marriage, the banning of polygyny, the end of the male right of repudiation, women’s ability to initiate divorce and necessitating their approval in arranged marriages, and more entitlements in terms of child custody and inheritance (Perkins 2014: 140). Bourguiba’s Personal Status Code “represented the most revolutionary such legislation in the Muslim world since the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the Turkey of the 1920s.” (Perkins 2014: 141).

This generation of men, now in their late fifties, sixties and seventies, were, similarly to Bourguiba, fully bilingual and for the most part not assiduously practising Muslims, yet often enthusiastically proud of their history, traditions and Tunisian identity. They formed an engaged group of ‘intellectuals’ in Zarzis, often bemoaning the lower standards of contemporary Tunisian education, and younger generations’ seeming indifference for it. Despite many having lived abroad for some or most of their lives, this group maintained an active interest in local politics and travelled back to Zarzis frequently. The higher education trajectories to France of this generation, however, are often overlooked in academic literature focusing on migration from North Africa to Europe – Maghrebi migration remaining predominantly studied through the lenses of labour migration. This lack of emphasis might also be due to the fact that, unlike with other newly independent African nations which used intergovernmental agreements (see Schenk 2017), there was less overt publicity about encouraging young Tunisians to pursue higher education in France in order to then return and contribute to Bourguiba’s development efforts. As Hendrickson highlights, universities were symbols of “modernity and progress” for Bourguiba, who viewed the “success of decolonization” as linked to the numbers who enrolled in the University of Tunis during the 1960s, in which the government invested considerable funds (2012: 115, 113). Tunisian students in France had nevertheless constituted an important community during the struggle for independence by forming the UGET (Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie – General Union of Tunisia’s Students), founded as an underground organisation in Paris in 1952 (Hendrickson 2012: 114). In 1963, during Bourguiba’s rule, the left-wing group Perspectives was also created among Tunisian students and professors in Paris, in part due to their disappointment in the UGET’s alignment with the regime, becoming an important dissident voice. It is among these students that “transnational militancy in defense of human rights” began through the establishment of the Comité International pour la Sauvegarde des Droits de l’Homme en Tunisie (International Committee for the Protection of Human Rights in Tunisia), (2012: 120). First of its kind, the organisation was created in the aftermath of violent repression and incarceration of protestors at the University of Tunis.

### *Husbands/Fathers*

Many among the following generations of men were absent from the streets of the *bled* (hometown) for most of the year. Of Baba al Hajj’s seven children, only two had stayed in Zarzis – one daughter and Hedi, who had recently died. The other five had at different times

all moved to work – or, in the case of the other daughter, to join her husband – in the Paris region, where Baba al Hajj himself had worked as a gardener, with two of them, including Habib, travelling back when possible to see their wives and children in Zarzis. Their families lived in well-kept, comfortable villas surrounding Baba al Hajj’s, as was customary. These husbands/fathers, now in their late thirties, forties and fifties, had mainly migrated to France for work, albeit meeting growing difficulties. “With European countries further increasing immigration controls in the early 1990s—in particular after the introduction of French and Italian visa requirements for Tunisians in 1986 and 1990, respectively—many migrants resorted to irregular entry and overstaying” (Natter 2015).

Habib, for instance, who was born in the mid-1960s, had worked on and off in France in his youth as a builder and in the catering sector, able to travel there and back easily by boat or plane. After getting married in the mid-1990s, though, he had started managing the souvenir shop of a big hotel on the island of Djerba – a renowned tourist destination for Europeans which had more hotels and job opportunities than Zarzis, and was just under an hour’s commute from home. The negative repercussions on the Tunisian tourism industry of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, of the war in Afghanistan, and of the 2003 American and British invasion of Iraq, however, as well as the 2002 bomb blast at the synagogue of Djerba, left him as well as many others jobless. When Tunisia’s tourism trade – on which “one out of eight Tunisians depended, directly or indirectly (...) for their livelihoods” (Perkins 2014: 212) – began declining in the early 2000s, the country entered economic crisis, resulting in other jobs also becoming scarcer. The problems that arise from Tunisia’s economy being tied to such a volatile sector that is out of its inhabitants’ control were also strongly felt when I began fieldwork in Zarzis in the summer of 2015, in the aftermath of two terrorist attacks targeting foreign tourists – those at the Bardo Museum in March 2015, and at a Sousse beach resort in June 2015.

Back in the mid-1990s, some of Habib’s peers managed to obtain visas for France thanks to connections and bribes paid at the embassy – part of a wider system of patronage and corruption off which benefited those close to the Ben Ali regime. Others, including Habib, bought flight tickets to Argentina, or to other countries which required no visas for Tunisians, and started their new lives by exiting the airport during the layover in Paris. Most men from this generation had with time managed to regularise their situation in France, although Habib had, to start with, been unable to travel home and see his parents, wife, and children for four years in a row. After

obtaining documents, some men started bringing their families over under family reunification laws, or were hoping to be able to do so in the near future, as was the case for Habib and Afifa, my hosts.

As for younger generations – the cousins and brothers born after the mid-1980s, and therefore becoming teenagers as more restrictive Schengen visa regime became consolidated in the mid-1990s European Union<sup>52</sup> – the *harga* was often the only way to emigrate, and to follow in the shoes of many of their male relatives. When the revolution took off in December 2010, followed by a period of unguarded maritime frontiers, many seized the opportunity and left.<sup>53</sup> Their situation will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters.

### *Sons/brothers – the current generations of migrants*

Between 2015 and 2017, during my fieldwork, numerous young men I knew embarked on the *harga*, including teenagers who had been too young to leave in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, and men who had reached Europe in 2011 but who had since been *expersés* – forcibly repatriated (from the French word *expulsés*). In the summer and autumn of 2017 especially, the *harga* from Tunisian coasts picked up considerably. Adel, a fisherman from Bennana, explained this new ‘wave’ of departures in this way:

It hurts to say, but what are young people doing here? Café, beach, waiting about, if you’re caught smoking a joint you go to prison for a year. Young people gained nothing from the revolution. There is nothing here for them, no jobs, no future, what is Zarzis? I put a chain on the engine of my boat, I’m afraid they’ll steal it one of these days. If young men get desperate, they could do anything, there has only been talk of *Lambadouza* [the Tunisian name for the Italian border island of Lampedusa, where many arrived in 2011] this summer.

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<sup>52</sup> After the mid-1990s, amnesties granting legal status to irregular migrants residing in France and Italy became less frequent (Natter 2015), making it harder for *harraga* to legalise their status, and therefore have access to contracts and benefits, and be able to travel home to Tunisia. For details on how these regularisation amnesties – called *sanatorie* – functioned in Italy, see Tuckett 2018.

<sup>53</sup> These generations’ life stories, including their motivations for moving to Europe, will be discussed in more depth in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Adel was married to a European, and had not therefore joined fifteen of his family members on the *harga* in January 2011. He travelled often to Northern Europe, his wife's original home. Despite some years being better than others, he couldn't think of doing anything but fishing for a living, and married his wife knowing that they both wished to be based in Zarzis. Though holding this rather sympathetic view of the difficult situation young men face in Zarzis, Adel later added:

Syrians don't live well in their country, they are right to try and leave, but for us, for Tunisians, we live well here. But young men want beautiful girls, a new car, they want to smoke Marlboro, and that type of phone, just like their cousins in France who have a nice car. But what are their cousins doing in France? Cocaine? How else are they gaining that kind of money?

Adel's views capture sentiments that I often heard expressed in Zarzis by men and women of different ages regarding their ambivalences towards the *harga* and the dubious motives and lifestyles of the *harraga*. The inhabitants of Zarzis often held contradictory feelings and valuations on the topic of young men wanting to migrate to Europe. On the one hand, like Adel, most felt empathy for the *harraga* cause, expressing an understanding for the difficulties the youth encountered in trying to find a job and make ends meet in Tunisia – a country with high rates of youth unemployment.

Afifa's brother, for example, who worked as a florist in a Paris *banlieue* – and who had brought up his two children there speaking solely French, afraid that they would not be able to integrate and thrive in the schooling system otherwise – had made a trip to Zarzis in January 2017 to install security alarms in his guest house. Just before the revolution, he had invested his savings in buying a villa by the beach to turn into fully equipped flats to rent in the summer season – a venture which had yet to become lucrative due to the downturn tourism had taken in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Having heard from family and friends that robberies to finance the *harga* had started occurring again in Zarzis, he thought it best to fly back for a weekend to try and safeguard his property. During the revolution, almost every house in his neighbourhood (which was adjacent to a main road, and thus of easy access) that belonged to *Zarzisiens de France*, and which was thus uninhabited, had been looted. His own house had been broken into twice in 2011, and he had spent considerable amounts of money fixing broken windows and doors and replacing furniture and appliances.

Looting had been part of the revolution and, as often happens in moments of mass protest (see Osterweil 2014), it was the aspect of the uprisings that the Ben Ali regime honed in on through official media, depicting protestors as “vandals and looters, out for personal gain” (Mabrouk 2011: 632). The use of social media by protestors, showing police brutality happening live, and the releasing of videos denouncing the corruption of the regime – both of which were relayed by foreign satellite media – changed public perception in favour of the uprisings. “In doing so, popular protest eliminated the deviant official narrative that protest was no more than riot by criminals and terrorists and that the brutal and lethal repression practiced by the security forces was legitimate self-defence” (Mabrouk 2011: 632). In 2017, both Adel, who had put a lock on his boat’s engine, and Afifa’s brother with his security system, understood that for the young men who might potentially steal from them, this was the only option for changing their situation, for gathering money fast to pay for a boat out. It was a condition of *misiriya* (a Tunisian adaptation of the Italian word *miseria* or French word *misère*), wretchedness, that both men recognised as systemic. Neither were happy about the eventuality of their property being stolen or broken into, but neither fully blamed the *harraga* themselves for it.



Figure 1.2: “*Bled faqr u miziri*” – country poverty and misery – along a secondary, inland road of Zarzis. February 2017.

### **Conclusion – The morally fraught *harga***

The inhabitants of Zarzis and members of the ‘Akkara diaspora recognised that life had become more expensive in Tunisia since the revolution, and that corruption remained rampant. The general view had it that, while before there was one big thief in power, now there were many smaller ones eating up the country. Accusations of greed, immorality and corruption were thus also levelled against those in power, seen as having betrayed the revolution.<sup>54</sup> People additionally felt that it was deeply unjust of the European Union to impose on their youth this risky and undignified travel mode, and they generally voiced an understanding that this was a

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<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the different social divides that fueled a sentiment that the revolution had been betrayed, see Dakhli 2013.

way for “Europe” to create cheap labour for its own benefit. It thus made sense in the eyes of those who chose to, or had to, remain in Zarzis that the majority of other young men wanted to leave Tunisia, and that the *harga* was often the only way they could do it.

At the same time, though, people tended to be suspicious about the ways in which the *harraga* made money in France, and often passed moral judgements on the potentially immoral factors that might be driving men to leave, such as girls, cars, drugs, and easy money. Comparing Tunisia to other countries that people were fleeing to get to Europe, such as post-2011 war-torn Syria, also led some inhabitants of Zarzis to ponder on whether it was fully justified for young men to want to leave the *bled*, or whether they were simply obsessed with France, *marid* (ill) with the *harga*.<sup>55</sup> As Mehta (2019) shows by exploring accusations of greed levelled against impoverished crab collectors in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, whose economic situations marginally improved in recent years due to new crab export markets to China, these types of accusations often elicit discussions as to what constitutes a “sufficient life”. In Zarzis, these discussions often centred on whether or not a dignified life – *hayet karima* – is attainable in Tunisia. Ben Ali’s regime itself had indeed remained afloat through its second decade of rule by projecting to its citizens and to the outside world an image of Tunisia as a country of middle classes, riding on an “economic miracle” (Hibou 1999), while stifling and invisibilising discontent and the lives of those who were excluded from it. As the Minister of Professional Training and Employment put it in 2002: “no one is hungry in Tunisia; there are no people sleeping under bridges. Tunisians have a roof over their head and a decent income that allows them to handle their basic expenses” (Perkins 2014: 213). Within this vision, the *harraga* were vilified in public discourse, as well as being allowed to leave and bring their discontent elsewhere – migration having served as a “safety valve” for both Bourguiba and Ben Ali (Herbert 2016: 24).

Valuations around the distinction between needs and desires, moral and immoral motivations for wanting to better one’s life chances by migrating, and what kind of life is considered good enough – more than just survival, more than just bearable, but not excessive or sinful – continue coming under scrutiny in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Yet what the basic prerequisites for attaining this dignified life may be, and what instead constitutes indulgence, were topics that

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<sup>55</sup> Elliot (2016) points out that in an emigrant region in rural Morocco men waiting to migrate are also referred to as ill.

lent themselves to diverging interpretations, especially across generations, as the next chapters show. Beyond the question of the *harga*, these divergences can also give us a glimpse into wider debates taking place in Tunisia over what kind of society can, could or should emerge out of the demands that sparked the 2011 revolution.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 1.3: Relics of 2011 *harga* boats on the beach facing the property Afifa’s brother bought just before the revolution. May 2016.

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<sup>56</sup> For more insight into how inter-generational and gender dynamics are playing out in post-revolutionary Tunisia on topics other than the *harga*, see Boutieri (forthcoming).

## Chapter 2

### Blame and responsibility across the Mediterranean

#### Zarzis and the EU border<sup>57</sup>

*August 2015, Zarzis*

- *Alo?*
- *Selam* Dr Mongi. This is Valentina, the Italian student working on migration. I just arrived in Zarzis and was wondering if we could meet to talk about your work with the Tunisian Red Crescent?
- Valentina? Didn't we meet a couple of days ago?
- No, I don't think so, we've been in touch via email...
- Then yesterday I must have met another Valentina-Italian-student-working-on-migration. That's confusing. I guess I'll have to call you "Valentina 2".

Dr Mongi, a pharmacist in his sixties, was the go-to person in Zarzis to find out how migration was being managed in southern Tunisia. As the regional president of the Tunisian Red Crescent (TRC), with which he had been working for over twenty years, he organised the running of migrant and refugee *foyers* (housings) in the Medenine Governorate, on the border with Libya. These housings had been set up with the help of funding from the Swiss Cooperation to lodge undocumented foreign nationals. Some of their guests had been rescued in Tunisian waters by fishermen or by the Garde Nationale Maritime (coastguard) while their boat incurred trouble on its way from Libya to Italy. Others had been found by the regular Garde Nationale<sup>58</sup> either trying to enter Libya from Tunisia in order to make the boat crossing to Italy, or in Tunisian territory after fleeing Libya. Their numbers usually never exceeded a couple of hundred at any one time. Both the IOM (International Organisation for Migration) and the UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency) subcontracted the day-to-day management of these housings,

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<sup>57</sup> Earlier versions of this chapter were published in French in *Critique Internationale* (Zagaria 2019b), and in English in *American Behavioral Scientist* (Zagaria 2019c).

<sup>58</sup> The Garde Nationale is a Tunisian security force run by the Ministry of Interior charged with policing rural and frontier zones.

respectively for migrants and for asylum seekers and refugees,<sup>59</sup> to the TRC, their implementing partner. As a result, during the summer of 2015, while migration became the number one concern for media outlets, politicians and publics in Europe, Dr Mongi was often solicited by researchers and journalists who were arriving in this Tunisian governorate to document departures across the Mediterranean. He was thus in the position to act as both a “gatekeeper” of sorts, since journalists and researchers needed his permission to interview people being hosted in the *foyers*, and often also as their (and, at the start of fieldwork, also my) “fixer”. The latter is a term employed in journalism to refer to a contact in the field who organises interviews and translates for foreign reporters, and thus has a crucial role in the transnational construction of meaning and narratives.

Zarzis, and Tunisia more generally, had in recent history already become a major stop-over destination for international reporters and academics, and especially for those interested in migration. In January 2011, in the aftermath of the revolution, soon after Tunisian dictator Ben Ali fled the country, Zarzis became the main port of departure for the Italian island of Lampedusa for Tunisians from all over the country (Le Touzet 2011).<sup>60</sup> The region had also been in the news when, right after the start of the Libyan revolution (later turned civil war) in February 2011, thousands of people from myriad nationalities who had been working in Libya, as well as Libyans themselves, crossed the frontier into Tunisia, establishing a camp at Choucha, between the city of Ben Guerdane and the border post of Ras Jedir – both around an hour’s drive from Zarzis. International organisations such as the IOM and UNHCR have had field-offices in Zarzis ever since the establishment of Choucha camp, regarding this sea-side town with hotels and easy access to Djerba airport more appropriate for housing their international staff than the border town of Ben Guerdane. They have continued working from Zarzis, despite the ever-diminishing number of migrants and refugees in need of hosting and support in the region – and despite the UNHCR’s disavowal of those still living in Choucha camp up until the summer of 2017 – deemed people “not of our concern” after the camp officially closed in 2013 (Garelli & Tazzioli 2017).

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<sup>59</sup> People were divided into the categories of “migrant” and “asylum seeker/refugee” soon after their arrival on Tunisian soil by IOM and UNHCR workers (and, at times, by TRC employees acting on their behalf). This decision determined both in which *foyer* they were to be hosted and which legal avenues would be available to them to remain in Tunisia.

<sup>60</sup> As noted in chapter 1, in the months following the revolution, around 25,000 Tunisians reached Italian shores (Migration Policy Centre 2013).

In August 2015, when I moved to Zarzis, these international organisations were devising contingency plans in case the situation in Libya were to worsen – which could potentially lead to another great influx of people fleeing into Tunisia – in a conscious effort to avoid a second Choucha. Dr Mongi and the TRC were still the main local partners for these organisations, and were always ready to welcome those interested in this seemingly peripheral and yet important junction of the EU border system. Thus, once again, in 2015, as Europe faced what the media termed at first the “migration” and later the “refugee crisis”, researchers and journalists, unable to report directly from Libya – still considered a dangerous war zone – came to Zarzis in the hope of interviewing survivors of shipwrecks, people escaping Libya, and local fishermen involved in rescue operations in the Libyan Search and Rescue Zone. At the same time, the EU continued pursuing political moves to incorporate Tunisia more securely in its bordering efforts. This comprised measures such as increased amounts of funding pouring into the Tunisian coastguard and army budgets from the EU to intensify border control, and the construction of a border wall with neighbouring Libya, from which both migrants and potential arms and terrorists were feared to be entering the country (BBC 2015). It also resulted in training events reinforcing local authorities’ rescue at sea and hosting capacities: the other face of this humanitarian-cum-security border nexus (Andersson 2017).

The first time I met him, in a small, crammed office at the back of his daughter’s pharmacy, Dr Mongi had just returned from a one-week study visit to Italy with ten other Tunisian officials from the Ministries of the Interior, Social Affairs and Foreign Affairs, during which they were given a tour of migrant centre facilities and rescue at sea control rooms. In impeccable French, Dr Mongi described the geopolitical relevance of his region in the following terms: “this is a frontier zone, and as such it is confronted with mixed migration flows. We are learning from Italy how to host migrants.” When I asked him whether the TRC was also involved in managing the burial of people who died at sea on their ways to Europe he confirmed that these dead did fall under their sphere of action. In line with Fassin’s depiction of humanitarian reason focusing on governing precarious lives, “threatened and forgotten lives that humanitarian government brings into existence by protecting and revealing them” (2012: 4), the humanitarian activities that Dr Mongi was overseeing took the disregarded issue of the border dead as central to their concerns. However, as Dr Mongi swiftly pointed out, similarly to the management of living undocumented foreign nationals, local Tunisian authorities lacked the means to bury the unknown dead to international standards, and thus needed help from the EU and from

international organisations. He explained that at the moment unknown persons were buried in two sites, one closer to Zarzis, the other closer to Ben Guerdane. No DNA samples were being taken for future identification due to a lack of infrastructure, and municipalities were resorting to using machines to dig and later cover these graves – all of which Dr Mongi felt was not right. “Valentina 1 might also like to visit the Zarzis cemetery, we can all go together tomorrow.”

## **Introduction**

Zarzis, like many other cities along the Mediterranean coastline,<sup>61</sup> has a cemetery hosting the dead bodies and human remains of men, women and children who died at sea on their ways to Europe. Since the late 1980s, the European Union began imposing ever stricter visa regulations on non-EU citizens while simultaneously aiming to dissolve its internal borders. These incremental changes, developing alongside a global “proliferation of borders” (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013: 7), administered legal and safe travel to EU countries along privilege lines. Instead of halting migration, border control and deterrence policies pushed those unable to access documented mobility to embark on more and more perilous journeys. Over the years, this resulted in increasing numbers of deaths across the EU’s expanding border zones. In the waters between Tunisia, Libya and Sicily, these deaths gained in visibility in 2011, when revolutions and political protests in North Africa and South West Asia propelled Mediterranean crossings and the victims of the EU’s “liquid border” (Heller & Pezzani 2012) onto the world stage. In the aftermath of the October 2013 shipwrecks just off the shores of the Italian island of Lampedusa, to add to the mediatised “border spectacle” (De Genova 2013) imagery of desperate people on dinghies, the Mediterranean border dead entered the public arena (Ritaine 2015; Tazzioli 2015). Since then, increasing numbers of activists, researchers and journalists, but also governments, NGOs and international organisations, have turned migrant deaths into an issue of moral and political concern, albeit for different reasons.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The Deaths at the Borders Database, while only focusing on states belonging to the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, maps out the cemeteries hosting the bodies of persons who died trying to reach the EU in Spain, Italy, Malta and Greece, using data from 563 civil registries: <http://www.borderdeaths.org/>

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, how the politics of counting migrant deaths was politicised as counter-statistics by civil society to then be co-opted by international organisations: Heller & Pécoud (2018).

The moral and political positions, anxieties, incongruencies and clashes unfolding around the topic of migration in Europe have been foregrounded by critical border studies researchers by looking at struggles led by both people on the move and activists (Bassi 2018; Mezzadra 2018; Stierl 2016a; Stierl 2016b), and by unravelling humanitarian and security border logics (Cuttitta 2018). This work highlights the ambivalences at the heart of what De Genova (2016) terms the “question of Europe” that inextricably accompanies that of migration: “a putative crisis of the very *idea* of ‘Europe’” (New Keywords Collective 2016: 2). Few of these studies though have focused on how the dead are also found and buried in North Africa and in other places not commonly associated with the geographical perimeters of “Europe”. In these spaces, that are instead, as De Genova notes, “systematically represented as historically sanitized, which is to say, shorn of their deeply European (post)colonial histories as well as disarticulated from the European political and economic interests implicated in producing and sustaining their fractured presents” (2017: 18), border deaths also reverberate in people’s moral and political lives. Taking these contexts as vantage points could in fact help to more readily address the “ever-deferred confrontation with the European Question as a problem of race and postcoloniality.” (De Genova 2017: 23, 24)

South-east Tunisia is one such place. Tunisian citizens from this region have been embarking on illegalised boat journeys to Europe since before the 2011 revolution, and have also been disappearing and dying along this same sea crossing. Yet the dead found near the coastal town of Zarzis are almost always believed to have originated from other African countries, and are thought to have left from the neighbouring Libyan coast. What remains of their bodies is buried in an isolated terrain that used to be a landfill. This chapter explores the evolution of interest in this makeshift cemetery for unknown migrants between 2015 and 2017, and the acts of “fixing” it gave rise to. In doing so, it tries to answer two puzzles that arose during fieldwork, namely why the cemetery became mediatised during that period, and how come despite this heightened attention its situation did not significantly improve. The chapter first looks at how Zarzis is “fixed” (how it is framed) as an external frontier of the EU. This fixing occurred both materially, through EU and individual member state-led funding and training, and discursively, through the work of international media and academic research. It then describes the burial grounds for unknown persons situated on the outskirts of Zarzis. These were places where the dead and their “political lives”, to use Verdery’s term (1999), remained latent, since their burials made them hardly visible, and thus difficult to mobilise by the living. The material

remains of the dead at times vanishing into the scenery, at others resurfacing, constituted open-ended signifiers, and were not “fixed” (pinned down) into specific symbolic and political work for a long-time. Yet Verdery’s argument regarding the potential of dead bodies to become politically meaningful at specific historical nexuses did become actualised as various actors – locals engaged in migration issues together with mostly European journalists, researchers, documentary film makers, photographers, and activists – went about conceptually and practically attempting to “fix” the cemetery.

These fixing efforts were aimed at creating meaning in the face of finality and meaninglessness – death being irreversible, and these particular dead being anonymous, unknowable – in a situation of perceived impotence towards bigger problems linked to borders and migration – intimately related to De Genova’s “European Question” – viewed as systemic and difficultly changeable by the actions of mere citizens. These plans for change and aspirations to “fix” the cemetery also conjured up blame and responsibility allocations, involving actors at local, national, EU, and international scales. “Fixing” is not a term directly employed by the different people engaged in writing about, filming, cleaning or managing the cemetery. It is an analytic term which, used through its various meanings, is aimed at trying to understand what different visitors, with different public consciousnesses and private interests involving the cemetery and the unknown dead, different vantage points and visions for moving forward, come together in doing and generating. “Fixing” the cemetery ultimately becomes a concrete way of managing the moral uneasiness produced by a system understood to be inhuman, but also too entrenched and complicated to be fixed by individuals, who nevertheless feel personally implicated to act in the face of its moral failings.

### **The vanishing cemetery**

The morning following my first meeting with Dr Mongi, we set off for the cemetery early, to avoid the scorching summer sun’s hottest hours. In the car with Dr Mongi and Valentina I was also Chamseddine, the TRC volunteer from the Zarzis team who had been involved for years in supporting local authorities in the burial of unknown persons. Dr Mongi had only been to the cemetery a handful of times, and so had asked Chamseddine to accompany us. As we left town and began driving in the direction of Ben Guerdane, I quickly realised why it was necessary for us to have a guide. Soon after veering from the main road, the landscape turned

into a vast, golden-brown expanse, with off-piste routes winding in different directions. Chamseddine kept silent as he confidently steered the car around heaps of sand and plastic. Dr Mongi explained that some of the olive tree fields we were passing through were privately owned, while the empty land mostly belonged to the municipality of Zarzis, who had used it as a public waste dump. Garbage had been buried here for years, creating what now resembled squat hills of compressed soil and trash. Dr Mongi pointed out that the terrain is a *sebkha*, a marsh, which makes the cemetery we were slowly heading towards inaccessible when the ground is wet. Dry and windswept in the summer, swampy after rain, we all agreed that it made for an unsuitable grave site, seasonally on the brink of exhuming its hosts.

Before taking us to see the terrain where anonymous persons were currently being buried, Dr Mongi wanted us to visit the old plot that had been used starting some twenty years ago, until it had filled up and the municipality had to expand the burial ground to another nearby plot. The two sites were both in the same area, known as Al Gatt'aya. Chamseddine stopped the car twice to climb on top of a waste dune and look for the placement of this older cemetery. He hadn't been back there for a while, not since the time he was still working as a fisherman and, together with his colleagues, came here to bury the dead they found at sea. The fishermen of Zarzis work in front of the Libyan coast and close to the Italian island of Lampedusa, and as a result are often the first to rescue living migrants, and to sight the dead. It is these personal experiences of encountering and salvaging the unknown dead that lead Chamseddine, now in his mid-fifties, to continue wanting to be present and help at their burials even after he stopped working as a fisherman due to a business investment gone wrong. Throughout his fishing career, his brief time spent working as a taxi driver, and his numerous years of unemployment punctuated with small jobs as driver for different international organisations, volunteering, as he called it, at the cemetery remained a constant engagement for him.

However, the difficulties involved in burying the unknown dead in this context are numerous. Often neither Chamseddine nor the members of the Garde Nationale Maritime or of the Protection Civile (the coastguards and fire-fighters, the two main bodies tasked with the recovery of corpses) have gloves or face masks for handling human remains. They also at times run out of body bags, and have to resort to using black bin bags, or to making do with no bags at all, working with their bare hands. It is hard to retrieve bodies from the water without dismembering them, and neither fishermen nor local maritime police forces have the equipment to do it in a way that ensures proper respect to the dead, regrets Chamseddine. Sometimes it

isn't even bodies that are found, but just limbs, or a skull, and it is often impossible to guess their sex, age, origin, or religion. Despite highlighting these trying conditions, Chamseddine spoke of his voluntary involvement as simply a matter of doing his duty towards the dead, and of trying to bring some dignity to their burials with the little means available to him. He cared deeply about *'amal insani* (humanitarian work), which he started getting involved in during the Choucha years, when he was employed as a driver by various international organisations (International Committee of the Red Cross – ICRC, International Medical Corps – IMC, Danish Refugee Council – DRC, International Organization for Migration – IOM). And he knows that this work pleases God: God sees their efforts to bury the dead in the face of this challenging context, and he commends it, feels Chamseddine. He was not considered to be the most devout of Muslims by the community – for instance, since he rarely prayed, he was not in the habit of making sacrifices for his family at religious feasts such as the 'Eid. However, as I got to know Chamseddine, I heard him often speak of his own understanding of spirituality in relation to the unknown dead. He believed that we each have a duty towards humanity, and that the anonymous dead buried in Al Gatt'aya “will get to paradise before us”.



Figure 2.1: Looking for the old cemetery from the height of a waste dune. August 2015.

“The scenery is lunar, isn’t it? The emptiness and quiet. At least in this sense it feels appropriate for a cemetery”, commented Dr Mongi as we waited for Chamseddine to climb down from the rubbish mound the second time. We eventually got out of the car when Chamseddine felt sure we had arrived. Yet to both Valentina 1 and myself the plateau we were told to look at and photograph appeared identical to all the others we had passed. Nothing about this particular plot gave us any clues as to its being a burial site. In this region it was common for cemeteries – especially very old ones – to be unmarked, without any enclosure or sign, and for tombs to be signalled only by stones, and thus to blend almost seamlessly with the desert landscape that surrounds them. The placement and presence of these cemeteries, however difficult to detect for a foreign eye, is nevertheless known by local communities, whose family members and ancestors are buried there. However, this older cemetery for the unknown dead, without families living locally able to be present at the burials and visit occasionally, risked slipping into oblivion. Indeed, this particular site was subsequently left out of “visit itineraries” for journalists and researchers led by Chamseddine. This might have been due to the intentions of Dr Mongi and Chamseddine to improve the dire situation of the new cemetery, leading them to direct these foreigners’ focus towards the site where the dead were still being buried today: to the site that was most urgently in need of “fixing”. But perhaps the erasure of this older cemetery from the narrative they presented to the media might also have been a result of the fact that it lacked sufficient signifiers. During our first visit it seemed difficult even for Chamseddine and Dr Mongi to identify it as a cemetery, and to make us see it as such through their explanatory, “translation” labour – a term which will be explored in the following sections. This older cemetery was simply harder to “fix”, to pin-down, to make sense of, as it blended seamlessly into its surroundings.



Figure 2.2: The old cemetery and the “lunar landscape”. August 2015.

### **Plans for “fixing”**

The search for the new cemetery was swifter, as Chamseddine had been going there regularly over the course of the summer for interments. From the height of the short hill making up the old cemetery, Chamseddine scanned the horizon for the two brick posts that were, one day, to hold the gate to the private property facing the new cemetery. These were the only workable markers, as the cemetery itself was not signalled in any way, just like the older terrain. He explained that there is a faster route to the new cemetery that is usually taken by the excavator and by the pickup truck carrying the dead – the same pickup truck that is mainly used for trash collection, and the only one the municipality claim they could use for this task. The new site was more visually intelligible as a burial ground. Several mounds of earth could be identified where thirty-nine people had been buried during the month of Ramadan that summer. Here too, the earth was scattered with colourful plastic bags and rusting utensils, construction site rubble,

and even bones, which Dr Mongi said were from the time when animal remainders from the slaughterhouse were dumped here as well. He also drew our attention to the shape of a pair of jeans emerging from below the sand. From one angle, bone could be seen inside the jeans. Being a pharmacist, Dr Mongi knew that these and other bones scattered in the terrain were human bones belonging to deceased migrants. They had been unearthed by the wind.

Dr Mongi took his smartphone out to show us photos of the latest dead body found near the shores of Lemsa, the closest beach from Al Gatt'aya, also a swamp, where currents often bring in objects from the sea, and sometimes also deceased animals and persons. He asked Chamseddine to identify for us where that person had been buried – it was a man, he said. “That’s all we know, impossible to tell where from, his skin was bleached by the salt-water, look, it’s almost purple.”<sup>63</sup> After pointing to the mound under which the man had been buried, this time in a body bag, Chamseddine explained that the hole had been dug by an excavator, and that this was not dignified: in normal circumstances, it would be the men from the family who would dig the hole with shovels. “During the Choucha times several men died, but we knew them, and we knew they were Muslim, so we buried them in the normal cemetery in Ben Guerdane. I helped dig the graves myself. There were Christians too and they were buried in the Christian cemetery in Sfax. But for those buried here, we don’t know anything”, reminisced Chamseddine. The lack of fencing also made him worry that wild dogs could easily dig up the dead. Moreover, Chamseddine’s memory, as we had just witnessed, constituted the only link between the police file opened when a dead person is found, and any photos or information they kept about the deceased, and the specific place of burial. No numbered bracelet was tied to the mortal remains to link them to a specific dossier – as was instead recommended by the ICRC booklets (Morgan, Tidball-Binz & Van Alpen 2006) that Dr Mongi and Chamseddine were given during training sessions for TRC volunteers. Nor were numbered plaques placed on top of graves to be able in the future to retrieve a specific body. DNA samples were virtually never taken.

Chamseddine also explained that not many people know that this is a cemetery, and so the youth come to this isolated place to drink – several Celtia beer cans lay scattered as testimony. I noted this down, interpreting it as a way for Chamseddine to tell us not only that people

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<sup>63</sup> De León (2015) documents the ways in which the desert also anonymises the bodies of those who die while on their ways to the United States.

weren't able to pay their respects to the dead because the site was not signalled, but that they were also unwittingly disrespecting the dead as a result. I later discovered, though, that cemeteries were often favoured as drinking spots by the youth, since they were usually unlit and unvisited at night, and so could grant the transgressing youth some privacy. This, as well as the "lunar landscape", were perhaps the only two uncanny ways in which this cemetery resembled local understandings of how cemeteries should be and how they are lived as spaces.

The feeling of heaviness that had overcome me – a feeling that was often also voiced by the many journalists, activists and researchers who were to visit the cemetery in the following years – was somewhat offset by Dr Mongi and Chamseddine's detailing of their future plans to change this situation. They both perceived an urgency in having to act to improve the way burials were carried out and to "fix" (rectify) the ensemble of factors listed above that made this cemetery undignified in their eyes. "The sea will start getting rough once the weather changes, it'll be autumn soon. There will be more deaths for sure, we don't have much time." A more dignified solution had to be found. Dr Mongi was ready to put his own money upfront to help the municipality pay workers to prepare tombs in advance dug by hand, as is tradition, and not by machines. The workers would dig these graves in an ordered line, with cement on either side, to prevent water, wind, and animals from moving, damaging or exhuming the dead. Preparing individual graves in advance would also prevent mass burial, ensuring a specific and easily identifiable emplacement for each body, which would then be signalled by a numbered metal plate on top of the grave, in line with the recommendations they had received – and would continue receiving – during several ICRC and MSF trainings on dead body management. These individual tombs would also be built facing Mecca, ensuring this basic and fundamental due to the dead. At the moment it was down to those on duty to make sure that this direction was respected, and so it wasn't done systematically, especially when burials happened at night or in a hurry. The hope was that in preparing the tombs in advance, a speedy burial would be facilitated, guaranteeing that, following Muslim tradition, the dead would be given their dignity by being returned to the earth as quickly as possible. In the spirit of following both international standards and religious and customary ways of honouring the dead, Dr Mongi concluded our visit that morning saying that our presence had motivated him once again to bring up the plight of the cemetery with local authorities.



Figure 2.3: What the cemetery looked like between 2015 and 2017. September 2017.

### **Questions of responsibility**

The will to “fix” the cemetery – intended as both a will to “mend or repair” and to “put (a bad or unwelcome situation) right” – expressed by Dr Mongi and Chamseddine back in the summer of 2015 was aimed at taking steps that would also “fix” the cemetery in place – “the action of fastening something in place”.<sup>64</sup> Their proposal to prepare and demarcate individual tombs and to build fencing around the terrain were attempts at preventing this cemetery from vanishing like the older one: they were to make it more visible and permanent. These aspirations of anchoring the cemetery would also result in giving it a more traceable existence in Tunisia at this point in history, thereby bringing to light the presence of the victims of the EU border on Tunisian soil. This will to “fix” the cemetery and turn it into an identifiable object of concern

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<sup>64</sup> Definitions of “to fix” and “fixing” from: [en.oxforddictionaries.com](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com)

in turn enabled the “fixing” (framing) labour of journalists and researchers who, in conjunction with Dr Mongi and Chamseddine acting as their “fixers”, channelled the cemetery into particular narratives aimed to inspire empathy, hope, and even change. Yet this resolve to redeem the cemetery from an undignified and dissolving fate inevitably also brought up issues of blame and responsibility for the different actors involved in these “fixing” efforts. Indeed, who should take on the task of “fixing”, and why, were far from being straightforward and politically neutral questions. These questions instead led people with varying degrees of power to act to “fix” the cemetery to reflect upon their positionalities and to tackle moral and political conundrums conjuring up colonial and neo-colonial histories and legacies.

The day after my first visit to the cemetery, Dr Mongi, Chamseddine and I met with the deputy mayor, the municipal secretary-general, and the environmental officer from the municipality of Zarzis, with whom Dr Mongi hoped to make plans for the cemetery. He explained to them that a big inter-agency meeting was coming up in Zarzis, during which he intended to appeal to international organisations for help in changing the state of the cemetery of unknown persons. “There will be people looking for their loved ones one day, and it is not human to have mass graves. We can ask international organisations for help in training in dead body management, for work material and a refrigerated vehicle, and for the DNA”. What was at stake in the question of the cemetery, he stressed, was the humanitarian approach and the image of Zarzis and thus also of Tunisia. Dr Mongi emphasised the importance of organising to redress this situation by pointing at me: more like Valentina will be coming from Europe to report on the cemetery, and if we don’t act now to change it, it will reflect badly on us. He was sure that foreign journalists would come for these dead – a vision which proved prophetic indeed – and, since he knew the municipality had financial difficulties, he also hoped this foreign interest could be galvanised into finding funding for fixing and later upkeeping the cemetery.

After listening attentively, the deputy mayor replied that it had always been the municipality who had taken care of everything when it came to bury these anonymous persons. As the Garde Nationale Maritime and the Protection Civile men also often pointed out to me, there was of course much room for improvement in these burials, but, taking into account all the other urgent issues Tunisia was facing, these dead persons were at least being buried, and that was something. The three men we met that day were part of an interim municipal team put together after the revolution, in the short-lived period during which individuals holding at times

extremely divergent political views still thought it possible to work together to rebuild a political system. The date for municipal elections was however being regularly pushed forward,<sup>65</sup> and thus the municipality of Zarzis, much like municipalities all over the country, had continued functioning without an electoral mandate, without a unified political vision, and, crucially, without much funds. This, coupled with an economy in deep crisis – foreign investments dwindling following two consecutive terrorist attacks targeting tourists that same year<sup>66</sup> – left local government with meagre budgets at best. Yet these difficult conditions didn't account for the full picture when it came to why the care of the cemetery of unknown migrants made for a particularly thorny issue. Visibly frustrated with how the meeting was going, and turning to me in French to make sure I understood, the secretary-general clarified:

We have received hundreds and hundreds of bodies over the years, but we don't even have an ambulance to carry them. Nobody has ever given us any help. People in Europe want things to look good on the surface, but what about the deeper problem? Why are people dying? Every country takes its share, they say, so the *cadavres* (dead bodies) are our affair. At the border [with Libya] there are living migrants and it's good business, so all the organisations are there, while the dead just smell. This is politics: the *cadavres* are for Zarzis.

The secretary-general's frustration at "Europe" for making Tunisia face the ghastly consequences of its border and at international organisations for not helping with the management of the dead was in part a reaction to experiences and memories of Choucha. People in southern Tunisia had promptly stepped in to help those fleeing violence targeting nationals of Sub-Saharan countries in Libya in 2011. They provided food and shelter long before international organisations arrived to Choucha – albeit more readily for Libyans, with whom they shared family ties, than for Sub-Saharan Africans – as the work of Garelli, Tazzioli and Sossi shows (2012). But when Choucha camp was officially created and its running was taken over by international organisations, the fate of migrants came within the ambit of "professionals", and ceased being a situation in which ordinary citizens could get involved in – let alone the Tunisian state, which at the time was in a process of reconstruction in the aftermath of the revolution. These mostly European professionals, living in hotels and driving

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<sup>65</sup> Post-revolutionary Tunisia's first municipal elections were finally held in May 2018.

<sup>66</sup> The Bardo attack in March 2015 left 24 dead; the Sousse attack in June 2015 made 38 victims.

4x4s, were seen by the inhabitants of Zarzis as spending a lot of money on themselves instead of on aiding those in need, who continued living in the desert for years, some until the summer of 2017, when the Tunisian authorities forcibly relocated them.

The fact that the situation in Choucha dragged on for so long, and that the conflict in Libya is still unresolved, made many in Zarzis feel that if “Europe” decides to militarily intervene like it had done in Libya then it ought to deal with the consequences. Similarly, as the secretary-general expressed it, why should it be up to them to bury migrants, when it was Europe’s border that killed them to begin with? Many reasoned that neither Tunisians nor these unknown dead would ever have embarked on such dangerous journeys if they had been permitted to take a plane as Europeans do when they travel to Africa. Understandings about the responsibility to step in and offer help and care to vulnerable or dead foreigners therefore changed locally after the experience of international involvement in Choucha. Echoing arguments made by numerous migration scholars,<sup>67</sup> it became public knowledge in Zarzis that immigration was a business for “Europe” even when its management was outsourced to “third countries” like Tunisia. Local authorities in Zarzis recognise that since these unknown persons have been found in Tunisian waters or soil, they should be buried there, and, in the absence of family members, it should be up to Tunisian authorities to organise and pay for their burials. They therefore recognise a responsibility to bury – a responsibility in the eyes of God too, some also believe, since to leave a dead body unearthed is a sin. However, for everyone involved, from Chamseddine to the municipal secretary general to young policemen, it is Europe who killed these people at sea. If Europe is responsible for their deaths, it is therefore seen as the actor that should get involved to make burials more dignified.

In the absence of an official EU delegation in Zarzis, local actors turned to international organisations to seek help. Despite Dr Mongi bringing up the question of what to do about the cemetery at many subsequent inter-agency meetings, though, the latter remained reticent about getting involved. As a UNHCR employee explained, while the fate of the unknown dead deeply touched all of those working in Zarzis for the various agencies, the issue simply didn’t fit any of their mandates, and it was thus difficult for them to be able to intervene. Just as, during Choucha, some people were refused asylum and consequently continued living in the desert, the unknown dead too “fell through the cracks”, in her words, of the humanitarian system’s

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<sup>67</sup> On the business of “illegality” in Europe, see: Andersson (2014b); Feldman (2012); Friese (2014).

various mandates. The ICRC and the Swiss Cooperation similarly felt that they could only fund a project for the cemetery once the Tunisian government had shown willingness eventually to take responsibility for running it. The ICRC had carried out several training sessions in Zarzis with TRC volunteers, local doctors and authorities on dead body management as part of a larger project aimed at supporting identification procedures of unknown migrants in various Mediterranean countries. As part of this drive, in the summer of 2017 it signed a contract funded by the Swiss Cooperation to launch a project to construct a new cemetery for the unknown dead in Zarzis, and to help establish a DNA bank for these dead. The project, though, is yet to start operating, as it relies on the municipality of Zarzis putting forward a new terrain first. The Swiss Cooperation explained their reluctance to get involved in yet another<sup>68</sup> project related to migration where the Tunisian state would disengage.

As part of these responsibility-allocation struggles, Dr Mongi interpreted the IOM's decision at the end of 2015 to stop directly renting housing for migrants in southern Tunisia as resulting not only from lack of funds but also from their wish to make the Tunisian state take responsibility for providing shelter. Dr Mongi knew that while the government usually granted food and subsidised medical care to migrants via the TRC's work, accommodation remained something they had so far been unwilling to provide, perhaps because it was the most visible sign of having accepted to care for foreign others who ended up in Tunisia while trying to get to Europe. Despite Tunisia being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the government was constantly delaying the passing of national refugee law, thus making it difficult for EU countries to claim Tunisia to be a "safe third country" to which asylum seekers might be returned.<sup>69</sup> As a Tunisian journalist summarised it for me:

The nonchalant way in which Tunisian authorities approach the issue of refugees is because we don't want to be enslaved to Europe, we don't want to become Europe's migration dumping site. Others might think we're cold-hearted and

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<sup>68</sup> The Swiss Cooperation were already paying for the housing of vulnerable migrants in the Medenine Governorate, and were funding in part both the IOM's and the UNHCR's programmes in Tunisia.

<sup>69</sup> This law, that the UNHCR had been involved in helping to draft, and which was ready to be presented for adoption in 2016 (Cassarino 2020), had still not been passed at the time of editing this thesis in the summer of 2020. See Bisiaux (2020) for an analysis of the EU's outsourcing of migration management to Tunisia in 2020 despite the latter's abstention from the passing of this law.

don't want to help our neighbours, but migration is one of Tunisia's only tools for negotiation, so we are stuck between two chairs.

While for locals in Zarzis and for Tunisian authorities the responsibility to “fix” migration problems in the Mediterranean was understood to lie with the actor who had created the situation in need of “fixing” in the first place (“Europe”) or with those who were viewed as being paid for “fixing” (“international organisations”), representatives of international agencies maintained a more legalistic approach to responsibility based on the sovereign duty of states to intervene in “fixing” within their national territory. As EU sovereignty expands and retracts in the grey area of the border (De Genova 2017: 27), “fixing” a cemetery for its victims in one of its external border posts – the relatively “small story” of the cemetery in Zarzis – is met with bigger questions of who should take moral, political and financial responsibility for both living and deceased foreign undocumented persons who find themselves in Tunisia while on their ways to Europe. These are questions related to colonial and neo-colonial entanglements linking the inhabitants of this border zone and those passing through it, whether they be attempting to reach Europe or having come to southern Tunisia to document these crossings or to work for humanitarian organisations. The fact that thinking of solutions for the cemetery inevitably conjured up more systemic problems related to borders and violent power relations between states in part addresses why, despite great mediatic interest in the cemetery in the years to come, its situation remained fundamentally unchanged, with no state, union of states, or intergovernmental organisation stepping in to take responsibility for it.

### **“Fixing” mediators**

- *Alo Chams, labes?*
- *Valentina, are you at home?*
- *What happened? Have they called you for a burial?*
- *No, I'm with a German journalist, there are two others from Agence France-Press driving to Zarzis from Djerba airport. We're going to the cemetery, we'll pick you up in five minutes.*

In the context described above, where everyone felt the dead were not being treated with respect, but where no one institutional actor would take on the responsibility to change its

conditions, in stepped what anthropologist of journalism Hannerz calls “translation workers”. These are “others who are, like anthropologists, in a transnational contact zone, and engaged there in making meaning across distances” (1998: 109). For Chamseddine, these workers involved in creating meaning across the Mediterranean Sea had to be part of my research. He believed they were the ones who were going to alert European publics to what was going on in Zarzis, who would in turn intervene with material and funding to “fix” the situation. He therefore called me every time they called him, and despite at first feeling uncomfortable at having to be present at their visits to the cemetery – as they were in some respects doing similar work to mine – I followed Chamseddine’s wisdom and began detailing these encounters in my field notes. As the cemetery gained notoriety, I started receiving phone calls myself, as I was one of the only young Europeans based in the south of Tunisia who could be in that “fixer” position – a role I had trouble navigating, feeling an overload of responsibility. Yet Chamseddine together with myself and all the “translation workers” who flocked to Zarzis from 2015 onwards did contribute in bringing about Dr Mongi’s prophecy. By the summer of 2017, the cemetery and its self-appointed guardian Chamseddine became the main story coming out of Tunisia aimed at European audiences. It was broadcast on major international media outlets as well as national ones through articles, videos, photographs and crowdfunding campaigns in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and the USA.



Figure 2.4: Mediatizing the cemetery through Chamseddine's story. September 2016.

One reason why Chamseddine's strategy to seek help for the cemetery through these visitors was successful is that these researchers and media from Europe were also wishing to report on the unknown migrant dead because of a sense that their states were complicit in these deaths. Researchers and the media too were thus keen on attaching responsibility onto "Europe", and felt interpellated by this story. The following exchange, taken from a documentary aired on public Dutch TV called "Dreaming of a cemetery" (ZEMBLA 2018), exemplifies this sense of implication and a felt responsibility to draw attention to the unknown dead and their cemetery. The conversation takes place at night at the site of an abandoned migrant boat on a beach in Zarzis, and is between an anthropologist working in the Netherlands but originally from Zarzis, Amade M'charek, and a journalist enquiring about her motivations for getting involved at the cemetery for unknown migrants:

- This is the story of us. All of us are somehow involved in this issue.

- Why are all of us involved in this issue?
- Well, we're citizens of a world in which these complicated and big issues take place. We can't solve them alone. But sights like these keep us on our toes.
- Do you think we, Europeans, are responsible for what people have to endure on these boats?
- Yes, I think we are. I'm not saying that we are responsible for it but I think it's our responsibility to face up to this situation and to not look away. We should keep confronting ourselves with it. Don't sweep it under the carpet, cover it up or trivialise it. That is our responsibility.
- Why is it so important?
- Because we can't and mustn't remain silent. It's too big a crisis or drama for that.

Later in the documentary, Amade and Chamseddine discuss the saltworks that can be seen in the distance from the vantage point of the cemetery. Since the revolution, these saltworks have sparked protests in Zarzis as well as in other parts of the country due to the fact that France has been benefitting enormously from them since colonial times.<sup>70</sup> Chamseddine highlights that “despite our mineral resources we don't have money for a cemetery. Only Europe benefits from these riches of ours.” Relating this example back to the issue of European responsibility and of entangled histories, Amade concludes: “Here, with the cemetery on this side and the saltworks on the other side, it's obvious that the issue of migration, drowning people and the cemetery's struggles, are part of who we are as Europe. It's intertwined with European conditions and societies.”

This anthropologist is the only “translation worker” who to my knowledge made the neo-colonial legacies at play this apparent. Creating meaning at the cemetery was during each new visit a collective and collaborative occurrence, and so diverse ways of understanding it, such as connecting its story with that of the adjacent saltworks, emerged during these encounters and subsequently spilt over onto others through the constant presence of Chamseddine. But a

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<sup>70</sup> As noted in chapter 1, from 1949, the 65% French-owned Cotusal company has been extracting salt from places like Zarzis at 1 symbolic French Franc per hectare (Beji Okkez 2018; Blaise 2019).

few others too gave space in their narratives for critiques of “Europe”. Two Danish journalists reporting for *The Guardian*, for instance, relate that Chamseddine

is not shy of assigning blame, launching into a 10-minute lecture. “The truly guilty are the politicians keeping them from leaving. The migrants are African and no one is interested in them. But if it had been a man with blond hair and green eyes, you would all be interested. (...) the money the EU has spent on border control could be more usefully spent by investing in the countries the migrants come from.” (Svendsen & Skov Andersen 2017)

Most of the “translation workers” I met at the cemetery had been interested in migration for some time and had either produced other documentaries in the past or had already run several stories about refugees en route to Europe. They often described their work to me as stemming from their personal moral unease at the violent and deadly state of affairs in the Mediterranean. They were motivated by the hope that if European publics knew what was happening, say, to the unknown dead in Tunisia, they would feel morally compelled to act and to pressure their governments to change migration policies. Of course, not all journalists expressed their feelings and wishful thinking this plainly, and most who did also recognised that these were perhaps vain hopes. Nevertheless, they all felt it was important to come to Zarzis to report on the cemetery because they believed it was wrong, unjust and shameful for Europe to let people die at sea, and wanted this situation to change.

Chamseddine’s personal story was also a key appeal for them. His dedication, perceived selflessness in caring for dead unknown people, and moral compass were felt to be inspiring and made the cemetery, as an Italian journalist phrased it, “a small story with great symbolic potential”. He meant that it was a story that encapsulated and expressed both sides of the coin of the current so called “migration” or “refugee crisis” in Europe. It expressed at once a crisis of morality of European states who were letting migrants drown – a crisis that was embodied in the presences of the dead washing up on both northern and southern shores of the sea – and the incredible resilience of individuals in fighting against this system and staying “human”. Another video-maker expressed that she wanted to make a film about Chamseddine and the fishermen of Zarzis because they were anonymous heroes, saving lives and bringing the dead to shore in the face of a completely horrifying situation that was not of their making. Almost all of the articles on the cemetery were therefore told through Chamseddine’s story, as is made

explicit in many of their titles: the French newspaper *Le Monde*, for instance, published an article entitled “In Tunisia, a Red Crescent volunteer fights to give dignified burials to the migrants who wash up in Zarzis” (Bobin 2017, my translation), Al Jazeera similarly named its article and video “Tunisian volunteer gives refugees 'dignity in death'” (2018), while the LA Times went for “‘I am their family.’ In Tunisia, one man's mission to bury the migrants who die at sea” (Hennessy-Fiske 2017). The similarities between these article titles and their content seemed indeed indicative of the cemetery and Chamseddine being turned into a symbol of sorts.

For this story to become symbolic, though, and elicit admiration and empathy, it had to be simplified. The ins and outs of why the unknown dead ended up being buried in this undignified way, and different actors’ senses of who should be responsible for them, found little place in journalistic narratives. The story was told solely through Chamseddine’s eyes, and very few journalists took time to interview the municipality, the *Garde Nationale*, the *Protection Civile*, the doctors carrying out the cadaveric inspections, or other inhabitants of Zarzis.<sup>71</sup> For his part, Chamseddine depicted the situation from his own vantage point, thereby also simplifying it, and rarely mentioning that he was assisting the authorities in burying people and thus was not alone in working on this task. Just as municipality employees complained that they fell outside of foreign funding aid for equipment to better face burying the dead (the *Garde Nationale* being privileged because also involved in border work for the EU), journalists too tended to almost unanimously ignore the fact that in Tunisia, when a dead body is found, a precise mechanism involving different authorities kicks in. Having previously worked in Sicily on burials of unknown migrants, and having followed how journalists cover those stories, it struck me as significant that, while in Italy no journalist would take at face value the idea that a volunteer singlehandedly went looking for and burying anonymous human remains, in Tunisia assuming that the state was absent seemed plausible to reporters. Chamseddine was therefore often portrayed as a simple citizen taking it upon himself to bury deceased migrants, moved, as almost all articles explained, by having been a fisherman himself in the past, and by having had his own sons leave on the same sea crossing.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> This created a controversy between Chamseddine and the newly elected municipal authorities during the summer of 2019, which led municipality employees to erect a sign at the cemetery stating that it was run by the municipality of Zarzis, and that no photos were allowed. Chamseddine was later largely excluded from discussions for establishing a new cemetery.

<sup>72</sup> See chapters 4 and 5 for more in-depth discussions of the motivations of Zarzis youth for doing the crossing.

The universal appeal of Chamseddine's humanity towards the dead was privileged over those details pertaining to why this particular cemetery was difficult to "fix" without addressing bigger systemic questions of violence and inequality. Journalists thus worked to make the cemetery intelligible to non-Tunisian audiences, to European and North American audiences, asking Chamseddine, for example, to pretend to dig a grave with a shovel while they photographed and filmed him. This manipulated the narrative, as digging graves by hand only happened twice during my time in Zarzis, and Chamseddine worked on it together with the men of the Garde Nationale. It also erased one of the issues Dr Mongi and Chamseddine felt needed urgent fixing, but which entailed a different understanding of dignity for the dead, namely the undignified digging of the graves with an excavator. These degrees of truthfulness in recounting the burials though did not matter to journalists as much as how the cemetery could be presented so as to become understandable for their readers and viewers. The staging of the shovel helped in this mediation of meaning, while the more culturally specific excavator issue was left aside.

Laurent, a French Red Cross volunteer, made the question of "fixing" meaning for a particular audience even clearer to me. He had read about the cemetery in French newspapers for the first time in March 2017, but when he came across another article in August outlining the same exact tragic situation and calling for help to be sent to Chamseddine (as many articles and videos did) he decided, motivated by his Christian faith, to travel to Zarzis and make a video to raise money for the cemetery. He believed that

you can't sell the idea of buying desert to the French, it won't mean anything to them, they will not understand why with all that emptiness their help is needed to buy land for a cemetery. I'll raise money for buying a refrigerated car instead, it is a material thing that French citizens can visualise and appreciate the value and use of.

What needs "fixing" so as to attain a dignified cemetery also changed through these interactions among people for whom "normal cemeteries" meant different things. As a result, for instance, when talking to foreign journalists Chamseddine expressed that he wanted to plant trees near the graves in Al Gatt'aya, despite the fact that in local cemeteries planting trees, flowers or plants is not customary. Chamseddine, however, knew that for these Europeans adding plants

would have made the landscape more dignified, so he included these dignifying propositions to his narrative. Eventually, a team of volunteers from Tunis made up of Tunisian and European activists came to Zarzis and helped him give the cemetery the first of several “dignifying” makeovers.



Figure 2.5: The cemetery of unknown persons after its first major makeover. December 2017. Photo by Giulia Bertoluzzi.

Chamseddine hoped that all of this “fixing” and “translation” work with these foreigners would lead to change at the cemetery. Since he had been laid off from the TRC he had been unemployed, and had turned the cemetery and engaging with the press into his full-time work and *raison d’être*. He also sometimes described things that he would like to happen, and most journalists picked him up on it. Soon after I left Zarzis, he was invited to speak at the European Parliament in Strasbourg and to enact his burial work with a child-sized puppet in a symbolic action along the river (Stroesser 2018). During this action he washed the puppet and put it in a white sheet as is customary for Muslim burials in Zarzis. Neither washing nor covering the

dead in white cloth, however, happens for the unknown dead, as it is difficult to even handle their human remains at times, and the sea is believed to have purified them already. But it was perhaps not surprising that these journalists chose to believe that these actions really took place for the unknown dead, or that they asked Chamseddine to enact this scene. Their articles were, after all, aspirational: they were pitched and worked at the symbolic level, and were written to inspire compassion. Even during my very first visit to the cemetery when, in the face of its bleak conditions, Dr Mongi and Chamseddine had focused on what they would like to happen, instead of dwelling on the painfully awful fate of the dead, I too had chosen to focus on planning change with them as the way out.

### **Conclusion – Mobilising for the future cemetery**

The twenty tombs that Dr Mongi wanted to pre-emptively prepare in August 2015 were never made. The French Ambassador who proclaimed on Facebook in the summer of 2017 that he had been moved by Chamseddine's actions never intervened to support his work – rumour has it in Tunis that such an intervention could have been read as cynical given his position. The Swiss Cooperation-funded project with ICRC is yet to take off, and the money from five different crowdfunding initiatives that were launched in 2017, 2018 and 2019 to buy land for a new cemetery or to support Chamseddine's work has not so far been used.<sup>73</sup> The different actors holding the money to create this new cemetery are either waiting for the municipality to provide a terrain in order to move forward, or are waiting to buy another plot from a private owner. Unknown persons in Zarzis are thus still being buried in holes dug on the spot by an excavator in that same terrain in Al Gatt'aya that Dr Mongi and Chamseddine were hoping to

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<sup>73</sup> See: the first campaign was initiated by the Tunisian Red Crescent through the crowdfunding platform CoFundy <http://new.cofundry.com/projects/065cb5e1-2914-44e1-abea-68beef96b6bb/cimetiere-pour-les-migrants.html>; Foundation Drowned Migrant Cemetery (based in the Netherlands) collect money on a rolling basis <https://www.stichting-dmc.nl/en/about>; a smaller campaign was initiated by Public Services International through crowdfunding platform Gofundme <https://www.gofundme.com/support-the-cemetery-of-the-unknown>; the campaign that caught the most media attention was initiated by Konbini News through the crowdfunding platform Gofundme <https://www.gofundme.com/xdp4v-un-cimetiere-pour-les-migrants>; the latest was initiated by Watch the Med Alarm Phone through the crowdfunding platform Betterplace <https://www.betterplace.org/en/projects/67701-crowdfunding-for-the-cemetery-of-the-unknown-in-zarzis-tunisia>

improve back in the summer of 2015, and that has now almost reached full capacity. In Zarzis, the “managing” community that emerged as local institutions and the Tunisian state kept their involvement in both immigration matters and in the burial of these unknown others to a minimum, opened the possibility for diverse understandings and practices related to dignifying these burials and the cemetery. These management nexuses between locals, foreigners and the dead involved acts of care that were also acts of appropriating the dead, of making them part of one’s sphere of concern.<sup>74</sup> These acts of care-cum-appropriation are importantly non-dialogical, the dead being dead, and thus unable to make themselves knowable, unable to relate back as equals, making encounters with them particularly conducive of meaning creation by superposition stemming from actors’ differently situated moral uneasiness. The cemetery has as a result undergone some changes, and has gained in international resonance and significance.

As the cemetery of unknown persons underwent various makeovers – some carried out by Tunisian and international activists after heavy rains had erased even the small semblances of cemetery-ness that there were, others initiated by church groups made up of retired Europeans living in the neighbouring island of Djerba, others still by the Zarzis scouts and the youth organisation Zarzis Al Ghalia – the fate of these unknown persons came to be more and more integrated in national discussions and mobilisations on migration in Tunisia. The dead came to be thought of more frequently alongside the plight of Tunisian families looking for their own dead and disappeared across the same stretch of Mediterranean Sea,<sup>75</sup> and came to integrate mobilisations linked to the call for freedom of movement more generally. Chamseddine’s work of witnessing and denouncing now has a much larger audience, who witness and denounce with him, and whose virtual and actual presences keep him doing what he does and in different ways financing his work. In the face of larger structural inequalities that are beyond the control of those living in Zarzis, attempts at “fixing” become a tangible means through which people coming together at the cemetery can feel less paralyzed by the magnitude of the problem. The cemetery has, at least on the surface, gained some dignity and visibility. Ultimately, the “fixing” of the cemetery, an act which in reality is unable to change the underlying causes of migrant deaths, becomes a means through which inhabitants of Zarzis and international visitors

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<sup>74</sup> Analogous nexuses will be explored in chapter 6.

<sup>75</sup> More details about the struggles and experiences of Tunisian families of missing migrants are discussed in chapters 4 and 6.

can give themselves together a sense of purpose and of rectifying something, or at least of channelling it into a symbol of hope for future change.

### Chapter 3

#### To dignify the dead

#### Those who care for the dead<sup>76</sup>

*Nighttime, September 2017, Zarzis*

*Ikram al meyet dafnuhu*

[To preserve the dignity of the dead is to hasten the burial]

“Every Muslim knows how to wash the dead theoretically, because the steps resemble those of ablutions before the five daily prayers. But in practice, it’s a different thing.” Walid, a cousin who lived two houses down from ours with his wife and three small children, was the only man in the extended family who was experienced in caring for the dead properly. He was one of the few men in the *huma* (neighbourhood) who was called upon when somebody passed away to prepare the deceased’s body for the funeral and burial, usually taking place on the same day as the death.

Before deciding to move back to Zarzis, Walid had lived in France for several years, where he had, in his words, lost his way. The physical trace this period had left on Walid was the loss of his left eye due to an accident caused by a night of heavy drinking. Since returning to Zarzis he had taken to praying more regularly, and had slowly turned to a conservative religious lifestyle.

Walid had been the one to take care of washing Kamel’s father Hedi when he died.<sup>77</sup> I only crossed paths with him occasionally on Fridays as he rode to the mosque for prayers on his bicycle, wearing a long white robe and a white cap, his good eye carefully avoiding looking in my direction, but his upbeat voice always greeting me politely. I managed to speak with him

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<sup>76</sup> This heading and the chapter’s approach on questions of care and community are inspired by the title and content of the chapter “Those you count on” in Carol B. Stack’s book *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*.

<sup>77</sup> In chapter 1 we learnt that Hedi was Baba al Hajj’s and Umm Akri’s son. He died in 2010.

about his involvement in burials only during the very last month of fieldwork, when one of his cousins, Kamel, who also prayed regularly, and who had never done the *harga*,<sup>78</sup> deemed that speaking on the rooftop of his family home at night in darkness could be appropriate. Walid accepted, and in fact seemed eager to explain to me how the dead are to be honoured before being laid to rest in the earth.

He explained that washing the dead pleases God, and that it was for him a privilege to be the one people called for the task. Before starting, one must set one's intention: "you are doing this for God. It is not for money, it is not a job." The person who washes the body must also protect the secrets of the dead. The secrets of the body (and so of the dead) are not to be shared with anyone, as that would amount to a betrayal of the dead person, which would displease God. "If in washing the dead a secret reveals itself about their past life, the secret is buried with the dead." Reflecting on his role, he explained: "not everyone can deal with being so close to corpses (*juthath*), although in principle everyone should be able to. Death is not something to be afraid of."

With regards to the unknown persons who die at sea on their ways to Italy, and whose bodies are found and buried in Zarzis, Walid felt that the conditions in which they were buried was not dignified – it was the first time he was hearing about it, and asked me several times if I was sure about this information. He reasoned, however, that at least the sea washes the dead, and so there would be no need wash them again before burial. After some thought, he added: "if someone dies at sea God could consider them a martyr, and they could go straight to heaven."

## **Introduction<sup>79</sup>**

This chapter revisits the same terrain, the same cemetery of unknown migrants described in chapter 2, so as to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) of its fluid, processual, and painful existence. Having acknowledged the local and transnational "fixing" efforts it provoked, this chapter will delve into the history of how this cemetery came about in this form in the first

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<sup>78</sup> The reasons why Kamel decided not to do the *harga* will be discussed in chapter 5.

<sup>79</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (Zagaria 2019a).

place in Zarzis, and will allow it to remain unsettling, unfixed. Having discussed the power-laden geopolitical factors at stake with its “small story”, inextricably linked to questions of responsibility, structural violence, and post-coloniality, the following sections place focus on how the cemetery also raises questions locally related to the significance, value and materiality of dead bodies. This return to the cemetery will therefore draw out broader temporal and political entanglements as they are experienced and made sense of in Zarzis.

The question of how and where to bury unknown persons has come to the fore in recent years in Zarzis. Citizens during the time of fieldwork (2015-2017) were able to have an open discussion about how this is being addressed by the authorities, something they were unable to do during the Ben Ali dictatorship. From the early 1990s onwards, as the number of people on the move drowning at sea increased as a result of ever tighter immigration policies in Europe, a standardised sequence of actions developed locally in south-eastern Tunisia with regards to the management of these deceased persons. The unknown dead, usually found by fishermen on or near the coast, are transported on the municipality rubbish truck (or, more recently, in a privately owned mini-van), in suitable body bags (or, when they run out, in bin bags), to the emergency ward of the hospital for a summary medical inspection. They are then laid to rest in holes dug by an excavator in a piece of land outside the town that used to serve as a garbage dump, with no funerary rituals. Very few efforts are made to identify these persons, or to facilitate future identification. Everyone involved in this chain of events – the fishermen, police, coastguards, firefighters, doctors, Red Crescent volunteers, municipality employees – agrees that the way in which these dead persons are being buried is “wrong”. It is neither dignified nor respectful to the dead, as they are laid to rest among rubbish. Moreover, since the area is not enclosed, there are concerns about dogs and other animals digging up the bodies, while the fact that the cemetery is not signed means that passers-by are not aware of the dead’s presence and cannot pay their respects to them. How did the bodies of unknown persons end up being buried like this? And how is it that this seemingly uncaring disposal of the dead proceeded apace, despite those involved feeling deep discomfort with it?

These dead bodies do not belong to the family members of those who bury them; they are not their fellow nationals, nor are they the country’s war dead. They exist outside the local social sphere, but also outside any other social sphere, since they are rarely found with identity papers and so they remain unplaceable, unreturnable, eternally stateless. These bodies or human remains are also often recovered in advanced states of decomposition, making them difficult to

anchor in the world of humans, in the world of matter whose disposal must be ritualised or must at least match that matter's ascribed humanity. On the surface, these unknown dead seem to be inconsequential to life in Zarzis: the deaths of foreign migrants and the presence of their dead bodies do not have a direct effect on social reproduction, they are not "socially useful", as a functionalist reading would have it. If, as Hertz – cited by Bloch and Parry – argued, the death of an individual member of a community is a social event and not simply a biological one, and thus has an impact on the social order and engenders particular kinds of emotions, then conversely, "the death of a stranger, a slave, or a child will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion no ritual."<sup>80</sup> Such individuals have not been fully incorporated into the social order, which therefore remains largely unmoved by their deaths." (1982: 4) If we zoom out from the local to the global scale, where black lives and bodies are forever devalued, turned into quintessential others deemed "ungrievable", in Butler's terms (2009), and where undocumented migrants are scapegoated and dehumanised in political discourse,<sup>81</sup> these undignified burial practices might not seem so surprising after all.

The cemetery in Zarzis is not the only one in southern Tunisia to be hosting the bodies of unknown persons washed up from the sea, and the dead found in Tunisia make up but a small percentage of those found near other shores of the Central Mediterranean – close to Libya, Italy and Malta. These in turn amount to only a portion of the number recovered on the coasts of other Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Turkey, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt.<sup>82</sup> Not to mention the number of dead found at other borders where "nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible denial of blame for any victims the desert may claim" (De León 2015: 29, 30). De León is referring to the United States, but Schindel (2016) similarly argues that the EU border materially and symbolically produces what Agamben (1998) terms bare life: subjects ruled through their mere biological existence, instead of as rights-bearing citizens. Control and surveillance technologies push "unwanted travellers", perceived as "intruders" and as a "biological threat", as part of "an ahistorical and apolitical phenomenon", into more and more dangerous routes, whereby death is not "produced by assassination, but by abandonment to the

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<sup>80</sup> See Hertz (1960: 76), cited here by Bloch and Parry (1982).

<sup>81</sup> Some European far-Right political discourses go as far as equating migrants with waste, see: Thorleifsson (2017).

<sup>82</sup> For ethnographic work on the retrieval and burial of people on the move along the EU maritime border see: Green (2012b); Kobelinsky (2016); Mirto (2018); Perl (2016).

elements” (Schindel 2016: 230, 224, 223). Thus all these numbers can only account for the dead that are found: they are not representative of the total number of deaths at sea or in the desert, in the mountain ranges or water channels turned into deterrent, lethal landscapes. Not to mention the deaths of undocumented persons who are underpaid to undertake riskier work than is legally allowed, with no personal or social security, whose bodies are also often disposed of anonymously and uncouned. Death at the border by the border, and the exploitation and devaluing of the lives of non-citizens, has come to demarcate the frontier between lives that matter and those that do not, the world over.<sup>83</sup>

By tracing how, in south-eastern Tunisia, this particular way of burying the unknown dead came to be adopted, this chapter attempts to uncover why it is that these dead persons continue to be buried in ways that are locally felt to be undignified, despite great psychological discomfort on the part of those involved. The foreignness and apparent non-significance of the unknown dead for the lives of locals in Zarzis seems to account, in part, for why they end up being excluded from “normal” burial places and practices. This reading, however, does not consider the fact that the presence of these dead bodies and human remains also calls for actions aimed at humanising them. These result in the development of particular attachments and imaginations on the part of those who come into contact with them, or who simply inhabit this borderland. The materiality of these bodies and human remains results in their oscillating between being considered and related to as “things” and as “people”, respectively, making individuals question – and make efforts to produce – the very concept of the human. As the physical integrity of human bodies crumbles at sea, dissolving individual stories and identities, they conjure up moral dilemmas for those who come into contact with them and have to negotiate a way of relating to them, as this work could dignify and humanise these remains, or could do the very opposite. The work of care and dignity emerges within an institutional chain of tasks and responsibilities that have developed as a result of a practical problem: what to do with the rotting human remains of unknown persons in a context where death is managed by families and the authorities don’t have the means to face up to the task.

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<sup>83</sup> In one of the earliest academic studies of “border-related fatalities”, Weber and Pickering (2011) took this category to include not just deaths that happen at external borders, but also those of people who die in detention centres within states, and those resulting from illegalised living conditions.

## The clandestine cemetery

Leaving the port behind, head south. Keep to the main road as it advances, flat and straight, in the direction of Libya. The two-storey houses, abandoned construction sites and busy commerce characteristic of the *centre-ville* gradually become more scattered, allowing glimpses of sea to the left and desert to the right. Watch out for the eight-kilometre marker, then turn right between the alcohol depot and the new football stadium. Drive along the side of the stadium, past graffiti praising the much-loved Esperance de Zarzis team. Once to the back of it, take the first dirt path snaking through mounds of sand and rubbish. From here on there is no more signposting. The only vehicles you might meet as you negotiate this narrow, off-piste route are those of petrol smugglers carrying their barrels back from Libya, or of farmers driving their tractors back from the olive groves. They will most likely be unable to help you with directions. Eventually, two imposing brick pillars appear in the distance. Park next to them: you have arrived.

The bumpy terrain in front of the columns is a burial site hosting the bodies and human remains of unknown persons who died in the Mediterranean Sea while on their way to Europe. It came to be located in this isolated area known as Al Gatt'aya, on land which previously served as a garbage dump, because, according to the local authorities, it was the only plot that they could devote to the task. The municipality of Zarzis does not own much land within its catchment area, and since the bodies are usually found by fishermen close to Al Gatt'aya, on the swampy beaches of Lemsa, this patch of land seemed to be a convenient choice. In 2006 the local authorities bought this land from the Ministry of the Environment, since by then another site was being used for waste disposal, and repurposed it into a makeshift cemetery. This location was selected despite its being a *sebkha*, a marsh, and so particularly unsuitable for providing a stable resting ground for the dead. The cemetery is not signed, nor is it enclosed by a fence, and the two brick pillars that have become essential for identifying its location have in fact nothing to do with it, their purpose being to mark the entrance to a neighbouring private property. If a visitor were to go look for the cemetery unaccompanied by someone who knows where to go, it would be difficult to find, as it is visually indistinguishable from the continuum of olive trees and rubbish that surround it.

Yet this solution had originally been envisaged as only temporary: in the words of a municipality employee, this is a “clandestine cemetery”. No official papers were ever produced to convert

the plot of land into a cemetery; it thus doesn't feature as a cemetery in the town's urban planning cartography, and it is not clear whether the municipality holds any records of the number of persons who have been buried there over the years.<sup>84</sup> When the first unknown dead were starting to be found near the shores of Zarzis some twenty years ago – coinciding with the strengthening of the Schengen Zone in the EU, and thus with the simultaneous abolition of internal EU borders and imposition of ever stricter visa regimes on non-EU citizens – local authorities buried them in the cemetery closest to the *centre-ville*, the Jabbana Lazrag. That cemetery, however, is not the town's main cemetery: like all of the innumerable other cemeteries characterising the geography of Zarzis, it is family and neighbourhood run. The municipality therefore had trouble burying unknown persons there and ultimately had to resort to burying them in the remote ground at Al Gatt'aya.

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<sup>84</sup> During my fieldwork in Tunisia between the summer of 2015 and the autumn of 2017, different municipal officers told me that they believed no records of these burials were being kept in the municipality of Zarzis, and that they could not give me an exact number of how many people had been buried in Al Gatt'aya over the years. In 2018, after several years of heightened media interest in the cemetery, another researcher, whose family is originally from Zarzis, received more information on the matter from newly elected officers – the first post-revolution municipal elections had been held in April 2018. It seems that the municipality was then able to produce a precise number of unknown persons buried in Zarzis, and thus that it had been keeping records over the years.



Figure 3.1: The cemetery of unknown persons in Al Gatt'aya. January 2017.

The management of the dead in Zarzis, like in many other Tunisian towns, is not centralised in any one or select few cemeteries, and it is not municipally run. Each family and *huma* – small cluster of streets and businesses, one category below that of neighbourhood – has its own cemetery, built on land originally donated to the close-knit community by wealthier, land-owning members as *sadaqa* (religiously motivated charity). While in Zarzis these land donations have recently been formalised and registered as public municipal domain, if you were to ask the municipality for the total number of cemeteries in Zarzis they would be unsure of the answer and would have to refer to town planning maps to count them one by one. Similarly, if you were to ask the municipality for the exact placement of a deceased person in a specific cemetery, they would not be able to provide you with the information, since they do not produce documents attesting to the allocation of burial plots. In fact, burial plots cannot be bought and sold – as they are in some parts of the world, where the state has taken over the management

of death, thereby often commercialising it<sup>85</sup> – and there is no predetermined plot designation: deceased persons are buried in the ground one after the other in the order of death, in succeeding horizontal rows. Thus, the municipality’s role in the burial of its citizens to this day – despite the government passing laws to gain more control over both the land and the organisation of cemeteries – is restricted to providing them with death certificates and burial permits. It is the family of the deceased who take care of digging the grave and contributing to the maintenance of their local cemetery, and who also guard the knowledge and memory of who has been laid to rest where.



Figure 3.2: Traces of the land’s past use. July 2017.

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<sup>85</sup> In France, for example, the state started taking an interest in the fate and administration of dead bodies in the nineteenth century. As the management of death became a state affair, church cemeteries were turned into municipal ones, gradually allowing for the development of death-related businesses. See Trompette (2008).

The Jabbana Lazrag's location next to the city centre made it seem like a more intuitively municipal cemetery, as compared to others, yet this association relied on specific historical developments that had not translated into a change in people's relation to the cemetery. Under French colonial rule Zarzis played an important role, due to its port and strategic position close to Italian-ruled Libya. The French had thus settled close to the port and had built military barracks, French gender-segregated schools and a Christian cemetery next to the existing Lazrag Muslim cemetery and the adjacent Jewish cemetery – the Jewish community having historically resided in this part of town. As a result, this neighbourhood developed into what is now known as the *centre-ville* of Zarzis. Prior to French rule, though, Zarzis was neither considered nor inhabited as a city, but more as an area populated by small villages closely connected through trade and kinship. The city of Zarzis developed in the absence both of a particular vision of town planning and of a will to centralise the management of death. Its inhabitants have continued burying their dead themselves in small, family- and *huma*-run cemeteries, and the municipality has continued to have little to do with death matters. As a result, when the victims of the EU border regime began to be found on the coast near Zarzis, the legitimacy of the municipality's decision to bury them in the Jabbana Lazrag was open to contestation. The old rubbish dump site later emerged as a temporary, last resort solution.

### **Equality in death**

The family-based approach to caring for the dead works smoothly for locals, who overwhelmingly feel the business-oriented management of death in Europe to be deplorable. An uncle of my host family, who has lived in France since his history degree studies in the 1970s, was a union leader fighting for the rights of migrant workers and remains a committed man of the Left. He often liked to point out to me that, unlike in Europe, “here in Tunisia all tombs look the same, because everyone is the same when it comes to death. The richest man in town could be buried next to the poorest and there would be no way of telling the difference.” A more religious reading of the same belief that in Tunisia one does not carry one's class, economic or social status to the grave – and about which I was told by people from diverse backgrounds – would be that in Islam everyone is the same in the eyes of God, who judges individuals for their deeds rather than their riches. As Hertz argued in the case of Indonesia, “death has a specific meaning for the social consciousness; it is the object of a collective

representation” (1960: 28). In Zarzis, ideas surrounding sameness in the eyes of God, and the relative absence of the category of class to stratify society and create inequality, were evoked in different conversations aimed at highlighting the distinctive features and moral worth of the ‘Akkara.

This uncle and his middle-aged to elderly friends, most of whom lived in France or received French pensions, often dwelled on memories from their childhoods when sharing with me their concerns for the present. In the old days, they recalled, both men and women wore loose, monochrome clothes and lived in one-storey, white-washed houses whose windows faced only towards the inner courtyards. This made everyone appear to be living in the same way, and minimised envy and animosity among neighbours: what was inside the clothes and houses was not flaunted but was only privately and modestly enjoyed. The uncle and his friends contrasted these noble virtues of the past with the (in their view) immoral attitudes of younger generations of emigrants to France. They criticised the ways in which they returned to Zarzis in the summer in shiny cars full of gifts, spending money, making their peers who had not migrated feel inferior and jealous. Their showy displays of European wealth were what encouraged others to follow suit and attempt the *harga*: the potentially risky “burning of the border” by crossing the Mediterranean Sea undocumented. Thus, older generations of ‘Akkara, who had been able to travel to France legally and safely under more lenient mobility regimes, believed these younger men’s ostentatiousness was at the core of the persistence of the *harga* appeal in Zarzis. They also felt that the capitalistic culture of exhibiting one’s wealth, and the tangible goods and cash brought back by the large diaspora residing in France, had ultimately eroded the values of equality that had been dear to their forebears. Now people sought to stand out by wearing the latest fashions from Paris, and families strove to build ever larger and more extravagant villas – which often remained unfinished for years. The principles of the past, referred to with nostalgia by these middle-aged men who had witnessed that world of simple sameness disappear and become more like the one they had come to know in France, could nevertheless still be found in the cemeteries.

For these men, the ideal of equality is reflected and embodied in the extremely simple appearance of the graves in the cemeteries, and in the fact that all tombs resemble each other. In older cemeteries it was common to just use rocks found nearby to mark the positioning of a grave. More recently, people have started pouring cement over the tomb, painting it white and writing the person’s name, dates of birth and death on a slab of stone or marble, and in some

cases also a verse from the Qur'an. Despite these changes, the appearance of tombs is still homogeneously simple. Since graves all look similar, and since people are not accustomed to visiting cemeteries often – most visit only for the 'Eid al Kbir and the 'Eid al Sghir<sup>86</sup> – family members may find it difficult to identify exactly where a relative who isn't part of their immediate family circle might have been put to rest. A strategy that is sometimes used to remember the exact location where a person is buried is to place a plastic bottle cut in half or a small bowl filled with water on the sand or cement covering the grave, where birds might drink. Birds coming to drink at a tomb are interpreted as a sign that the soul of the deceased person has ascended to heaven – a belief that is not shared by everyone, as some more religiously conservative members of the community view these gestures as superstitions. Still, these markers are deemed acceptable because they are quite subtle and they have a purpose other than demarcation, thereby not causing the tomb of any one particular person to stand out too much from the others. The values of equality and sameness in death and in the eyes of God are also reflected in the clothes that the dead wear to the grave. After the ritual washing of the body, the deceased, whether men or women, are wrapped in a white cotton cloth, the *kfan*, and are interred on the same day, without a coffin. Everyone thus looks the same and carries no earthly clothes or possessions to the grave.

Still, while in Zarzis “everyone can afford to die”, as the uncle put it, and everyone will be given the same ritual treatment regardless of their social standing while living, the lack of a centralised system for organising burials did make it difficult for the municipality of Zarzis to continue burying unknown persons in *huma*-run cemeteries. After the number of unidentified dead found near the beaches of Zarzis began to rise, locals began voicing concerns that their *jabbana* (Tunisian dialect for cemetery) was filling up quickly, and that soon there might not be enough space to bury loved ones close to their other deceased relatives. In the Jabbana Lazrag – the cemetery closest to the *centre-ville* where unknown persons were at first buried – a patch of land had begun to be used solely for the unknown dead and came to be referred to as the Jabbana al Ghorabé – the Cemetery of Strangers. Subsequently, when more bodies were found, the municipality tried to diffuse the issue by burying them in other cemeteries in the neighbourhoods of El Mouensa and Dhouiher. But the families living close to those cemeteries too voiced similar worries concerning future lack of space for their own dead. While class and wealth might not matter when it comes to how a person is to be buried in Zarzis, belonging to a

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<sup>86</sup> Known in other parts of the Muslim world as the 'Eid al Adha and the 'Eid al Fitir.

local family seems to be a significant condition for being admitted into one of the town's innumerable cemeteries. As Scheele remarked of the graveyard of a Kabyle village in Algeria, being "central to notions of identity and belonging, it easily becomes a site of social conflict and criticism" (2006: 861). Local iterations of the values of equality, unity and solidarity of villagers were here too felt to be reflected in their cemetery which, despite being a single site, was likewise thought to be organised along familial lines. Therefore, similarly to Zarzis, it mattered "what kind of person" (ibid 862) could be admitted for burial there: it mattered who was perceived to belong.



Figure 3.3: "In the old days, a stone placed on top of the grave would suffice." May 2016.

## Religious anxieties

Anxieties also rose among the citizens of Zarzis surrounding the impossibility of determining the religion of the unknown dead, and whether it was therefore appropriate for them to be buried in Muslim cemeteries. When asked whether they felt that this was a problem, a few people to whom I spoke hastily claimed that it didn't matter to them personally whether people of other religions were buried next to Muslims in their cemeteries – distancing themselves from a view that they perhaps worried might sound discriminatory to a foreign researcher. Some asserted that it had been mainly 'Akkara working in the Gulf states who, influenced by a more conservative reading of Islam, had been vocal about it being inappropriate for Muslims to be buried next to potential non-Muslims. Others stressed that these concerns were only secondary to the more pressing fear of running out of space in family cemeteries, the latter being the main issue that resulted in the exclusion of the unknown dead from the local cemeteries.



Figure 3.4: In the Jabbana Lazrag, this bare plot of land in the middle of the white graves came to be known as the Jabbana al Ghorabé – the Cemetery of Strangers. October 2016.

For the municipal employee mentioned above, not being able to ascertain the religion of an unknown dead person felt problematic not because he or his fellow citizens were racist or wished to discriminate against people of other religions, he emphasised, but because “God values Muslims differently from others.” He explained that God’s judgement begins as soon as the body is laid to rest in the ground, which happens within twenty-four hours of the person’s death. “We cannot know exactly what happens below, but it is God’s will that Muslims be buried with Muslims.” The fate of the body in the grave was a subject of apprehension for most religious people to whom I spoke. They took care that children didn’t hear them when they explained to me the interactions in the grave between the deceased person and the two angels Munkar and Nakir, for fear of the children getting scared and having nightmares. The two angels are believed to question the deceased person in the grave about their faith in Islam, in Allah and in his prophet Mohamed, as soon as male relatives leave the cemetery after the funeral. If the dead person’s answers are correct, then their grave enlarges slightly and becomes a “little paradise”, but if they are not the grave shrinks, crushing the dead person’s body, and a double-headed serpent appears, subjecting the deceased to unimaginable pain. Thus, the municipality employee reasoned, “you might have made as many mistakes as there are waves in the sea throughout your life, but still it matters to God whether you believe in him and only him, and so he prefers that Muslims be buried separately.”

A European woman in her fifties married to a man from Zarzis once told me that her husband did not mind her being an atheist, and never tried to get her to convert. However, she knows that the thought that they will not be buried in the same cemetery because she is not a Muslim greatly upsets him. Burying persons who are not Muslim in Muslim cemeteries is simply not considered appropriate, despite the personal feelings of sadness or discomfort people might hold in relation to this generally recognised state of affairs. People often recognised that there is something problematic about objecting to Muslims being buried alongside non-Muslims. Nonetheless, especially when considering the doubts and fears of what might happen to the body underground, burying people according to religion seemed best: Muslims with Muslims, Christians with Christians, Jews with Jews, and people of unknowable religious affiliation separately. Consequently, the idea that the unknown dead might be buried in the Christian or Jewish cemeteries in Zarzis was also not contemplated. These same logics were projected onto other religious communities, as it was felt that the tiny Christian and Jewish communities would

have similar concerns about future lack of space for their own, and would also deem it inappropriate to bury persons of unclear religious affiliation in their cemeteries.

Whether shared by many or a few, these anxieties ultimately contributed to the municipality's decision to search for a separate piece of land to bury unknown persons. Whether wilfully or unwilfully, the unknown dead were de facto excluded from "normal" cemeteries, exposing the limits of the uncle's assertion that "everyone is the same in death." Since the unknown dead had no local family, state employees had to step into the shoes customarily filled by family members in caring for their dead. Since they had no religion, the authorities were obliged to get involved for the first time in death matters. Lacking a municipal cemetery for those with no particular religious affiliation, they had to find a new piece of land for these dead. The Al Gatt'aya area was thus taken up as a provisional solution, with those involved in the burials wishfully assuming that deaths in the Mediterranean would soon end, or that these dead persons might eventually be claimed. Over the years, though, as the Central Mediterranean has turned into even more of a mass grave, this temporary fix has become a permanent one, and the different authorities held responsible for the burial of unknown persons have developed a depressingly normalised set of procedures.

### **Normalised procedure**

Today, when a dead body or the human remains of an unknown person are found – either at sea or on the shores of Zarzis – this triggers a well-rehearsed chain of actions and roles. If the body is found at sea, the Garde Nationale Maritime (a maritime police force linked to the Ministry of Interior) are tasked with retrieving it. The Protection Civile (firefighters) – who are instead responsible for putting the body in a body bag if it is found on the beach – are then in charge of moving the body from the coastguards' motorboat to the pier. By this point, Chamseddine, the middle-aged volunteer with the Tunisian Red Crescent (TRC) who we already encountered in the previous chapter, will already have arrived on site. In his activities he would be joined occasionally by another member of the local branch of the TRC or more regularly by me. Finally, as Mohamed – head of the Zarzis TRC Committee – often reminded Chamseddine and me, "we are auxiliaries to the state, our task is to help when needed but not to replace the authorities." Chamseddine's role was nevertheless quite central, since, unlike the coastguards, firefighters and municipal employees, who rotate in their job posts, he has years

of experience and is a constant presence when a dead person is found. He thus knows whom to call when, and often ends up coordinating the action between the different groups, as well as acting as the chief public relations person of the cemetery when foreign journalists come to town.<sup>87</sup>

From either the pier or the beach, the body then needs to be transported to the emergency ward of Zarzis's public hospital for a medical inspection. Since there are no forensic doctors working in either Zarzis or in the Medenine Governorate<sup>88</sup> (the closest legal medicine unit being in Gabes, 140 km away), the mandatory inspection is usually carried out by whichever doctor is on duty, regardless of specialisation. The Garde Nationale are by law required to accompany the dead body wherever it needs to go, but may not drive it in their duty cars. Whenever possible, a doctor is brought to the site to carry out the inspection, to minimise the movement of the body. However, doctors are not always able to leave the hospital, and so the municipality is designated to provide a vehicle to transport the body to the hospital and later to the cemetery in Al Gatt'aya. Once again, though, the municipality claims that it lacks the necessary means and that the only vehicle it can put to use for these cases is the open-backed mini-van used for the collection of rubbish. The most poignant memories of the unknown dead, for those citizens of Zarzis who have not witnessed at first hand the recovery of a body at sea or on one of the town's beaches, were of the smell of the dead bodies being carried through town to the hospital on the open-backed mini-van. This smell, which is a recurring sensorial trace also in fishermen's narrations of encountering lifeless bodies at sea, reminds the inhabitants simultaneously of their city's position within the larger tragic picture of people dying at sea and of their own state's lack of the means to face it in more dignified ways for both the dead and the living.

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<sup>87</sup> As seen in the previous chapter, the recovery of unknown dead persons did not often feature in local or national media in Tunisia until after the 2011 revolution, when the international media also started taking a keener interest in the fate of the border dead.

<sup>88</sup> A forensic expert was appointed in the summer of 2017 in Medenine after pressure on the government from the International Committee of the Red Cross, who have over the years taken a particular interest in pushing for the identification of unknown migrants in the Mediterranean region. However, until the end of my research in October 2017 the doctor still hadn't carried out any autopsy, since no new suspicious death cases or unknown persons had been found.

In 2017, the municipality responded to criticism from the press and from the international organisations present in Zarzis (IOM, MSF, UNHCR,<sup>89</sup> all stationed in Zarzis because of the town's proximity to Libya, resulting in occasional arrivals of so called "mixed flows" of migrants and refugees). Since it lacked alternative vehicles, it would simply stop providing the rubbish van to transport these bodies. Local authorities thereby washed their hands of the responsibility, and delegated it to whoever could step in. However none of the international organisations present was able to offer one of their vehicles for the job, since the scope of the cemetery of unknown persons seemed to fall outside of their mandates. Due to a lack of alternatives, the regional head of the CRT stepped in and lent Chamseddine his private white Berlingo mini-van to drive the dead to and from the hospital, and finally to the cemetery. In the absence of adequate infrastructure, and unable to summon the means to change the situation, local authorities started progressively to unload their responsibility for the care of the unknown dead to the local and international organisations who took an interest in the matter. State and non-state actors passed the buck to one another, with the result of making these burials even slower and more anxiety-producing for those directly involved.

### **Unenvisaged identifications**

In May 2017, police authorities feared that two bodies that had been found at sea near Ben Guerdane (the neighbouring town) might be those of Tunisian fishermen who had been reported missing for some time. On this occasion, Chamseddine was summoned as a CRT volunteer to drive the two bodies to Gabes in the privately owned Berlingo for an autopsy. Some weeks later, their DNA was found not to match that of the missing Tunisian fishermen's families, and this meant that the bodies were those of unknown foreigners. Chamseddine was asked to drive them back to Zarzis in the Berlingo for them to be buried with the other unknown persons in Al Gatt'aya. The forensic pathologist doctor in Gabes recalled that, before the revolution, at the discretion of the local and governorate-level authorities of the time, many more bodies were sent to Gabes for a proper medical cadaveric inspection than was currently the case, and they would then usually be buried in a cemetery close to the hospital in Gabes. However, with the Zarzis cemetery gaining more and more media attention and notoriety from 2015 onwards, the

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<sup>89</sup> IOM: International Organisation for Migration; MSF: Médecins Sans Frontières; UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

municipalities of other towns, perhaps guided by the reasoning of ordered belonging described above, have tended to send the bodies of unknown persons that were found near their area to be buried in Al Gatt'aya. They have done this despite the hygiene concerns raised by travelling back to Zarzis from Gabes with the body in an unrefrigerated vehicle. The smell of that three-hour drive in the white Berlingo, on a spring day that felt like full-blown summer, still haunts Chamseddine and the young policeman who accompanied him. Nevertheless, Chamseddine reads some logic into this new practice: if a family were to come looking, the bodies of unknown persons would at least all be in one place.

This particular case was the only time during my two years of fieldwork in Zarzis (from 2015 to 2017) that I heard of unknown dead being sent to Gabes for cadaveric inspection and DNA sampling. In most cases, police authorities assume that the dead found at sea or on beaches belong to *africains* rather than fellow nationals, setting up a distinction between themselves and other natives of the continent, despite there being a sizeable community of black Tunisians in the region. "If I ever decide to kill someone, I'll lure them to come to Zarzis on holiday, take them on a boat trip, and then dump the body at sea. You'll just assume it's a migrant and will never catch me," I would tease the Garde Nationale officers as we waited beside the Berlingo for the prosecutor in Medenine to give us the burial permit. The two or three of them who were sent on these burial missions tended to be the younger members of their teams, usually in their twenties. As it sometimes took the whole day to go through all the procedures, they got used to the company of me and Chamseddine, and we often chatted and joked to pass the time. Their response to my provocation was that, if a Tunisian citizen or a tourist had been murdered or had gone missing, then they would know and would be looking for them. When these bodies were found, in contrast, the police have no on-going cases that could form the basis for "claiming" or "identifying" the dead.

What is more, policemen have learnt from the often-hasty cadaveric inspections carried out by general practitioners in Zarzis that, to determine a drowned person's origin, one should not rely on the dead body's skin colour if it has been in the water for several weeks or months. Skin loses its pigment after having been in water for long periods of time, and so most body parts of drowned persons that have not turned to skeleton – skulls, hands and feet often do quite quickly after months in sea water – are white, or have a patchy, bleached or rusting appearance. One must therefore look for the remaining bits of skin with hair still attached to it, either on the skull or around the pubic area, to ascertain whether a dead body belonged to an *africain* or to a

Tunisian. Other clues, like clothes, might also help to give away the origins of the dead person. Generally, though, unless the police have a pending missing person or homicide file, any sign found on the dead body – be it remaining chunks of curly black hair, bleached skin colour or soaked clothes – are interpreted as signs of non-Tunisianness, signs of foreign Africanness, regardless of how objectively unknowable this supposed origin may be from these deteriorating clues.

As a result, in the majority of cases, the *procureur* in Medenine does not demand that the bodies of unknown persons presumed to have been migrants be brought to Gabes for the autopsy and DNA sampling. He commonly decrees from the doctor's report that the cause of death was drowning and gives the Garde Nationale and the municipality the authorisation to bury them directly. When the burial permit comes through, which sometimes takes several hours (and is the dullest and most frustrating part of the experience for both myself, Chamseddine and the Garde Nationale men, as we are all stuck waiting) – a municipality employee is called to operate the digger to excavate the hole, and the dead person is buried. When several bodies are found at the same time they are usually buried together. Since no records are kept, if it were not for Chamseddine being relentlessly present when new holes are dug, the municipal employee on duty on a given day would not know where to dig.

Usually nothing permanent is placed on top of these burial sites to signal that a person is buried there. Depending on the initiative of Chamseddine or of one of the Garde Nationale men, sometimes a rock found nearby is placed on a new mound, following the tradition of the old cemeteries in Zarzis. Only very recently, after a wave of foreign journalists, researchers, photographers and video-makers made their way to Al Gatt'aya, did local Red Crescent volunteers start making numbered metal plates to be planted in the sand to indicate the presence of a dead person, with a matching numbered bracelet to be tied around the arm, leg or any other body part of the deceased. However, just one of these plates had been installed by the time I left Zarzis in the autumn of 2017. This one grave with a metal plate on top became the protagonist in the photograph of the cemetery that is most widely used by international media – perhaps because, being marked with a number, it was the only grave that vaguely resembled a European imaginary of the anonymous tomb. Apart from that one case, no link exists between the police file and the exact place of burial of a particular person. Thus, not even the most basic measures are taken to make future identification possible. The idea that this might take place is often brushed off – despite individuals involved in the burials thinking about the families of the dead,

like Chamseddine above – as both policemen and authorities feel it to be unlikely that the families of the *africains* will come asking after their loved ones here, in Tunisia.

### **Humanising acts**

Whereas local authorities are understood by the citizens of Zarzis as having slender means, and much bigger priorities than to focus on changing the situation at the cemetery of the unknown dead, for now they remain the only ones who can intervene when an unknown person is found. When I discussed the way in which unknown persons were being buried in Zarzis with the uncle mentioned above, he was shocked, and hoped to galvanise civil society into perhaps raising money to build a fence around the cemetery and to pay somebody to dig the graves with a shovel, according to tradition. These were small gestures. The uncle felt that citizens ought not to intervene in more complicated matters such as DNA sampling, but he did feel that they could still make a difference to the dignity of the dead. After all, fifteen years ago he had raised money among the ‘Akkara diaspora in Paris to build a wall around their *huma* cemetery to prevent dogs from entering and to discourage people from drinking there at night. They had also built a water well and a hut for family members to stand in the shade during funerals. Similar initiatives to improve *huma*-run cemeteries, and so to respect the dead, had been taken up in other neighbourhoods in Zarzis, often financed by men working in France. The uncle therefore felt that he and his friends were in a good position to do something about the cemetery in Al Gatt’aya. But on further reflection he concluded that, in the case of a cemetery of unidentified persons who were unrelated to them, they had no legal basis upon which to act, and he was afraid that by intervening they might get tangled up in potential lawsuits. An organisation with an established role like the Tunisian Red Crescent should intervene, he reasoned, but it was ultimately up to the Tunisian authorities to step up, and if they lacked the means to do it properly then they should ask the EU and international organisations to help. Interestingly, this view on who should be responsible for the unknown dead was shared by officers at the municipality, who felt frustrated by the fact that they had to deal with the deadly effects of the EU border without any financial and material support from the EU (as seen in the previous chapter). Municipal authorities agreed that, to some extent, the Tunisian state should be responsible for these dead bodies, since they were found in Tunisian waters. But they were very clear as to who was responsible for their deaths, and who should therefore offer compensation to families and pay for burials.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, municipal authorities and the Tunisian state have, as yet, done little to change the situation of these burials. Nor have international organisations or the EU made any efforts. Those who are left to care for them are the fishermen, municipality digger drivers, Red Crescent volunteers and young Garde Nationale men who, with little means, make do with what they have to cope with this unforeseen situation they most likely had not envisaged being part of their work lives. Chamseddine, who used to work as a fisherman and has seen at first hand the boats of migrants headed for Italy and the human and material remains of shipwrecks, has made dignifying these burials his mission. Even when he feels discouraged by the lack of plastic gloves to handle the bodies or of body bags to put them in, or by the slowness of the process and the undignified conditions of work, “something pushes me to go”, he says. He often recites from the Qur’an before sand is poured onto the body or body bags by the digger machine. Chamseddine and the Garde Nationale men also often try to make sure that, when the body is lowered into the hole, it is buried with the head facing Mecca. This entails their trying to remember where the skull was in the body bag and turn it around to place it properly in the hole. Everyone involved also tries to make the procedure as speedy as possible, despite the bureaucratic slowness of getting the response from the state attorney in Medenine. This is because, in “normal” circumstances, burials are meant to happen on the day of death, following the tradition and proverb shared across the Muslim world cited at the beginning of this chapter, saying that dignity for the dead is to be buried under the earth as soon as possible. This is also why it is particularly unpleasant for everyone involved to have to wait long hours before being able to bury these unknown persons: it is experienced as yet another disrespectful act towards people whose lives have ended violently and unjustly. People who find themselves involved in the burials thus do a minimum of “officiating” at them: they take on some basic religious roles with an aim to providing some respect to the dead while carrying out otherwise bureaucratic tasks.

## **Conclusion**

I wonder what future archaeologists will think of this plot of land in Al Gatt’aya, this cemetery of unknown persons. What puzzles their dig might conjure up, and how they might attempt to piece it back together. Loose human bones, human bones in plastic bags, human bones in body bags, loose animal bones, among and mixed with plastic, glass, metal and any other bits of

discarded scrap that might have survived the passage of time. What they will make of finding human remains in the midst of layers of debris. What they might read into the difference in appearance between the skulls found there and those found in the myriad of sites in the region that are recognised as cemeteries. What tentative conclusions they might draw about the ways in which the lives of these particular human beings were (under) valued by the societies that buried them between the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. Unless a costly exhumation intervention or building project comes to the cemetery, its contents may reach future archaeologists as they are now, letting their bare materiality speak for itself.

But placing too much focus on this bare materiality or attempting to read meaning into it through the lenses of its necropolitical<sup>90</sup> context might overshadow what is more subtly at stake in people's relations to the unknown dead in Zarzis. It would fail to capture the anxieties, discomforts and awkwardness that their simultaneous presence and unknowability conjure up, as well as those private acts of humanisation and remembrance that have also characterised the interactions between the unknown dead and those living on the EU's border. It would thus obscure their "aporic" status. Drawing on Derrida and applying the concept of "aporia" to witchcraft in Indonesia, Bubandt argues that "Aporia marks an impassable situation, where understanding and the will to knowledge fail; aporia is a 'not knowing where to go'. . . Experience therefore remains, painful and troubled." (2014: 6) Commenting on this work, Pelkmans notes that witchcraft "is a mystery that cannot be solved, a puzzle that is 'without a path,' an aporia." For him, the connotation is that of "a 'black hole' that sucks life and meaning out of this world and gives back nothing. A black hole, also, because in spite of its meaninglessness the *gua* [or witch] is 'awfully significant', consuming the villagers' reflexive energy." (2016: 500) The bodies of the unknown dead in Zarzis are similarly "meaningless", and on the surface inconsequential to the lives of the inhabitants of Zarzis, and yet they are a conundrum, one that pushes people to think about life and death.

Or, following Laqueur, it is perhaps the dead body itself – who "notices nothing, cares for nothing, feels nothing" (2015: 5), and whose fate beyond death, in the view of the people of Zarzis, is not something they can work to improve, as it is between them and God – that nevertheless "enchants". The dead body, despite being "disenchanted", inanimate organic matter,

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<sup>90</sup> This term was popularised by Mbembe (2003) in his famous essay on necropolitics, but has since inspired a vast literature that does not necessarily base itself on his initial conception of the term.

cannot be treated as such, as that would be “to deny the existence of the community from which it came, to deny its humanity” (ibid 4). In his “timeless view” (ibid 5) of the history of the dead in Western Europe and North America, Laqueur, as Engelke (2017) notes, brackets a career focused on the “refusal of grand narratives and an emphasis on cultural fashioning” to argue that care for the dead matters, and that human corpses enchant “everywhere and across time” (Laqueur 2015: 1). In Zarzis too, unknown dead bodies and human remains demand to be “a thing to be reckoned with” (ibid 4), not through other agentic modes of presence, such as in the form of ghosts – of which there are no traces in Zarzis when it comes to these dead – but through their material presence. The visual and olfactory impact of their corpses leave their marks in the memories and dreams of citizens of Zarzis who encounter them long after their interment in Al Gatt’aya. Despite their upfront materiality, and despite the terrible symbolism of burying these bodies among waste, the unknown dead continue to be “enchanting”: they are still powerfully understood to be human.

Contestations over the local system of managing death, and mismatches between the ideal of equality in the eyes of God, on the one hand, and differentiation between people who “belong” to Zarzis and those who are foreign, on the other, thus surfaced with the finding of unknown deceased persons. Belonging to no family locally, displaying few clues as to their identity or religion, these dead fell by default under the care of local authorities who were unprepared to face up to the task and had little means to deal with it in a dignified way. Burying unknown persons in a remote, rubbish-ridden field was not a premeditated act instilled with any particular intention, but more of a pragmatically temporary, turned permanent, response to an uncomfortable situation which exposed the limits of people’s sense of categorisation and attribution of meaning. On one level there seems to be a threshold to the capacity to have feeling for people with whom one has no relations, a sort of exclusion of these dead persons from being our own, relegating them as a result to the realm of subjects/objects to be dealt with by the authorities. Yet people do feel pity. They feel that this is a wrong way to die and that there is something unjust and undignified in the way this issue is being dealt with, and with the way in which people are categorised in life and death more generally in Zarzis. While there is no expectation of returning the unknown dead to their families, these bodies and human remains are still assigned humanity. These dead may be unclaimed, but they still matter to those who inhabit this borderland.

## Chapter 4

### Familiar solutions

#### Awled Moufida – Moufida’s sons

*Late afternoon, September 2017, Zarzis*

Moufida and her daughter Hela were almost done preparing the last batch of *fricassés* for the day. Following her mother’s advice, Hela had started selling these popular sandwiches – fried dough balls filled with tuna, egg, olives and *harissa* – at a nearby *hanut* (corner shop) soon after moving back to her parents’ house with her two small children. She had just turned twenty-three. After a difficult year during which she had left her husband’s home several times in the aftermath of violent fights to take refuge with her parents, she had finally decided to break off the marriage for good. Going to stay with one’s family is a common conjugal conflict resolution option for women: she is *ghodbana* in her father’s house means she is angry with her husband, and left his home to seek the support and mediation of her family. Hela, however, seemed determined to ask for a divorce this time. She had therefore taken up selling *fricassés* as a way of contributing to her parents’ expenses, as she was unsure when the judge would rule on how much financial support she would be receiving from her husband. Moufida, who had been opposed to her daughter’s marriage from the start, supervised both the divorce and this small business operation. She hurried her youngest daughter Sirine to the *hanut* with the mouth-watering trays, and meticulously counted the money from the sales. With each piece going for 500 millimes, 400 for Hela and 100 for the *hanut* owner, they made around 6 dinars a day,<sup>91</sup> which Moufida felt was better than nothing.

As I walked into the kitchen, Moufida exclaimed, without taking her eyes off the fizzling frying pan: “*Weinek ya Valentina*, where have you been, there is big news. Go sit outside with the children, we’ll join you”. Minutes later, Sirine, an otherwise placid ten-year-old, rushed by me with a full platter, followed shortly by Hela and Moufida, who carried a couple of extra *fricassés* for us to snack on. The two women joined me around the wooden table in the patio

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<sup>91</sup> This made for around 2 euro earnings a day for Hela.

to cool off from the kitchen heat, and to give me a major update: “Ayoub is in Sfax, *inshallah* he will get on a boat tonight.”

Moufida’s son Ayoub, an eighteen-year-old who was born fourth in the family, had been itching to do the *harga* ever since his older brother Dali had made the crossing that winter. He was currently with around forty other people in a *guna* (waiting house) by a beach somewhere near Sfax, Tunisia’s chief port city. They were waiting for the night to fall to embark on their journey to Sicily. Moufida pointed out that in the *guna* with Ayoub were also some women and families, which is quite rare, since the *harga* is predominantly a male activity. She felt reassured by their presence, highlighting that women and families would not risk getting onto just any old rickety boat: they were due to leave on a big, sturdy, wooden fishing boat, considered one of the safest options. This detail had made Moufida concur with her son that this was a sound lead. She felt that, if he was sure this is what he wanted, he could go ahead with it. But the boy’s father did not agree. “We have a big problem with my husband now”.

Two more women from the family joined us at the table on the patio. They kissed each of us in turn four times on the cheeks, and immediately asked where Ayoub was. “Lower your voices, you know the walls have ears!” Moufida wasn’t actually concerned about snitches or about the police overhearing the details of Ayoub’s illicit journey, as she might have been before the revolution,<sup>92</sup> but had precisely played on this common fear, in her characteristically humorous tone, to get the whole table – and Hela’s children playing beneath it – laughing. The joke also worked because everyone was aware that Moufida’s husband Belgacem was unaware, and, above all, ought not yet to be told, that his son had gone. While several female relatives were closely following the twists and turns of Ayoub’s *harga*, as proven by the visit of these women, his father was best kept in the dark about it, as he had made it clear that he did not support it. When their oldest son had left in the winter, neither Moufida nor her daughters had told Belgacem about it. This time too, they were doing their best so that he would find out only once Ayoub had made it to Italy.

As we were discussing how we were going to continue hiding Ayoub’s absence from Belgacem, Moufida received a new text message from her son: “Don’t be worried, bye bye”.

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<sup>92</sup> See chapter 1 for details on how irregular migrants and anyone viewed as helping them were criminalised during Ben Ali’s regime.

She looked pensive for a moment, asked me to google the route from Sfax to Sicily and show her on my phone, then reverted back to the subject of her husband:

He is completely against it [the *harga*], he says it's not paradise over there. But it is a solution. Listen: most of the people make it to Italy safely. They know what a euro is worth. Sure, African migrants have no idea about the Tunisian sea. But Ayoub knows it very well. He has worked in the fishing industry before. And he has a better chance than his brother did in the winter because he has both his sister's husband and his brother in France now. They can host him, help him.

Moufida's animated rationalising was interrupted by Hela, who, as if emerging from her thoughts, light heartedly avowed: "I swear that if I suddenly decide to 'burn' (*nahrag*) I would do it!" Her mother, the two relatives and I all regarded her for a moment. Then Moufida, lowering her tone, in a calmer voice, broke the silence: "You can get a visa if you want. You could spend your money on the visa instead of wasting it on other things – like your children. Go ahead and do it if you want." Moufida knew that it would be difficult for Hela to re-marry in Zarzis as a divorcee with two children. She however felt strongly that her daughter's life was still ahead of her – she was only twenty-three – and that she could aspire to more than frying *fricassés*. Moufida therefore believed that moving to France could be a solution not only for her sons, but for Hela as well: she could leave the children with her in Zarzis and pursue a life abroad, where she would have a better chance of finding a more lucrative job and maybe even another Muslim man to marry.

## **Introduction**

Moufida trusted that going to France could be a solution for her daughters and sons alike. Being a mother of five, two sons and three daughters, and wife to an unemployed ex-fisherman, during the years I have known her she has managed to help all of her children move to Paris. For different reasons, she believed that each of them would have better luck, possibilities, and study and work conditions in France. The *harga* ended up being the way in which both her sons managed to reach Europe, despite Ayoub applying first for a tourist visa, as will be explained below. This documented avenue was instead granted to her three daughters, who all

took off from the Djerba-Zarzis airport with tourist visas, becoming undocumented in France only once these expired.

Awled Moufida – meaning Moufida’s sons – is also the name of a popular Tunisian *muselsel* (soap opera) that has been screening every year during Ramadan since 2015. Together with the teenagers of the family I lived with, I watched it every evening without fail, following the *iftar* (the first meal after the breaking of the fast). This *muselsel*’s main storyline is about a mother, Moufida, navigating both her own and her three grown sons’ morally questionable behaviour and life choices. The themes of family secrets, violence, violence against women, poverty, drugs and crime are all prominent in the series.

Different tribes in Tunisia and in the region are also often known as the Awled (sons of) followed by the first name of the main male ancestor – such as the Awlad Ali, with whom anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod worked in Egypt (1999 [1986]). This is also the case for the names of some of the main ‘Akkara *‘arushat* (tribes of Zarzis), such as the Awled Mohammed, Awled Bou Ali, and Awled Said. Women move to their husband’s family’s land when they marry, to a house or an apartment that will have usually been completed before the wedding, and which is customarily built close to the groom’s father’s house. As with Hela’s situation sketched above, were the wife to ever have problems with her husband or in-laws, moving back to her father’s house temporarily or more permanently is an option. Children, however, will rarely ever continue living with their mother were she to re-marry in the aftermath of a divorce or of their father’s death.

In this chapter, I play on these three references – Moufida’s conviction that leaving Tunisia was a solution for both sons and daughters to overcome different social and economic difficulties in Zarzis; a renowned television series thematising the illicit and the secret to address key social problems affecting families and the youth; and local patrilineal and patrilocal social organisation – to investigate what constitutes social death in Zarzis, and how individuals and their loved ones organise to escape it. Simultaneously, this chapter aims to tackle a statement that I often heard in Zarzis, and that never ceased to puzzle me: despite it being a principally male activity, according to men of different generations, the *harga* is women’s fault. Social death is therefore explored through gender and political relations within Zarzis and Tunisia, as well as with regards to the European Union’s border regime. “Burning”

the latter to get to Europe affects the way social death is experienced in Zarzis, leading to disagreements and moral valuations within, and between, families.

As will be seen in the following chapter, blame for changing values, for the causing of jealousies, and for perpetuating the *harga* often falls on successful *harraga* or on the *jam'at franza* – a vaguely-defined group of emigrants that nobody feels or avows to be part of. In this chapter, another set of accusations will be explored, namely, those levelled at young men, women, and families, and which come to the fore especially when the *harga* fails. The main reason given by young men in Zarzis (and in most of Tunisia)<sup>93</sup> for opting to do the *harga* is: “*ya harga ya sharga*” (either we *harga* or we choke), or “*gharga wala harga*” (we drown or we *harga*), meaning we either drown or we manage to “burn” the border and get to the other side of the Mediterranean. The underlying message of these statements is that one might as well embark on this potentially deadly journey across to Europe, since in Tunisia young unand-under-employed men are already socially dead. The first half of the chapter will focus on unpicking this claim by exploring the feeling of living interrupted trajectories in Zarzis unless one migrates. It looks at the feeling of being doomed to remain in limbo if one stays in the *bled* (hometown); of not being able to move on with one’s life, aim at any kind of improvement or goal, or physically move anywhere at all unless it is through the *harga*.

The second half of the chapter will explore how families, and especially female relatives, work to escape both their own and their sons’ social death. This activity, often shrouded in (often open) secrecy, makes them prime targets of blame when migratory projects turn sour. Mothers and sisters are often blamed for encouraging, helping to finance, and even pushing young men to leave as *harraga* (burners). Young unmarried women<sup>94</sup> are accused of wanting to marry only a man with a visa, thereby driving young men to leave – as will be explored in more detail in chapter 5. Mothers, sisters, and brides-to-be are also allegedly giving young men another kind

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<sup>93</sup> Documentary *Kannouta* by Zied Ben Taleb shows how young men in working-class neighbourhoods of Tunis point to this same sentiment of social death and stuckness as being their motor for migrating: <https://vimeo.com/169951435>

<sup>94</sup> Here I have specified that it is *young* unmarried women who are accused of wanting to marry only a man with a visa; the older a woman gets, the less able she is to decide whom she would like to marry. Women over thirty often feel and are talked about as if they cannot be picky: any marriage is better than no marriage. The fear of not being able to marry is what constitutes the risk of social death for women. This will be explored in more depth in chapter 5.

of green light: if the sea crossing is too expensive or doesn't work out, young men can always marry European women for visas. Finally, young women have also, albeit in small numbers, recently started embarking on the *harga* themselves, or have been voicing a desire to move similar to that of Hela above. These changes are seen by many in Zarzis as an ultimate sign of crisis. Women's relative facility in obtaining visas to Europe compared to young men's, and thus the gendered concessions of the EU's border regime, also work to amplify anxieties in Zarzis regarding a depletion of the town and a perceived abandonment of roots and traditions by its women.<sup>95</sup>

These clusters of accusations – waged for the most part by men – centre on women's roles in the *harga*, which this chapter approaches from their point of view. This will highlight some societal issues that women, for their part, take to be more salient. It highlights the ways in which they try to counteract their own and their male relatives' risk of being unable to advance in life, and of social death. While chapter 5 will examine in more depth the importance of marriage and of founding a family as motivation for the *harga*, the conjugal objectives of young men and women, and the issue of visa-weddings and European brides (also discussed in chapter 6), this chapter zooms in on one particular family, that of Moufida, to explore women's and families' roles in the *harga* and in bolstering personal and collective aspirations. I discuss the importance of feelings of “stuckness” and frustration (Masquelier 2013; Vigh 2006; Schielke 2015) for young men, and the moral opprobrium families incur for failing to ward this off or even for causing it to be experienced more intensely. Families of missing *harraga* are often blamed when their sons disappear or when they die, as they are seen as having encouraged their sons to incur these terrible risks. Viewing the *harga* as the paramount solution to local societal and economic blockages therefore emerges as a prevailing narrative, obfuscating and at times overriding *other* possibilities for escaping or rebelling against social death in Zarzis, even when the *harga* translates into actual death.

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<sup>95</sup> On the crucial role ascribed to women in upholding traditions and the ideal of the nation, as well as a sense of masculine power, especially among displaced populations, see Latte Abdallah (2006).

## Taking your chance

When Moufida's oldest son Dali finally found a way to do the *harga* in the winter of 2016, it had required her and her daughters to act fast. After having pursued in vain various leads in Zarzis over at least a year, Dali had changed strategy for actualising his plan of moving to France: he started a job as a driver for a construction company in Tunis. Since the only local alternative was to work as a freelance mechanic with an uncertain income, he viewed working in Tunis as preferable because it allowed him to have a more secure salary. It had now been a while since he had stopped nagging his mother about wanting to leave the country. Moufida felt relieved that her son had found his way in the capital – she was even half-hoping that now that he had a more stable job he might also calm down and change his mind about the *harga*. Dali, however, was focusing on putting money aside for paying smugglers and fixing a good deal for the “burning”.

One night, several months after moving to Tunis for this new job, he had phoned his older sister Imen in tears to tell her that he was in a *guna* near El Haouaria in the Cap Bon, a peninsula in northern Tunisia, and that he had just been scammed. The *paqueur* (smuggler) had promised him a free trip to Sicily if he brought with him eight other men. On the night itself, however, a different *paqueur* greeted them who knew nothing of Dali's deal, and so left him behind. He had watched his two cousins and the friends he had brought embark, and was left alone on the beach to head back to Tunis by himself. On the phone to his sister he sounded desperate, insisting that he had to leave now since everyone in Zarzis already thought he had gone, he couldn't lose face like that. He had also already quit his job and had nowhere to stay in Tunis. He was resolute about needing to gather the money and burn as soon as possible. He pleaded with Imen, telling her that despite the mix-up this really was the best deal available, as he would travel on a small *ski* (motorboat) carrying a maximum of ten people, following a route that had been used for a long time to smuggle Algerian contraband cigarettes from Tunisia to Sicily.<sup>96</sup> Dali told his sister that it was now or never: this route had just opened up, if they waited too long the police would surely catch on, and the bribes would become heftier.

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<sup>96</sup> Basing himself on media monitoring, Herbert estimates that most of the vessels intercepted by Tunisian authorities in 2016 attempting the *harga* from Tunisian shores carried between 10 and 35 people, who were mostly young men between 15 and 35 years of age. Similarly to Dali, some of these *harraga* were using the same contraband routes as those employed for tobacco smuggling (2016: 15).

Imen – who was nine months pregnant – relayed this information to her mother Moufida and her sister Hela, and the three women hurried to sell their wedding jewellery to obtain money fast in order to finance Dali’s journey. Moufida remembered having paid for the gold and silver jewellery for her two daughters’ respective weddings in monthly installments. When it came to selling it, though, she didn’t have time to think back on how much she had spent on each piece, or on trying to get the fairest possible valuation from the buyers: “I didn’t think of how much I’d bought it for, I only thought of my son”. As a result, three pairs of gold earrings, four silver and precious stones rings, one gold cobra necklace, one gold V-neck necklace, one gold ring, one gold bracelet, and the full bridal silver head gear and belt were sold in one go at the *hara* – the old Jewish neighbourhood of Zarzis, where all the jewellery shops are. In a matter of days, together with Dali’s savings, they managed to put together the 7000 dinars needed for the *harga*.<sup>97</sup>

As Moufida and her daughters were busy trying to make this possible, talk of *harga* in Zarzis exploded. On several shared taxi rides (the main mode of shared transport in Zarzis) heading to and from Moufida’s neighbourhood, I heard young men excitedly speak of new *harga* possibilities in El Haouaria, some even mentioning Dali’s name. They often concurred that this was the time to go: there was an opening. Other families started selling valuables and collecting savings, and other young men started heading north. Moufida sent the money to Tunis with a cousin, together with new shoes, trousers, a raincoat, and underwear for him. These she believed her son would need to look proper and blend in once in Italy. On the same night that Imen gave birth to her first-born, Dali embarked on a *ski* boat to Sicily. Two weeks later, he was in Paris. Imen’s husband joined him after a couple of months through a similar arrangement, as did numerous young men from Zarzis, who decided to take their chance with this lead while it was still viable. Imen and her baby son were granted a tourist visa to France seven months later.

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<sup>97</sup> 7000 dinars in 2016 came to about 2700 euro.



Figure 4.1: “Restaurant Lampedusa”, Zarzis town centre. March 2017.

### Awled el huma – Sons of the neighbourhood

Oh ya 3alim, hayetna barcha srar

Oh ya 3alim, 3abed fil mut ta5tar

Ken el 8adra vas-y

Ken ybi3ou vas-y

Fi chedda wa7di n9asi

w ena 5tart n3aich brasi

C'est fini

Rojla weini weini

Mchat m3ak enti a5tini<sup>98</sup>

Hey world, our life has many secrets

Hey world, people choose death [the *harga*]

There is only betrayal, go for it

There are only those who sell you, go for it

In the hour of need I suffer alone

and I choose to live by myself

It's over

Where, where is a man you can count on

He went with you, leave me

<sup>98</sup> This transliteration of the song's lyrics, with numbers standing in for Arabic characters that do not have an equivalent in the Latin alphabet, reflects the way in which most Tunisians write to one another via text messages

Times of *harga* are thrilling. The fast-paced tempo at which information about a new route spreads, the excitement at the often-long-awaited possibility of leaving suddenly becoming tangible, the urge to gather the money fast and take off, all contrast markedly with the calmer, uneventful everyday rhythms of Zarzis. When older men – and even some of their peers<sup>99</sup> – liken the *harga* to a disease that is contracted by their juniors, and when women echo that comparison, it is perhaps precisely this heightened state of being and feeling that overtakes young men when *harga* journeys are being organised to which they are alluding. This generational phenomenon suddenly “gets” them and becomes an all-encompassing objective.

Dali’s departure outlined above resonates with the *harga* stories of the majority of young men from Zarzis that I got to know during fieldwork and that either aspired to do, or had already attempted, the *harga*. Most were in their late teens and early twenties, and many had dropped out of school at fourteen or at the end of high school. In a few cases, fourteen-year-olds and even younger teenagers went straight from leaving school to doing the *harga*. In others, men in their late twenties and thirties who were already married – like Imen’s husband – chose to leave.<sup>100</sup> Some had done professional courses to become plumbers, electricians, or mechanics, or worked on and off as builders, waiters in cafés, or as fishermen. Others had found employment only during the summer, doing small jobs related to the tourism industry – an unreliable sector at best given recent terrorist attacks in Tunisia targeting tourists – like renting out quads or taking tourists on horse or camel rides or on boat tours. Most were either seasonally unemployed or voiced being dissatisfied with doing lowly-paid odd jobs in Zarzis. These same young men, however, simultaneously spoke in eloquent terms praising the high quality of life they had compared to that of their cousins living in small, crowded apartments

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and on social media. Throughout the thesis, I have tried to reproduce people’s written use of language in both simplified transliteration and in this form in order to capture the multiple ways in which Tunisians employ language, which often, as in the above song, includes words and expressions from French and from other languages, creatively incorporating them into *derja*.

<sup>99</sup> See Kamel’s opinions on the *harga* in chapter 5.

<sup>100</sup> This age-range matches that of both *harraga* coming from other North African countries and Tunisians more generally leaving around the time of fieldwork, from 2015 onwards, who were also overwhelmingly male and on average between 18 and 30 years of age, with middle-aged men and minors being in the minority (see Herbert 2016: 7, 15).

in a rainy *banlieue* (suburb) of Paris. Nonetheless they still felt a need and, in most cases, a desire to leave.

This desire was shared and collective. *Awled el huma* (meaning sons of the neighbourhood, a term often used to refer to “the guys”) is a powerful category of belonging throughout Tunisia (see Ben Ezzine 2012), one which plays an important role in the *harga*. Young men often speak of feeling truly comfortable and relaxed only when they are in their *huma*, and of feeling unable to venture into other neighbourhoods uninvited, alone, or without a purpose, and especially not in the evening. While women move to their husband’s families once they marry, young men remain in the *huma* where they grew up after marriage, and usually build a house close to their father’s home with the help of their brothers, cousins and friends. While women move between neighbourhoods to visit their own natal families, and would be able to find shelter in their father’s house were they to need it, young men are more deeply rooted in one single zone. While also developing deep attachments to their maternal family’s *huma* by visiting regularly throughout childhood with their mothers, their primary attachment is to their father’s *huma*. The *huma* is therefore made up of a collection of people related through the patriline and of neighbours from other patrilines whose members have been living next to one another for generations. During fieldwork, when I was asked where I lived, people would immediately start guessing the last name of the family that might be hosting me, since everyone has a more or less precise idea of which neighbourhood is inhabited by which ‘Akkara family.

As regards the reason for leaving on the *harga*, the fact that the sons of neighbours, cousins and older brothers had done it – and had found more lucrative jobs in Europe that enabled them to send money home and in some cases even return to Zarzis with stylish clothes, new cars and motorbikes – is one of the reasons why younger men felt motivated to do likewise. The appearance of the *huma* itself changed with succeeding departures of *awled*, as new houses started being built as they sent money home – in preparation for future weddings. The make-up of the *huma* also changed with generation after generation of departures. Some *harraga* told me that when they were younger they used to be unsure as to whether they would take a shot at the *harga*, but when everyone their age started leaving, they were reluctant to be the only ones left in the neighbourhood, and so decided to leave too.

Crucially, the vast majority of men from the *huma* who had done the *harga* had made it to the opposite shores safely. Yet aspiring *harraga* often speak of having a fifty-fifty chance of

making it across the Mediterranean alive, and of God having in any case already decided when their time would come. Succeeding at the crossing was therefore explained as hinging on one's *maktub*: destiny. The risk of dying along the way was, however, thought of as relatively small, since, as Moufida expressed, the 'Akkara know the sea well, and also know better than to get onto unsafe vessels departing from neighbouring Libya. Countless family members, friends and acquaintances from the *huma* before them had done the crossing and had been successful, so much so that the *harga* often barely felt like a gamble. Many young men took the decision to "burn" together with friends, cousins and other peers, posting on social media or sending loved ones their videos and photos featuring the singing, sharing of cigarettes and biscuits, and chatter that goes on during the boat ride.

Yet, while the *harga* is a mainly male, generational movement born of the collective desires of the *awled el huma* and the collective expectations of those round about, it is also often spoken about by young men as being a matter of "*chacun pour soi*" (each for himself). Feelings of betrayal and abandonment, of having no one to rely on in times of need, as depicted in Samara's song above, point to this sense that while everybody desires and engages in the *harga*, and young men often embark on it with relatives and friends, it is also characterised by the potential for feeling alone against the odds, for being cheated, and for being disappointed by others.<sup>101</sup> As shown in Dali's journey, new modalities of travel across the Mediterranean open at different moments from different places, and have to be seized quickly despite the risks of being scammed by *panseurs*.<sup>102</sup> Navigating (Vigh 2009) these challenges is viewed an essential aspect of taking one's chance: being at the right place at the right time is one thing, but one also needs to seize the moment and recognise the necessity to act fast, and be able to mobilise one's relations accordingly. Losing face – Dali's chief concern when discovering he had been cheated – is a real possibility if one doesn't manage to take one's chance, and not being able to rely on relatives in moments that require expediency is experienced as being especially hurtful. Personal qualities of bravery, adventurousness, determination, assertiveness and abilities of persuasion are therefore valued and seen as fundamental for the *harga*. These are also, incidentally, attributes commonly associated with masculinity in Zarzis, and especially

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<sup>101</sup> Mastrangelo (2017, 2019) highlights that young men in working class neighbourhoods in Tunis often point out that they can only rely on themselves for the *harga* and more generally in life.

<sup>102</sup> On the figure of the smuggler in migrant journeys, see: De León on coyotes between Mexico and the USA (2015); Steinberg on smuggling in the Horn of Africa (2014).

with male youth (adult men usually being expected to act more calmly, less impulsively). Simultaneously, however, the *rojla*, meaning the people you can count on – a term that shares the same root as the word *rajil* (man) and can also be translated as meaning masculinity (see Ghannam 2013 for Egypt) – are not understood as being easy to come by. In *harga* matters, the only person you can really count on is yourself, young men claim.

This image of the *harraga* as a solitary man against the odds – against destiny, God, the sea, the police, the smugglers, friends and family who let you down when you are most in need – resembles that of a classic or legendary hero, and often surfaces in young men’s self-projections within imaginaries of the longed-for journey north. Yet these self-representations obscure the role of the family networks – often powered by women – that in reality act as infrastructure for the *harga*. Bemoaning the erosion in solidarity and support from their peers and families is often the way young men characterise their disheartening predicament. They then avow that they can rely only on themselves to try and make it across to Europe and improve their lives. This contributes to their feeling of being socially dead in Zarzis, of being disregarded, disrespected, abandoned, of not being seen as valuable – neither by loved ones nor by the state (Honneth & Margalit 2001: 113) – and therefore of being unable to make something of themselves. These were the same factors that they identified as being the trigger for their desire to *harga* to begin with.

The *harga* as a project, however, implicates whole families and communities, and women have an important role in it. An infrastructure of family relations both in Zarzis and in Europe are crucial for the success of the *harga*. The narrative of the *harga* being a personal quest obscures the labour of families – and most often women – which allows young men to be able to afford the crossing and pursue their objectives. Being helped by one’s family is almost taken for granted, but in the *bled* it is only talked about when young men fail to get to the other side, when they get sent back, or when they go missing along the journey. It is then that the motivation of families – and especially women – for helping sons get to France get reconfigured as greedy and reckless. This, in turn, sidelines the fact that young men’s feelings of social death are inextricably tied to the fears that other members of their families and communities hold of their loss of face. This turns the *harga* into a site of potential for escaping myriad social and economic problems that go well beyond those related to the self-fulfilment of individual *harraga*. The more “rational choice” explanations provided by young men and their families, and reiterated by myself at times to complicate the narrative of the *harga* hinging on individual

heroism seen above, should not however be taken to be the paramount drive of the *harga*, despite being perhaps the most socially acceptable way to make sense of it (which does not make it any less valid). The affective dimensions surrounding the crossing and a desired future, as well as family and neighbourhood dynamics of care, or related to competition and to maintaining a social standing, exist alongside the more pragmatic reasons that are often foregrounded by the *harraga* for feeling compelled to leave.



Figure 4.2: Taking the new scooter from France for a ride around the *huma* (neighbourhood). August 2016.

“The *harga* is women’s fault” – Mothers<sup>103</sup>

*Clandestino, perché senza soggiorno*

*Perché senza la mamma*

*Perché senza ritorno*

*Clandestino, io voglio diventare ricco*

*faccio contento la mamma*

*senza cadere a picco*

*Clandestino*, because without papers

because without mum

because there’s no going back

*Clandestino*, I want to become rich

I’ll make my mum happy

without going under

*Clandestino*, Master Sina feat. Balti (my translation)

*Top hit in Tunisia – and Italy.*<sup>104</sup> *Played frequently in Zarzis in cafés, cars, homes, and at weddings throughout the summer of 2016 and beyond.*

Mothers, ever present in songs about the *harga* (Salzbrunn, Souiah & Mastrangelo 2015) for being both the reason why sons leave – to make them proud – and why they long for home – they miss their mothers – are targeted with their share of accusations, lobbed at them mainly by their husbands and by older generations of men. As a man in his late sixties, originally from Zarzis but living in Tunis, once asked me:

Have you seen that video on Facebook of women dancing at a wedding and singing that they will not cry for the *harraga*? *Ya ‘ayni matibkish al harraga* (oh my eye don’t cry for the *harraga*). It’s mothers who are passing on this ideology. This is the ultimate *apologie* (glorification) of the *harga*. If that’s not a sign of crisis, then I don’t know what is.

This quote reflects a perhaps slightly exagerrated view, but it was nevertheless shared at least in part by several other men his age that I knew. In Zarzis, as is also common in the rest of Tunisia and in other Mediterranean countries (see Miller 2018: 603), the mother is often an immensely beloved, highly regarded and unconditionally loving figure. A mother would look

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<sup>103</sup> “The *harga* is women’s fault” – Wives-to-be will be discussed in chapter 5.

<sup>104</sup> The work of Braude (2019) in Palermo, Sicily, testifies to this song’s popularity in Italy, especially among migrant communities that aren’t just of Tunisian origin.

after her sons no matter what, and would always forgive them and pray for them, while fathers were often described or expected to be more *wa'r* (strict), more austere and inclined to nurture grudges, renowned for kicking sons out of the house without a second thought in the aftermath of a fight.

In Zarzis, however, mothers, and to a lesser extent sisters, were also accused of going behind the fathers' backs to sell their wedding jewellery<sup>105</sup> in order to finance their sons' and brothers' *harga* – something which did indeed sometimes happen, as in the case of Moufida and her daughters. Mothers were viewed as the main instigators of the *harga*, as those who pushed for their sons to leave and seek fortunes abroad in order to send money home and spoil them in their old age.

Sons in Zarzis tend to be closer to their mothers than their father, which is in part due to the fact that many fathers were working in France while they were growing up and were thus absent from the everyday tasks of their upbringing and schooling. It is also for this reason that mothers are blamed, since they are seen as responsible for not having encouraged sons to get an education and learn a trade, instead having channelled them towards the *harga* due to their own greedy, selfish calculations.

Mothers, for their part, often speak of sons' desires to do the *harga* as something that weighs as heavily on their own minds as on those of their sons. One mother described it as a droning sound that gives her headaches. Mothers too feel stuck, anxious, and ambivalent about the *harga*. They often feel helpless, not knowing what to do to assist their sons in finding their place and in feeling more at peace with their lives. As can be seen for Moufida, helping her children, both sons and daughters, to achieve better living conditions abroad seemed to her like the best, if not in some cases the only, solution to social and economic problems back home.

### **Letting them keep some hope**

Moufida and her family had been living for years in a single storey house that was simultaneously falling apart and under construction. The kitchen and bathroom were tattered,

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<sup>105</sup> Wedding jewellery is traditionally conceived as a woman's safety net money-pot.

in need of replacement, while many of the floor tiles were cracked. None of the walls had yet been painted over – the grey cement still showed from the building works – and the windows still had plastic film protection around the edges, as if they had just been fitted. No curtains had been put up, almost all of the lighting came from naked bulbs, and the door frame to the kitchen hosted no door. The mattresses of the living room *sala* (the sofas that typically line the walls of rooms where guests are received in Zarzis houses) were liable to sink under anyone's weight, which caused their fatigued yellow foam to peep from holes in the fabric.

One early afternoon in April 2017, while sitting in the sunken *sala* with Moufida and her older sister sipping tea with fresh almonds, Moufida briefly lamented these conditions, but justified them thus:

The visa process for Ayoub is costing us a lot of money indeed, but what should I do? I could just sit here and do nothing for my son and spend my money on getting the house done up nice. But I can't do that knowing that my son is unhappy and has no hope for the future. I need to give him some hope. That's what's missing in Tunisia, hope for young people to do something with themselves. Young people have an appetite to make something of themselves, to gain money, to have a job, they are hungry for work. But here it is impossible to make that happen.

After her oldest son Dali had done the *harga* that winter, her fourth son Ayoub had become Moufida's main worry. "My thoughts wander, they go full circle, and then they go back to what to do to help Ayoub", she said, drawing big circles through the air with her finger, over and over, each time punctuating their closing in the same spot with a firm forwards poke. Part of her apprehension stemmed from knowing that Ayoub wanted to follow in his brother's steps despite not being in Dali's position. Dali had left Zarzis with a *métier* (a profession): he had finished his training to be a mechanic and had already been working for some time in Tunisia. He therefore had specific skills and experience as a basis for finding a job in France. Ayoub did not.

Since the accident with his eye during his plumbing training he cannot be around dust anymore. He cannot be a plumber, he has stopped going to that school, so he needs to train in something different. But he doesn't seem interested in

starting anything else. Ayoub is a lot more confused and lost than Dali was when he left, that's why I don't want him to just take a boat and do the crossing. It makes me worry.

The fact that in France Dali had yet to find work in his field, having had to make do as a pizzaiolo and delivery man thus far, did not represent a problem for his mother: with time he would hopefully find something he enjoyed more. What mattered to her, however, was that Dali would always have his *métier* to rely on, and that knowing a trade had given him the confidence to do the *harga* and to have a goal on the other side, both of which she felt were lacking in the case of her younger son Ayoub. To this, Moufida's sister added: "Ayoub is also scared of taking the boat, he is not like Dali, he would be scared of going by boat."

Moufida, juggling between letting Ayoub keep up hope and sheltering him from the boat journey, activated her contacts in order to organise to get him a visa. Her sister's two sons had been living in Germany for many years, had residence permits, European wives and children, and good incomes. The plan was for she and Ayoub to ask for tourist visas to go and visit them. Ayoub could then cross over to France and join his relatives, Dali and Imen's husband, who would host him and help him find work. Staying in Germany was not an envisaged option: "they only give work to Syrians there, and there is no *marché noir*, they are too attached to the law, there is no leeway in Germany if you don't have papers." Moufida and her sister knew this because they had already procured a Schengen visa to travel to Germany a couple of years back – they had shown me pictures on their phones of the two of them smiling in thick winter coats and woollen hats surrounded by snowy landscapes. They had seen just how many Syrians had been welcomed there since 2011, but had also heard stories of Tunisians being repatriated because they did not qualify for asylum. Those who had managed to remain struggled to get any work.

In France things were different, one could easily work and rent a place even if *sans papiers*, they felt. A few days after he had arrived there, for example, Dali had found work in a kebab shop in Ivry owned by a man from Zarzis who was a friend of a friend. He had lived just above the shop for a couple of weeks until he found an apartment to share with some old friends from the *huma* who had done the *harga* just after him. He had been going from job to job since, using a fake Italian ID, always searching for something that would be slightly better paid. Although he lamented to his mother that everyone was out to exploit him, he had never been

out of work since he had arrived in Paris, which made Moufida proud. During their multiple daily video calls she often reminded him, however, that her being far away meant she couldn't help him as much as she would like, and so he had to be more of an adult now. His first priority should be focusing on regularising his situation as soon as possible. Finding a wife with a French passport could be the best option since, as his mother prompted him, this was no time to pursue flings, it was a time to get serious.

Moufida and her sister however felt that Ayoub needed to take a different kind of route to get to France – he would not have been able at this stage to follow in his brother's footsteps. They therefore reckoned that asking for visas for Germany for mother and son could work and would allow Ayoub to join Dali albeit under safer conditions, best suited to his age, character and situation. Moufida had hired an accountant to help her get all the papers ready. The accountant advised her to enrol Ayoub in a hairdressing course, so that he could present himself as a student doing practical training, giving him a better chance of getting a visa than if he featured as being unemployed. Moufida followed this advice, but was nevertheless anxious that their application would be rejected. Last time she had applied for a visa she was able to prove that her husband had an income, a relatively stable bank account history, and health insurance, giving the whole family – in her words – an air of respectability traceable in pay slips and documents. This time, she could not, as the following section documents.

### **The destinies of fathers**

Moufida's husband Belgacem did not match the image of the "traditional" father figure – he failed to fit the ideal of *rojla* sketched above. The term *rojla* encapsulates the values that a good man should uphold: being reliable, strong, hard-working, honest, generous, always ready to lend a hand, active. In sum, a *rajil* (man) should be the pillar of the family and of society.<sup>106</sup> Of course, it is commonly avowed, again quoting from Samara's song, that "*rojla sa'iba*" – honouring these qualities and being a pillar for others is difficult – "*dinia tkhalli*" – and the world leaves you to it. As a Tunisian saying goes, "*el rakhis 'omru maywalli rajil*", meaning that someone who is cheap, someone who is easily bought and who compromises on

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<sup>106</sup> Linguist Gemma Baccini helped me think through the definition of *rojla* and the different Tunisian sayings in this chapter.

themselves, will never in their lifetime become a *rajil*. Thus *rjela* (men, also meaning people you can count on) are thought to be hard to come by. Another common expression, “*sahbi rajjal*” (here the term is used as an adjective), meaning “my friend is someone who has my back, is someone who won’t deceive me”, shows that this ideal of masculinity centres on men’s accountability to others, on their ability to be trustworthy problem fixers, and to step up when needed.

Moufida’s sons and daughters loved their father very much. In different conversations, they each emphasised to me that he had never forbidden them from doing anything in life, he was not *wa’r* (strict), on the contrary, he had always encouraged them to follow their own path and accepted them unconditionally for who they were. Imen, the oldest of the siblings, and the only one to have gone on to university to become a physiotherapist, particularly appreciated the fact that, unlike some the fathers of her female friends, her father never told her what she should wear or how to behave, he was not controlling. He trusted her, and never questioned her choice to go study in Tunis, nor her choice of husband. Both Moufida and her husband had also been understanding when Hela, at seventeen, had announced to them that she wanted to marry the son of one of their neighbours. Despite not approving of her choice, finding that the young man, whom they had known since childhood, had a difficult character, and objecting that she was too young to marry, both her parents had ultimately allowed her to do what she wanted. Moufida and Belgacem saw that she was adamant about going through with it and, unlike her older sister, about not pursuing her studies. They later always left their door open when Hela needed to return home, and were now helping her through the divorce. Hela told me she was grateful to her father in particular for never asking her to explain herself or pressuring her to make a decision, but for just allowing her to take her time.

For emotional support, therefore, Belgacem could be relied on, and his sons and daughters were fond of him. He had however ceased being considered the financial pillar of the family for some time, and was known in the neighbourhood for not being good with making, investing, or saving money. He gambled, drank, and was thought to be both too generous and easily duped.<sup>107</sup> Moufida recalled that, just after the revolution, when fighting broke out in Libya, her

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<sup>107</sup> Being too generous and kind for one’s own good can be viewed as problematic male attributes, as others can easily take advantage, which reflects negatively on the image of the aider. See Osella & Osella on migration and

husband spent a lot of time helping Libyans and people from all nationalities who were fleeing into Tunisia for shelter. He gave as much as anyone in Zarzis, despite having very little. He had worked as a fisherman on other people's boats for a long time and never asked the owners for anything, recalled Moufida, but when it had been time to invest in his own boat he had not been able to make the right moves, and had ended up with nothing. He was also diabetic, and the leg he had broken while working had not healed properly, and so was still giving him trouble. Without health insurance, however, he resorted to going to hospital and renewing his medicine prescription only when absolutely necessary. He was in his mid-fifties, but the family held little hope of him finding a more stable source of income to put money aside for old age.

“God provides” Moufida believed, and so she hoped her husband's good nature and deeds would protect the family and would reward them with better luck in the future, despite avowing to having felt frustrated with him, and having considered divorce at periods during which his drinking (exacerbated in times of unemployment) became excessive. She nevertheless had not been sitting around waiting for their fortunes to change. She tended to be the one in charge of finances and of helping each of her children along. Moufida managed to keep the family going by letting out two apartments that her husband had inherited from his father. The tenants were Libyans who intermittently came to live in Zarzis when the fighting in Libya intensified, or people from Tataouine or other towns of the interior who came to Zarzis for their summer holidays. These two apartments were, according to her, the only possessions her husband had managed to hang onto. The rest of the inheritance – land, olive trees, and other small properties – had been stolen away by Belgacem's brothers, deemed dishonest by Moufida, who resided in France and in Tunis. The money from the rent allowed her to cover the family's basic expenses. Since neither she nor her husband worked (in the past, when they had been in financial need, she had worked in the laundry team of one of the big hotels, but hadn't done so in a long time) all extra costs – such as Ayoub's eye doctor bills when he had the accident during his plumbing training, the money needed to fix the two apartments up for renting, the money for Dali's *harga*, and later the visa expenses for Ayoub – she had managed to cover by taking out personal loans and repaying the interest through the income from the apartments and

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manhood in Kerela, where society accuses such men behind their backs of being “foolish and weak” for not being able to ascertain when it was a good idea to lend money or help (2020: 126).

with the help of family and friends. She always turned to the same loans company, putting down the two apartments as guarantee.<sup>108</sup>

It was also Moufida who called family members, neighbours and friends in times of financial need. Female members of the family had hidden both Dali's and Ayoub's *harga* from their father not because he was strict, violent, or because he would react by getting angry and by impeding their departures – which could in some cases constitute reasons for why other young men hid their *harga* plans from their fathers. Rather, they had kept it a secret because they did not want him to worry, and because they knew he was against the *harga* and wanted to spare him the humiliation of open disrespect. They were also, crucially, concerned with not dragging him into situations in which he would have to ask friends and family for favours and money to help his sons with the crossing. Moufida explained that everybody trusted her and knew she would pay them back. She also maintained it was less difficult and humiliating for women to ask for help than for men to do so. When she realised she needed money for Ayoub's visa, for example, Moufida went ahead and called two of her husband's close friends, knowing that it would not be right to put him through the anguish of having to do it. She knew it would be best if she went ahead without telling him.

In many ways, Moufida and her husband's characters and relationship, and the ways in which their family approached the *harga* of their two sons, are specific to their story. They are not necessarily representative of how family dynamics, money and journeys are organised in Zarzis more broadly. However, women in Zarzis do often manage their household's finances, especially when husbands live and work abroad, and many women are also employed, their families relying on their salaries as much as on those of their husbands. In women's recollections of the *harga* (and of other similarly pivotal moments in their family lives), stories abound of the efforts they make to avoid having their husbands, brothers or sons lose face, hope, and self-esteem. To avoid their menfolk feeling *hshuma* (ashamed), they thus ask for money in secret, or find ways to gather it with speed. Young men too preferred not to dwell too much on their failed *harga* experiences. Those who tried to burn and who were either caught by Tunisian police or were immediately repatriated (*expersé* in local dialect) by Italian

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<sup>108</sup> The image of Tunisia's "economic boom" predicated by Ben Ali to legitimate his rule was very much made possible by certain mechanisms of economic inclusion, including the ease with which individuals could pay on credit or take out loans – see Hibou (1999, 2011).

authorities, often spent days avoiding their friends or going anywhere where they would have to talk about it. When they did eventually emerge, they did not want to dwell on their experience, and stated that they had simply been unlucky, and that they would try again and hope for better luck next time. This was often despite knowing that gathering the money to burn once more would take time, and that that period would be difficult both for themselves and for their families.

### **Clocharat**

Sometimes, women interpret young men's feelings of stuckness, shame, and depression as leading them towards desperate actions. These, which can have shameful repercussions for themselves and for families, are sometimes labelled *clocharat* (from the French *clochard*, meaning homeless person, but in the Tunisian context relating to the actions of (especially) young men who misbehave, who get up to immoral or illegal business). Women bemoan that young men do get desperate despite their best efforts to keep them thinking positively and to shoulder some of the future-oriented planning and labour. For instance, after waiting for several months for his visa from the German embassy, Ayoub found out that it had been rejected. While Moufida tried to figure out how to appeal the decision, or whether it was worth making a new claim, he attempted to gather money for the *harga* himself by acting as a mediator in the sale of a motorbike. Unfortunately for him, the vehicle had been stolen. The man who had hired him as mediator, and who had stolen the motorbike, was untraceable and had disappeared with the money – it was later discovered that he had used it for the *harga* himself. It was only Ayoub who was caught and imprisoned for the crime.

He wasn't thinking about the consequences, he just wanted easy money so he could leave sooner. The owner of the motorbike is an honest man who really isn't very wealthy at all. It is shameful (*'aib*) that they stole his scooter. But now it's only Ayoub who is in prison, and we have to find the money to get him out and to repay the owner.

Moufida went to visit her son in the infamous Harboub prison in Medenine, the governorate's capital, at just over an hour's drive from Zarzis, as often as she could. Belgacem instead refused to visit Ayoub, finding what he had done too shameful. He went on a fishing expedition for

several days, and then tried not to go to cafés or walk around the neighbourhood too much, knowing people’s gossip and questions insinuating that Ayoub might have actually been the thief would upset him. “This isn’t how I raised him (*marabbitush hekkeka*), these are not the values (*qiyam*) we live by”. Ayoub’s actions would have repercussions on Belgacem’s and the family’s integrity, his father felt, as they had been the ones who had raised him. A paramount insult in Tunisia is to say of someone that they are rude because they were badly raised (*mush motrabbi*), as it is an accusation that taints the whole family. As will be seen in the next chapter, the relationship between a paternalistic state (which had been Bourguiba’s style of rule in Tunisia, and to a certain extent also Ben Ali’s) and the population is also viewed to entail the state “raising” its citizens. Having corrupt (*fussad*) leaders that raise their subjects to steal, for example, was believed by some to have turned Tunisia into a country of “dogs” (*kileb*) – of immoral thieves (*surraq*) – who were understood to still be ruling Tunisia after the revolution.

Many fathers with whom I spoke recounted not having been in the know when their sons embarked on the *harga*, and often spoke of their wives as having been much more involved in listening to, providing advice and sometimes money (often by selling their wedding jewellery) for their sons’ journeys. The reasons for keeping *harga* plans hidden from fathers spelt out above could have been relevant in different cases too. While many fathers, in recounting their sons’ journeys, detached themselves from the choices of sons, bolstered instead by the help of mothers, by avowing that they did not know their sons were leaving – for whatever reason – mothers, like Moufida, tended to avow their support for the *harga*, and in the few cases in which their sons said they had not told their mothers, the reason tended to solely be because they did not want to make them worry. In a *bled* where the majority of young men dream of *harga*, fathers surely suspect that this route might be taken by sons. The therefore (often) open secret surrounding *harga* journeys is necessary to allow both young men and fathers to maintain the reputation, hope, and self-respect, that mothers and sisters are also invested in upholding. In the words of Ghannam:

Fundamentally, women’s support, instructions, and corrections are structured by social norms that define proper men and by a strong desire to see their male relatives become men who are respected and cherished by themselves and others. Women are not isolated and segregated but are entangled in the broader cultural and social universe that defines the proper man and they work diligently to

materialize that understanding in the trajectories of their male relatives. (2013: 105)

As is also argued by Rogers (1975) by exploring male/female household relations in a French village, bolstering men's social standing beyond the home was something women very much participated in. These approaches clash with once popular characterisations in 1960s anthropology of Mediterranean and Arab majority societies as driven by the paired concepts of honour and shame. Social life in these societies – where state institutions were thought to be weak at best – was painted through a gendered “system of social values” made up of male worlds defined by claiming honour, and female worlds concerned with modesty (Stewart 2015). Numerous scholars (see, for instance, Abu-Lughod 1989: 286) have since countered the idea that “honor is exclusive to men” and that women “passively” defend it (Stewart 2015). Following Ghannam, Rogers, and Abu-Lughod, I would contend that entangled projects of self and family fulfilment, of individual and collective social advancement channelled through the *harga*, were important to and created by both men and women. Despite the *harga* being physically actualised by (mostly) men, it also implicated women's own sense of worth, image and dignity. Moufida and Belgacem's family, like many others in Zarzis, lived the *harga* through the simultaneously intimate, personal, political, and collective structures of feelings that constitute it.

### **“We either drown or we burn”**

Many young men, including Dali and Ayoub, viewed the *harga* as a make-or-break matter. “*Ya gharga ya sharga*”: we either drown (*gharga*) in the Mediterranean, or we manage to “burn” (*sharga*) and begin a new life on the opposite shore. This is a refrain that inhabitants of Zarzis of all ages repeated almost mechanically, as a matter-of-fact explanation for why (especially) male youth engaged in this potentially risky journey to Europe. Implicit in this statement is the idea that they had nothing to lose regardless of the outcome of the *harga*. Young men felt they had, and would be, unable to build or make anything of themselves in Tunisia – a place where the horizon of possibility for becoming a responsible adult (*rajil*) and for founding and providing for a wife and family was viewed as unreachable. Getting out was understood as a matter of achieving or regaining that dignity which was understood to be unattainable in Tunisia. Asking parents for money to buy cigarettes or coffee, begging relatives and

acquaintances for jobs, having to chase people up more often than not to get paid, bribing a police officer or a municipality employee to get a permit to become a taxi driver – these were all recurrent examples in young men’s narratives for explaining why staying in Zarzis was hopeless, and why it was viewed as undignified living. Having to ask, having to beg, having to lower oneself to obtain one’s due, made them feel worthless, and made them view their future as equally hopeless. They often rationalised that they might as well face the dangers of the *harga* in order to be able to advance socially back home and escape what they perceived as social death.

There are two main aspects to this claim that are crucial to unpick in order to better understand this “we have nothing to lose, so we might as well risk doing the *harga*” standpoint. The first – explored above – is the fact that, despite many young men talking about having a fifty-fifty chance of making it across the sea alive, and of this having already been determined by God through one’s personal *maktub* (destiny), the vast majority of those who do the *harga* arrive safely. A considerable number manage to avoid being caught and *expersés* (expelled), and to arrive in France or other aspired-to destinations. Thus, most of the *huma* and families of Zarzis have a substantial proportion of their male population living abroad. This acts as tangible encouragement for younger generations of men to follow in their cousins’ and neighbours’ steps by migrating in turn. The other aspect, to which I will now turn, is that Tunisia is seen as a place where the possibility of languishing, and eventually becoming “socially dead”, looms large.

For many young men, Zarzis and Tunisia were spaces of stasis and entrapment, where there was no hope of anything happening or changing in their lives, and where a different future was unimaginable. Getting by as they were doing did not match their hopes for and visions of themselves, and did not allow them to live up to their family’s or to society’s expectations. They reasoned that risking actual death at sea was worth it for a second chance at being reborn into a new life abroad. This, in turn, was seen as opening up possibilities for a new life back home. Almost no young man I spoke to avowed upfront to wish to establish himself in Europe forever. On the contrary, many spoke of wanting to do the *harga* in order to earn enough money, experience the world, see how people live in this much fantasised elsewhere, and then return to the *bled* and build a family in their *huma*. Despite loving certain aspects of Zarzis and knowing that France was not El Dorado, few had any work stability, and few could aspire to a regular income, social security in case of accidents in the workplace, paid holiday leave, or a

pension – all things that they sought and believed might be available for them in Europe. As Obeid (2015) argues regarding the demands of the 2011 uprisings throughout the Arab world, desiring the state, what she calls “states of aspiration”, were at the heart of those revolutions. Young Tunisians desired the jobs and security nets that would allow them to make their own decisions and become less reliant on their families, and that would allow them to take up the position of *rjela* (responsible adult men, “proper” men (Ghannam 2013: 85)) vis-à-vis their parents, siblings, and later their own future wives and offspring. They wished to go from depending on others to being dependable.

In this quest, fearing social death, young men were perpetually busy trying to make something of themselves. The trope of the youth idling around in cafés was widespread, with the *awled* from one *huma* accusing the *awled* from another *huma* of being lazy and just moping around in cafés all day. Yet none actually spent their days doing nothing. As Masquelier’s ethnography of young un-and-under-employed men in Niger (2013) shows, waithood and boredom are not unproductive and value-less – there is much creativity, hope and labour involved within them too. What is more, I can think of no examples of men being actually excluded from sociality and from their families, or being considered “socially dead” to their loved ones. If we take Moufida’s husband Belgacem, for example, despite not living up to local ideals of masculinity, none of his sons and daughters – nor even Moufida herself – considered him a failure or a bad man, but instead expressed empathy and understanding for his predicament and for the fact that things had not worked out for him as he would have liked.

### **Stuck families**

Despite knowing that the *harga* can be deadly, and despite knowing that Europe is not paradise, the narrative that it is a prime solution to young men’s feeling of being constantly on the edge of worthlessness continues to be powerful, even for families who do not believe it to be a solution and who have personally suffered the loss of a loved one to the *harga*.

Dalel lost both her brother and her son in February 2011, when a boat carrying around 200 men was hit by a Tunisian military ship in an attempt to stop it from reaching Lampedusa. The bodies of the two young men and of the nineteen others who died in the accident were never found. Dalel’s husband, Bechir, became the spokesperson for the families of the missing for

this particular case,<sup>109</sup> and took on the role of updating me on the legal case. Once, as I was helping Dalel with the cooking, she said:

The neighbour's son is visiting from France for the 'Eid. He was in the same class as Hakim [her missing son], they were on the same boat that day, but he survived. Then he tried again and the second time it worked: he made it to Lampedusa. I don't know how he could try again after what happened. Young men are different. I couldn't have tried again after knowing people died. It's youth: they are different. He has a French wife and he got his papers now in France. It was luck.

After his son's accident, Bechir helped several other young men from his neighbourhood make it to France, by either mediating with the organisers to let them go for less or for free, or by giving them money. It was an impulsive reaction to his son's disappearance, he says. His son had not made it, and he felt all the more keen to help others to get where they wanted to go. After a while he stopped, though, and came to feel that the *harga* was a problem and that the Tunisian state should either work hard to get their sons visas or strive to keep them in Tunisia. Either way, his son's death was to be blamed, he believed, on the captain of the military boat, on the Tunisian state, and on Europe. Bechir also blamed himself for having let his son go. Thinking back at the discussions the two of them had had just before Hakim's departure, his son had argued that even women and children were embarking on the *harga*, which had made Bechir give in: if even women were leaving, he had felt he had no grounds for prohibiting his son from going.

The wider community's ambivalence towards the *harga* could most cruelly find a target in the form of blame directed towards families of missing or deceased *harraga*. After news of a shipwreck ran on the evening news my host family's first reaction was a resigned questioning as to why families insist on letting their sons go – or worse, in pushing their sons to leave – and to incur these terrible risks, how families and young men could be so reckless. The

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<sup>109</sup> The struggles of the Tunisian families of missing *harraga* to demand the truth from Italy and Tunisia about their disappeared sons came to the fore in the aftermath of the revolution and became an important social movement in the country. See: Ben Khalifa (2013); Boubakri & Potot (2013); Cassarino (2018); Oliveri (2016); Sossi (2016); Souiah (2019).

assumption that pressure to do the *harga* came from families, and that if sons died the responsibility partly fell on their shoulders, was widespread. As Dalel points out, though, the *harga* is characterised by an element of luck, unpredictability, and risk, and it is a game whose rules are dictated by higher powers – by God, the sea, the state, the military, the EU. Yet, since all too often it is the only mode of travel available to young men, and since most make it across, the allocation of responsibility and blame for the gamble that is migration are rarely mentioned when things go to plan and the *harraga* succeed in getting to Europe. Ignoring these issues becomes more problematic when those who did the *harga* fail at regularising their migration status, and are thus unable to travel back or send much money to their families. In these cases, families in Zarzis start speaking of their loved one's heart having died in France (*gelbu met*).

While still fighting for justice for the death of their first son, Bechir and Dalel's more pressing worry now is their second son Achraf. They had always forbidden him to attempt the *harga*, scared of losing another son. In telling me about his aspirations, Achraf – who was then eighteen and among the few young men his age left in his neighbourhood – often oscillated between moments of restlessness, desperation, and resignation. His grades in middle school started deteriorating after his brother's death. He lost interest in school and barely made it to high school. After dropping out at fourteen, he tried a couple of internships in plumbing and electronics, neither of which interested him much, and then went on to work in big hotels as part of the activities and entertainment team. Dalel was able to feel calm only when Achraf was away from Zarzis doing internships in hotels elsewhere. She knew that he was frustrated about being offered only unpaid internships, but she tried to reason with him that he was still young and needed to gather experience before being given a job. She felt thankful that he had not yet done anything rash, he had managed to evade the pitfalls of *clocharat*, such as stealing in order to pay for the expense of leaving or getting into trouble with the police. When he was far from the *bled* and all the talk of *harga*, Dalel felt that there was hope that he might be able to distract himself and build a life.

This feeling of helplessness in the face of sons feeling unhappy and stuck reflected a shared sentiment among mothers of missing Tunisian *harraga*. This points to a more generalized sense of helplessness in the face of the structural inequalities that these often gendered “blame games” partially obscure. At a meeting of the families of the missing in Tunis, a mother summarised this by saying: “it is important to keep fighting to know the truth about what happened to our disappeared sons. But a more pressing matter is that I have another son who

tells me he wants to do the *harga* too, he has been waiting to leave for years, and I don't know what to tell him anymore". Dalel concluded that the *harga* is like a disease, and that there is nothing much mothers can do to cure it.

## **Conclusion**

The "ugly feelings" and accusations that circulate around the desire for *harga* in Zarzis point to the fact that, despite migration being central to life in this emigration town, the *harga* also constitutes a potentially subversive act. Focusing on the negative emotions associated with it helps to provide a multifaceted, embodied and affective account of how the border affects the home communities of irregularised travellers. But, tellingly, this focus also highlights how the politics of accusation surrounding migration are linked to broader generational and gender frictions underpinning discourses of political and social change in Tunisia.

By looking at how an ambivalent set of sentiments about and valuations of the *harga* becomes reified, and how it feeds affective behaviours and forms of blame-allocation at moments when the *harga* fails, I have shown how inhabitants of Zarzis resort to reinforcing a conservative social order predicated on the urgency of reproducing the patriarchal household. The perceived societal "moral breakdown" caused when the *harga* goes wrong is therefore followed by an "ethical demand" (Zigon 2007) to reconstitute an order of sorts whereby "traditional" power holders (older men) maintain a moral high ground (and control), while women and young men are accused of greed and of incurring reckless risks. The aspirations of the young men, in turn, are involved in maintaining the status quo, as they are directed towards travelling and working abroad in order to allow Zarzis to remain a space where the social order can be reproduced. Doubts surrounding whether these foregrounded aspirations will actually be fulfilled once in France, and whether women too will incrementally start embarking on *harga* journeys, show that these structures of sentiments and affective moral policings, largely sustained by young men, women and mothers, may also constitute the vantagepoints of change.



Figure 4.3: Waiting for the *iftar* (the breaking of the fast during Ramadan). July 2016.

## Chapter 5

### A dignified life

#### The walls of the *huma*

August 2017, Zarzis

During the summer of 2017, as more and more young men I knew in Zarzis were taking their chance at the *harga*, a new graffiti appeared on the wall facing the narrow dirt path leading to the *huma* (neighbourhood) where Baba al Hajj's family lived. It expressed frustrations similar to the ones I had heard from several inhabitants of both Zarzis and Tunis regarding the outcomes of the revolution. Taking inspiration from a famous line<sup>110</sup> by Iraqi poet Abu al 'Atahiya, which many Tunisian children learn by heart during their primary school years, this new graffiti read:

If only we could go back to our youth, and with that returns Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Leila, because we've had enough of her dogs – *tfuh* [spit on them].<sup>111</sup>

The walls of the *huma* – separating different properties, under-construction houses, olive trees, palm trees, and sandy fields occupied at times by a camel or a horse – had for several years been displaying other messages from especially one of its *awled* (sons). Ghali, the youngest of Hedi's children – Baba al Hajj's deceased son – amused himself, his brothers, and friends by spraying his discontent. "*C'est pour déconner*": he does it to kid around, emphasised his oldest brother Abdelmalek. Ghali explained this seemingly contradictory sentence in this way:

Zine and Leila left us their dogs here in the country: people who were working under Leila Ben Ali. The police, ministers, all of them. When you see how they behave – they don't behave well towards us. When I see how they behave

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<sup>110</sup> The poem is called *Bikitu 'ala al shabab bidamu'i 'ayni*.

<sup>111</sup> *Ya layit al shabab y'aud yuma wa ma'ah zine al 'abidine ben 'ali u leila faqad dhuqn dhar'a min kileybiha tfuh.*

towards people it drives me crazy. So the spit is for the police.<sup>112</sup> They stayed. If they hadn't stayed Tunisia would be like Dubai. The revolution didn't bring anything. Ben Ali and Leila were alright. Leila was a bit bad, because she wasn't very intelligent, she didn't have the qualifications to get that position – she was a hairdresser (*hajjema*) when Zine married her, she hadn't studied.<sup>113</sup> [In order to be a politician] you should have at least completed the second or third year [of high school]. *Yarham weldihum ennes el kull*, [God have mercy on everyone's parents, if you don't have that level of education, I don't disrespect you]. It's just that it's best for politicians to have studied. When you *yrabbi* [raise, train, educate]<sup>114</sup> a dog, that dog cannot follow someone else.

On the corner opposite, a more faded, slanted graffiti announces the entrance to “*hay ezzhur*” – the neighbourhood of flowers. The term *hay* is the Standard Arabic word for neighbourhood, used in official documents, while *huma* designates the neighbourhood one is attached to, the place one belongs to.

- Did you write that as a joke, “neighbourhood of flowers”?
- Never! I love my *huma*, it's the most beautiful of places.

A broad smirk confirmed this to be a deliberately ambiguous statement – it was up to me and to whoever else passed by to decide how to interpret it. At another entrance to the maze of paths that make up the *huma*, Ghali had inscribed a different designation for it: *humt erro'b*, neighbourhood of terror. This affirmation could have been written as a warning to outsiders, since young men would not commonly venture into other neighbourhoods uninvited. It could also be interpreted as a statement of fact, describing the mood of the neighbourhood according

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<sup>112</sup> “A figure to remember is the Tunisian police apparatus’ at the fall of Ben Ali, which comprised of a hundred and thirty thousand men, as many as France’s, despite Tunisia comprising of a sixth of the population. This makes it one of the highest police supervision rates in the world.” (Dakhliya 2011: 51, my translation).

<sup>113</sup> Leila Trabelsi, Ben Ali’s wife, was often disparagingly referred to as *al hajjema* (the hairdresser), highlighting her lower class and education level compared to her husband’s. She was particularly disliked by the Tunisian population, as was her family, who were seen as being the main “clan” running the state like a mafia. For an exploration of her and her family’s corruption and wrongdoings, and what Leila’s persona represented to Tunisians, see Beau & Graciet (2009) and Ben Chrouda & Soares Boumalala (2011).

<sup>114</sup> This verb can be used for both children and animals to mean raise, bring up, but also educate or train.

to Ghali on that day. On the other hand, in *derja* (Tunisian dialect) the verb *yer'ab*, to feel terror, can also be used to mean its opposite, and so to designate something extremely “cool”.<sup>115</sup>

On another wall further down the track, a bulldog’s face smiled between a deleted graffiti painted over in black and a sentence affirming that “*sh'ab thib tahrag*”.

- Did you mean *sh'ab* as in “the youth” or “the people”? [the word *sh'ab* can mean both, and the graffiti’s spelling wasn’t grammatically sound]
- It’s the people: the people want to burn (*tahrag*). The people including everyone, old people, young people, women, girls, boys.

Ghali, twenty-two at the time, had himself attempted the *harga* earlier that year. Being the youngest brother out of eight siblings – five brothers and three sisters – he had been too young in 2011 when the revolution broke out and many of the young men from the neighbourhood had left, including two of his brothers, Said and Lotfi. He had therefore remained in Zarzis with his mother and with his brother Kamel – in his late twenties – who had refused to leave, and who had taken the reins of the family after their father Hedi’s death in 2010.<sup>116</sup> Their oldest brother Abdelmalek – in his mid-thirties – had moved to France with a student visa to live with his uncles in 2002. After having abandoned his high school studies, he had continued living and working near Paris undocumented, without being able to ever return to Zarzis, not even for their father’s funeral. After having been repatriated in 2012, and after a period in prison, he had also joined Kamel, Ghali, their mother and their youngest sister in the family home. By 2016, most of his family – except Kamel, who was against the *harga* altogether, as we will see below – agreed that since it was still his wish, the time had come for Ghali to try also his luck at getting to France. He had thus travelled to Tunis in January 2017 and had lived there with a friend for a couple of months to search for a lead for the crossing. After having spent most of his money to no avail living in the more expensive capital, and having almost lost all of the

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<sup>115</sup> This is similar to the words “sick” and “wicked” in London slang, which are used to mean their very opposite.

<sup>116</sup> Chapter 1 introduced this family, showing how Kamel was tasked with carrying out the sacrifices of the rams at the ‘Eid in the name of his uncles in France.

sum his family had helped him gather for the journey in a deal that he luckily realised was a scam before it was too late, he had returned home to Zarzis.<sup>117</sup>

Back in the *huma*, adamant to be his own boss, Ghali had started running a car repair workshop from his family home's garage. Business was decent, as he had made a name for himself among emigrants from the *huma* who in the summer months brought back T-Max motorbikes, quads and cars on ships arriving to Tunisia from Marseille, Genova or Palermo. Most importantly for Ghali, he was independent. His ambition of moving to Paris, however, had not wavered.

I still want to do the *harga*. I still want to go, to get out. I work as a mechanic. I don't earn much, and I have no savings. In my mind I need a lot of money. Over there in France, I'd like to improve my qualifications, I want to broaden my knowledge in order to then come back here and become a mechanic in big construction sites, not just motorbikes and scooters. I want to go over there and see what the deal is. Then I'll come back: I don't want to stay there for long far from my mother.

Where the dusty trail bifurcates into two, another writing in black paint, this time in French, declares "*la guerre pour faire ma vie*" (a war to lead my life). The word *mafia* is written in capital letters above the word *la vie* (life), also in capitals.

Every now and again a *muja* [a wave, an idea] comes. Like, I could be sitting with a friend, I don't know why, *la guerre* [war]... it comes. In Tunisia before [the revolution] we couldn't move much, we couldn't do much. Here, now [after the revolution], we started to have the freedom to hold opinions, and this makes us feel like we're a big deal. Do you get me? But if people tell you that Tunisia is doing well, they are not telling the truth: things have gotten worse. Before, the state took care of us here, they didn't leave us to get ill. They didn't leave us fighting in the streets. They taught us well. Now in school children don't learn anything. At the time of the revolution I was in second year [of high school], close to going on to the baccalaureate. Before the situation wasn't a mess like it

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<sup>117</sup> The Introduction details Ghali's grandmother Umm Akri's point of view on his *harga* attempt and on the *harga* more generally.

is today, especially with education. In primary school, middle school, high school, they taught us with a good heart. But now they tell you do whatever you like. Things were better before. Before, only one person stole from us and that's it. Only Zine El Abidine Ben Ali stole from us. Now everyone has started to steal from us.

Afifa, Ghali's aunt, with whom I lived, had been his maths teacher in middle school. She felt it was a shame that he had stopped studying: he was a bright student, she believed Ghali had potential. After the death of his father, however, followed by the revolution and many of his peers and older brothers leaving, his mother and the rest of the family had too many other concerns. When he had announced to them that he would stop studying, they had not insisted on his continuing. Ghali reasoned that

Here there is no money, no democracy, no respect – there is nothing. What can I do? I can't work if I have someone screaming at me. Here, I don't know why, but I cannot live. The life here, it's not life, because if a person doesn't have money here it's a problem. You can't do anything, you're always stuck in the same place. *Obligé* [it's a must] you go there [to France] because there is the euro there [which in Tunisia carries you a long way] and actual democracy.

Looking around from his workstation in the garage, Ghali pointed to the under-construction house that his brother Said, who lived in France, had commissioned his other brother Kamel, who had stayed and worked as a mason, to start building now that his wife had given birth to their first daughter.<sup>118</sup> Beyond it was the almost-finished villa that the brothers had all been working on in anticipation of Abdelmalek's wedding the following summer. Ghali affirmed that he would not build his home in the *huma*, but near his mother's kin. Youngest sons usually inherit the family house, but before dying Hedi had willed theirs to be passed on to his three daughters, ensuring that they would have a safety net were they to divorce or to not marry. Ghali enjoyed the idea of founding what he called “another national team” – meaning a big

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<sup>118</sup> It was rare in Zarzis for couples to marry unless the groom's family provide an apartment or a house for them in advance of the wedding. In the case of Said and his wife, though, he had started renting a big enough apartment for them both in a Paris *banlieue*, and the couple were in love and adamant to marry. The families agreed that the house in Zarzis would be built at a later stage.

family, similar to the eight-siblings one he had grown up in – in a different *huma*. Envisaging this future for himself, however, seemed difficult without first moving to France.

The problem is the money. Here, women from here... say a man comes back from France and says “I’ll marry you now”. It doesn’t matter what *niveau* [level of education] he has, or if he hasn’t done any schooling, the girl will say “yes” immediately. Believe me, this is how it is: I’ll give you the Snapchat or Facebook contact of my girlfriend and you can ask her if she’d like to marry someone from France – I know she’ll say “yes”. If you take a Tunisian woman and you tell her you can marry this teacher – a teacher like Afifa, someone knowledgeable – and you bring her someone who makes pizzas in France, one earns 900 dinars [approximately 280 euro] and the other one 1200 euro, and has a house, and has a car, she will go with the one in France.



Figure 5.1: An abandoned *muja* (wave, idea), which Ghali wrote on a wall of his *hay ezzuhur* (neighbourhood of flowers)/*humt erro’b* (neighbourhood of terror). January 2017.

## **Introduction – *Harga*, revolution, and social reproduction<sup>119</sup>**

Ghali's various graffiti – products of spontaneous ideas that came while socialising with friends, written “*pour déconner*”, to kid around – encapsulate some of the contradictions and ambivalences that people were grappling with in post-revolutionary Tunisia. As explored in the introduction to the thesis, Tunisia and Zarzis were both experienced by their inhabitants as going through different and entangled ‘in-betweens’. Ghali's writings on his *huma*'s walls point to questionings common among Tunisia's citizens about the gains and setbacks of the 2011 revolution. Had change really come about, or were the same people continuing to rule the country in the usual corrupt and plundering manner? Were some aspects of life better before the revolution? The police and politicians were still often felt to be treating ordinary citizens with disrespect, and the economic and security climates were generally perceived as having worsened.<sup>120</sup> Education, which to a certain extent continued to be upheld as a route to social improvement by different generations, was believed to have become more and more devalued during Ben Ali's rule, and its quality to have declined further after the revolution. It had thus lost some of its standing for the youth, whose seeking of the *harga* incremented older generations' apprehensions at what they perceived to be a degradation of both *niveau* (intellectual level) and moral compass among young Tunisians. The latter, however, analysed the country's transition to democracy as being riddled with corruption, disdain towards the youth and the unemployed, and a lack of possibilities for either gaining a good education or for following one's aspirations in different ways. They felt that in order to be able to reproduce their parents' standard of living and create a family of their own, they had to migrate. Often, like Ghali, they foregrounded the economic reasons for why “the people want to burn”, emphasising their desire for a dignified future in Zarzis that resembled that of their parents and

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<sup>119</sup> Parts of this introduction and parts of earlier versions of some of the sections in this chapter were published in *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* (Zagaria 2019d).

<sup>120</sup> See Souiah (2018) and Mastrangelo (2017, 2019) for how these feelings of disrespect and *hogra* (strong humiliation, being despised and looked down upon) were being experienced by young men in working-class neighbourhoods in the capital of Tunis at around the same time as my fieldwork in Zarzis (between 2015 and 2017). These feelings, just like in Zarzis, were closely linked to a feeling of disappointment in the revolution.

grandparents, and which would be characterised by pursuing labour that ensured financial independence, without being oppressed (*madhlum*)<sup>121</sup> and feeling constant disrespect (*hogra*).

“While the international community celebrates Tunisia as the Arab world’s sole example of a successful transition towards democracy, Tunisian citizens are disillusioned with the unfinished democratisation process, sapped by terrorism, unemployment and unrelenting corruption”, write Marzouki and Meddeb, summarising the outcomes of a conference focusing on post-revolutionary Tunisian politics (2016: 1). The issue of “state continuity” was a feature of Tunisian political history that academics working on the transition during the same years as my fieldwork (2015-2017) were identifying as having remained salient (Dakhli 2013; Dakhli 2011; Marzouki & Meddeb 2016). As Marzouki and Meddeb highlight, during the revolutionary process “a majority of politicians resumed reformism as the most legitimate form of politics. This attachment has been a characteristic of Tunisia throughout the course of its history: from the Beylik of Tunis, to the national state after the Independence, all the way to the neoliberal era introduced by the Ben Ali’s regime” (2016: 2). In the aftermath of the 2011 revolutionary moment, voices calling for compromise and a return to the smooth running of the state so as to salvage Tunisia’s image and economy – mostly “emanating from the bourgeoisie and the middle urban classes” – and those keeping up protests and calling for a clean slate were battling it out, creating a seemingly paradoxical understanding of the revolution as having already been betrayed while still being an ongoing process (Dakhli 2013). Indeed, as Dakhli points out, the main way in which this “non-ideological revolution” (2011: 93) was neutralised in public discourse by some intellectuals and elites was by arguing that the state was “healthy”, and that the problem had been the corruption of a handful of individuals at its head (2011: 57, 59). Was progress towards establishing a democratic political system turning out to be conservative, or even counter-revolutionary? Was it being made “at the expense of the revolutionary demands for dignity and social justice?” (Marzouki & Meddeb 2016: 2).

During my fieldwork, “disappointment and discouragement” (Dakhli 2013) were widespread affects surrounding the topic of political change. Especially during the summer and autumn of 2017, *harga* departures started picking up in considerably greater numbers among the youth in

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<sup>121</sup> In other parts of the Arab world this word would be transliterated as *mazlum* – I spelt it *madhlum* as it is closer to its pronunciation in *derja*.

Zarzis and all over Tunisia, putting the small Mediterranean country back in the headlines of international news outlets (RFI 2017). Italian media started reporting a growing number of what they termed *sbarchi fantasma* – ghost landings – of Tunisians in Sicily, meaning arrivals of relatively small boats that were not detected and brought to shore by the authorities, and that thus landed autonomously and remained mostly invisible and uncounted (see Paluzzi 2017; Scherer 2017). During the month of October 2017 alone, more Tunisians attempted the *harga* than the total number of those who had done so in 2015 and 2016 combined (Herbert & Gallien 2017). Many read this increase in departures as a reminder that, despite the revolution, the underlying social, economic and political problems that had led to the 2011 uprisings in the first place had remained largely unaddressed. In a report on this 2017 increase in *harga* numbers, the FTDES (Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights) reasoned that after the revolutionary moment's boom in departures in 2011, irregular migration numbers had dropped as a result of "hopes borne by some Tunisians regarding the new political discourse that included the youth and which promised them change in terms of employment opportunities" (FTDES 2017: 7, my translation). This, coupled with the European Union's donation of boats and radars to apprehend the *harraga* (burners), had contributed to a drop in the number of departures. The corruption and social blockages that prevented Tunisians from accessing that dignified life that was at the heart of revolutionary demands in 2011, however, were still in place six years later.

What is more, the inhabitants of Zarzis and of south-eastern Tunisia more generally, from which many of the 2017 *harraga* hailed, had faced increasing economic difficulties that year. As Herbert and Gallien emphasise, on top of historically accumulated regional inequalities,<sup>122</sup> the collapse of gasoline smuggling from neighbouring Libya, the government's crackdown on the informal financial sector, and the invasion of the blue crab – known locally as the *Daesh* (ISIS) crab due to its aggressiveness towards local species – had made these regions more vulnerable. The year had also seen an increase in protests echoing the demands of the revolution and calling for economic development, jobs and more dignified living conditions (FTDES 2017: 2). These took place in various Tunisian governorates throughout the spring and summer months of 2017, and most famously in the governorate of Tataouine (neighbouring that of Medenine, of which Zarzis is part) in al Kamour, where protestors occupied an oil pumping station and blocked production for several months (McCarthy 2018). In Zarzis, on

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<sup>122</sup> See the introduction to the thesis and chapter 1.

top of these economic difficulties, intense sentiments of disappointment in the revolution, a lack of trust in the government (whom many saw as behaving in continuity with Ben Ali's regime, and as being made up of the same dishonest "dogs", as Ghali put it), and dwindling hopes for future improvements were common. There was a palpable and generalised "sense of resignation and growing pessimism", that Herbert and Gallien (2017) also identified in their interviews with young men from nearby towns during this period.

Behind these heightened moments of economic and political crises which spurred periodic increases in *harga* departures, however, were difficulties that the youth had been facing for much longer periods of time. These had to do with an ever more acutely felt sense of the impossibility of becoming autonomous adults and achieving a dignified standard of living in Tunisia. Similar plights were felt and voiced by the youth in different parts of the world in the aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2007-2008.<sup>123</sup> The revolution itself had coalesced around politicised economic demands, making clear that "aspirations for work and decent living conditions" included "the articulation of social rights and values: these are not just economic claims, they are formulated as a right to dignity, respect, indeed as a right to equal rights" (Dakhli 2011: 94, my translation). Within broader struggles over continuity and change at nation-wide level in the aftermath of revolution, young men in Zarzis were concerned with how they were going to live up to reproducing what was locally understood to be a "normal" life course: from gaining skills in school or in professional training, to finding a job, becoming economically independent, building a house, getting married, having children, being able to provide for one's family and taking care of one's parents. An important motivation for them to do the *harga*, which many, such as Ghali, voiced, was marriage: unless they found work in Europe, it would take them an unbearably long time to save enough money to get married.<sup>124</sup> The reasons they cited for it being overwhelmingly men who did the *harga* (on top of the fact that sitting in a boat full of men for long hours at sea would be inappropriate for

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<sup>123</sup> For the ways in which the youth engaged in social mobilisations in the aftermath of economic and political crisis in different African countries, including Tunisia, as part of demands for economic and social justice and access to full citizenship and adulthood, see Honwana (2012).

<sup>124</sup> Getting married is a costly business, since before agreeing to a marriage proposal the bride's family usually request the groom's family to provide a fully furnished house for the couple. The marriage festivities are also expensive, as they last three days and involve buying large quantities of food, jewellery, clothes and other goods that will ensure a comfortable start to the couple's life together, and which also act as status displays for the families. Weddings are explored in more detail in chapters 4 and 6.

women) and for girls staying in school longer and opting more frequently for university, was that women did not have the pressure of having to be the breadwinners later in life.<sup>125</sup> While it would be considered acceptable for a woman to decide to stop working once married (even though acknowledging that the economic situation in Tunisia made it difficult), an unemployed man would find it very challenging to get married in the first place.<sup>126</sup>

This chapter is about the relationship between a dignified life and social reproduction, and how continuity and change, “burning” steps versus a “step-by-step” approach, are valued in trying to navigate socially acceptable life courses from the points of view of young men, older generations, and young unmarried women. Older generations of especially men perceived different and related crises of sorts to be unravelling in Zarzis. Their angst focused particularly around the changing nature of what they viewed to be core ‘Akkara values, and shifts in young people’s relations to education, consumption and marriage in relation to personal and societal advancement. Reproducing conventional life-course transitions, such as planning to migrate or to marry, were however core concerns of both migrants and stayers, in continuity with the values of their elders. The *huma* (neighbourhood) as Ghali described it in his graffiti, was neither “horrific” nor “cool”: it was not a place of extremes, but was instead rather “middle of the road”, as were the life aspirations that the *harraga* foregrounded in explaining their wish to leave Tunisia. Holding contradictory feelings about one’s *huma* and one’s country was common: leaving was felt to be a necessity on the part of the *harraga*, but the chief reason that was advanced for doing so was to be able to advance socially in Zarzis. As has been argued throughout the thesis, and as will be explored in the rest of this chapter, these contradictory sentiments were at the heart of the feeling of in-betweenness and transition characterising Tunisia at the time. Dignity was both a politically salient demand for justice and recognition, and tied to reproducing a way of life that remained highly socially sanctioned despite generating its own inequalities and injustices.

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<sup>125</sup> Pressures on young men to provide for their family and thus to migrate are also common in other African countries, see: Cole and Groes (2016); Masquelier (2005); Sommers (2011).

<sup>126</sup> For literature documenting how for young men not being able to marry represents “social death” in South Africa, and how it is these key life-course moments that often prompt migration, see: White (2004; 2010; 2012a; 2012b).

## Those who left

*Evening, a few days after 'Eid al Kbir,'<sup>127</sup> September 2016, Zarzis*

*Dans cette famille, on a tous un dossier avec la France*

[In this family, we all have an open file with France]

-Said

“I’ll go from the beginning.” As the adult members of the family sat on floor mats lining the patio, passing around small glasses of sugary red tea as an after-dinner digestive, while keeping an eye on the children running in and out of the house, Said started telling me about his journey to France in 2011. The beginning was that after the revolution, in February 2011, Said, at the time twenty-four, had asked his brother Kamel, who is very close to him in age, just over a year his junior, if he wanted to do the *harga* together. Their oldest brother Abdelmalek had been living in France for years, while one of their younger brothers, Lotfi, who had attempted the *harga* from Libya at sixteen a couple of years earlier, had been in a bad scooter accident some months prior, and still had his right leg in a cast. Their youngest brother, Ghali, they deemed too young to leave. When Kamel decided he would stay in Zarzis to continue working as a mason and take care of their widowed mother and younger siblings, Said borrowed money from one of their uncles in France and took his first shot at the crossing.

Others from the *huma* had already reached Italy with the aid of a *porteur* (trafficker) from Sangho, a seaside neighbourhood of Zarzis, where most of the hotels are located, fully shut at the time due to both winter and the revolution. This man took Said and several of his friends from their *huma* to a villa near the beach to wait for the right time to leave. At night, they were taken on small rowing boats to a bigger boat further out at sea – they were about 180 people in total. The passenger in charge of steering the boat, however, got the bearings wrong, so they were caught by the Sfax police and brought to prison. Luckily, Said’s oldest sister’s husband – who was sitting next to him as he was narrating these details, following the story with amusement – had a cousin in the military with some influence, so Said and his friends were

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<sup>127</sup> Chapter 1 introduced this family and some of the migratory dynamics between its members as they were getting ready for ‘Eid al Kbir. This chapter will explore further the points of view and trajectories of current generations of *harraga* and would be *harraga* – the brothers and cousins aged between their late teens and early thirties.

soon released from prison and took a *louage* (minibus) back to Zarzis. While changing his 50 euro back into dinars at a bank in Sfax in order to pay the *louage*, Said plugged his phone in to charge, but because it had become wet in the journey, it exploded, making a booming noise. “Everyone got so scared at the bank, they thought it was a terrorist attack! *C’était chaud* [it was a heated, tense situation], after the revolution people were on their toes, I was almost sent straight back to prison!”

As Said reached home, eager to call the *passeur* so as to get his money back and give the *harga* another shot,<sup>128</sup> his mother exclaimed: “What are you doing back here? Your brother is already in Lampedusa!” Said’s recounting of this episode set the whole patio, including his mother, crying with laughter. Without telling anyone, advancing on crutches due to his broken leg, Lotfi had set off to another beach the same night that Said had left for the safe house (*guna*) in Sangho. There, he had managed to convince a *rais* (another word for *passeur*) to let him go for free. At hearing this news, Said had rushed to wash and change, grabbed biscuits and water – having noted during his last expedition that there would be no provisions onboard – and headed back out. This time, he and his friends boarded a much bigger fishing boat that was moored at the main dock near the *centre ville* (town centre). The military were stationed at the entrance to the port, making sure that no fights broke out, and that only vessels fit to leave would be used, without too many passengers: if they deemed a boat to be overcrowded and unsafe, they would make people disembark. The military were not, however, preventing boats from leaving. Similar memories of the *harga* happening in plain sight from the port with the military present were the first to be conjured up by most people when commenting on the same period as the revolution. Said and his friends, exhausted from having been constantly on the move without sleeping, asked to be put below deck, where there were a few mattresses. They fell asleep to the sound of people singing and celebrating above them, under a bright sky of stars, as the boat advanced smoothly through inky vastness. Fourteen hours later, they woke up in Lampedusa. Lotfi greeted them and informed them that, while the Italians in the migrant centre were feeding them only pasta with tuna, he had already found a man in town who sold *harissa* sandwiches.

“Things didn’t go as smoothly for my cousin – he left on a smaller boat, and it was so crammed that he almost fell in the water while he was sleeping, he was saved at the last minute by another

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<sup>128</sup> The deal was that were the *harga* attempt to fail, the *passeur* would keep twenty percent and give back the rest of the money.

passenger”, interjected Said’s older sister’s husband. He was a high-school maths teacher, and recalled that in 2011 a substantial number of his male students left on the *harga*. “We knew there were risks but we didn’t really think about them”, replied Said. His brother-in-law explained: “At the time staying was a risk and leaving was a risk, because there was no government – not even public sector workers (*fonctionnaires d'état*)<sup>129</sup> were being paid. People thought: it's now or never.” His wife, Said’s sister, a high-school IT teacher, added: “Of course there are risks with the *harga*, but people just went for it. Women, old people, pregnant women and everyone got on those boats. There was also a man who had his papers but wanted to try it, and so he did the *harga* even though he didn't need to. One of our neighbours went back and forth three or four times [as a *passieur*], the money he gained was more than enough to buy a new boat and start again.” I had been told stories of this kind countless times by inhabitants of Zarzis. They concurred that ultimately God has already written everyone’s destiny (*maktub*), so one might as well give the *harga* a try if it seems like a way to a better life for them. Said concluded the discussion:

Some people there, from 2011, are still sleeping under bridges in France, and others died at sea. I would not have been able to make it without the family’s support. I took the boat without really knowing how I’d get to France, the journey made itself along the way with the help of my uncles [in France]. But there are some poor people (*mseken*), especially from the south-west, who don't know how to swim and died, or who had no contacts in France or in Europe and so didn't make it and had to come back. Even if you know how to swim it's the open sea: if something happens you are out there with no help. Some *passieurs* also scammed people and took them to Djerba or Bizerte [other places in Tunisia instead of Italy]. I always knew I was going to go to France to work, that was my objective, so I didn't hang around in Italy, I have never even been back there since, or to visit any other country. I went straight to France because that's where our contacts are. It was a good experience the *harga*, I’m glad I lived through it.

Near Paris, Said initially worked for his mother’s brother, who had a small one-truck moving company, and lived with one of his other uncles. Over the years, he worked for a palettes business, as a pizza deliverer, and for a repair company, while most recently he had become a driver with Uber. He had met his wife – a daughter of an ‘Akkara couple residing in Paris, born

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<sup>129</sup> Similarly to France, the state is a major employer in Tunisia. Public sector positions are highly regarded and sought after, as they are one of those rare positions which provide stable employment, salary, and access to welfare.

and raised in France – in Zarzis years prior: they seen each other about four times at weddings over different summers, but they had since lost touch. They met again through common friends when he arrived in France, and eventually got married.

Lotfi, on his part, had taken a different path, less linear and socially commended than that of his brother Said. When he was deported from France in January 2017, and I finally met him, after having heard many times the story of his departure and several other of his feats from different members of the family, he shared with me (“Valentina *clandestina* in Zarzis”, as he called me) some of his views on migration:

I did not keep calm, stay put (*resté tranquile*), I visited almost six different countries after I got to Europe, I stayed in Belgium almost nine months, in France I stayed almost five years, I was in Germany, I stayed two weeks. I was also in Switzerland two days, after just two days in Switzerland they told me “you, get out”, because I didn't have papers, and Switzerland is dangerous if you don't have papers, you don't stay there or they will catch you. Because there is money there, everyone's money, even Tunisia's, so they kick you out. I did it all, I drank, I travelled, I got into fights. Those older emigrants didn't even want to have coffee with me. They don't know how to live, they build these big houses here and never enjoy them. And over there, I've seen them, they wear second hand clothes, do shopping at the *brocante* (flea market).

In France, Lotfi had worked in pizzerias owned by different ‘Akkara of their father's generation, but his family suspected that he had been involved in *clocharat* (illegal business). He had been *expersé* after being caught in a police house raid. He too wished to one day settle back in Zarzis and marry a young woman from the *bled*, but not yet, there was much living to be done before hand, he did not feel the rush that his brother Said had felt to settle down.

Said avowed that he would like to move back to Zarzis in the future, after having made enough money, definitely by retirement age. Another one of his sisters, Maroua, who also lived in France but was on a temporary visit, interjected from the mattress she was resting on by pointing out that old men always say they want to come back to Zarzis, but their wives never do if their children are living in France. “We'll see how that fight goes when we come to it”, replied Said. “For now, I have no regrets over having left.”

On this visit home, Said promised their youngest brother Ghali he would be looking to find a solution for him: maybe there was a way to find a sponsor for a training or work visa.

He is a *bosseur* (hard worker), and he has his head screwed on right, he won't lose his objectives in France. I don't want him staying here, I can tell things are not working out for him. He is a gifted mechanic, I'm sure he'd find work easily *là-bas* (over there). He deserves to go to Europe and *kawwen ruhu* (further himself).



Figure 5.2: Entrance to Zarzis port, through which Said left for France. February 2017.

## Those who stayed

Kamel built *carcasses* – the “bare bones” of houses – for a living. It wasn’t up to him to turn them into the slick villas envisaged by men working abroad – he wasn’t fond of doing the tiling, wall fillers and other finishing touches. The jobs he was best at were those of laying down the foundations and raising the load-bearing walls. When he and his team were done with this, construction often came to a halt in any case, waiting for more money to be sent home, making the *carcasses* a constant and stable feature of the Zarzis landscape. Working in *maramma* (construction) as a *bennei* (mason) had been his father’s *métier* (profession), from whom he had learnt the trade and inherited the business. His father Hedi had never lived in France for prolonged periods of time, but he had travelled there with his younger brothers and father Baba al Hajj on several occasions to buy the machinery needed to run his small construction business in Zarzis. As travel regulations with European countries turned stricter for Tunisian citizens after the 1990s, and as life got more expensive, especially in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, his trips had become less frequent. None of his sons had been able to obtain documents to travel abroad and bring back better equipment, the costs of which were prohibitively expensive if purchased in Tunisia. Kamel was therefore still working with the few bits of machinery that his father had bought some twenty years back and that hadn’t yet broken down. He had to partner up with other businesses or rent the tools and trucks he was lacking, which made his job less lucrative than it had been for his father.

Out of his work team, Kamel was the only ‘Akkara. He worked with a man from Gafsa (Tunisia’s main phosphate mining city, located in the interior of the country), and two others from Jebiniana (a small town in the Sfax governorate). While taking part in bigger projects, such as the building of a hangar for an olive oil pressing and bottling company that exported directly to Europe, Kamel had also worked alongside builders coming from different countries, such as Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea Conakry. He believed that in general in Zarzis people respected *Afriki* (people coming from other African countries). Some had arrived in Zarzis from Libya – either fleeing the violence of the war, or after being rescued at sea while on attempted crossings to Italy or via plane, since visas were often not necessary to travel between

different francophone African countries and Tunisia.<sup>130</sup> “They are hard workers”, he affirmed, contrasting the ethos he noted from these co-workers with that of some of his ‘Akkara peers.

*Maramma* is tough no doubt, it takes a toll on the body. I come home at night exhausted sometimes, but I also have time to go to the beach and swim, ride my horse, visit family, have a barbecue with friends... It’s a job like any other, but you need to be willing to wake up early, break your back, and earn your living. There is everything here in Zarzis, but people are demanding, they are not satisfied with just a little bit. If a job pays 20 dinars, they refuse, they want 40 straight away.<sup>131</sup>

If there are no *shanti* (from the French word *chantier*, meaning construction site), then Kamel works as a fisherman on other people’s boats: “I’m flexible, I have two *métiers* (trades), I like them both.” Kamel, twenty-seven when I met him in 2016, always maintained that there was work in Zarzis and in Tunisia, and that whether other men his age accepted this work or not depended on their outlook and priorities. When he was younger, he had also thought about doing the *harga*, like everybody else. But then he had started praying more regularly, and he had changed his mind.

I started realising that the *harga* is not a good thing. Earning more money is the priority for the *harraga*. But for me it’s not important (*mush muhimma*). I could do the *harga* and die at sea, and Allah would know that I had decided to leave for the sake of this life [and not for attaining life after death]. Humans must take a little bit from this life and work for the afterlife (*al akhira*). A bit of money, a bit of leisure, but all the while you work for your afterlife. If someone is ill, we must visit them, if someone is not praying, we should advise him to pray, if someone doesn’t have money, we should help him and we should give him as much as we can. So when it comes to *karama* (dignity), people should be fair with one another, they shouldn’t violate other people, they shouldn’t do bad things, shouldn’t rob others, shouldn’t lie. If they have a job to do, they should

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<sup>130</sup> See Cassarini 2020 for a detailed overview of immigration from different sub-Saharan African countries to Tunisia.

<sup>131</sup> A day of *maramma* or fishing usually paid around 20 dinars – around 8 euro.

strive to do it perfectly, they shouldn't daydream about shinier things instead. People should try to be level-headed. If they don't have much money, why try and buy a fancy car? Go slowly (*bishwaya*), take it step by step, be patient (*osbor*) and Allah will provide.

In contrast with the “burning” of steps involved in the *harga*<sup>132</sup> – a physical and spatial movement that people hoped would lead to a temporal jump into the next stages of life, such as being financially independent, being able to afford building a house, get married, and found a family – Kamel advocated for patience, for accepting to move forward in life more slowly, one step at a time. “*Harka barka*” he would tell his brother Ghali when he saw him sitting around at home feeling low – a common saying meaning if you put in the work and keep busy and active, God will reward you with blessings, and you will be successful. Similarly to stances that I also heard from older generations of men, Kamel felt that putting in the work in order gradually to gather the money necessary to marry was an honest way to approach life, while he suspected his peers abroad who made money quickly must have done so through illicit means:

If your goal is to make a lot of money straight away, how are you going to do that? Most of them who make money (*ydiru al fluss*) in France or Italy do it through mafia. They sell drugs, *zatla* (marijuana), steal cars, it's easy money the *clocharat*.<sup>133</sup> But you know who steals? Only dogs. Allah compares people who steal with dogs. Many young men get into these sorts of things, and then they get *expersés* (repatriated) and they have nothing – like my brother Lotfi. *Karama* is not about demanding more money without doing any work.

Kamel also believed that it was not worth sacrificing on one's duties to one's family in order to try and make more money abroad. Being there for his loved ones was what being a good, dignified person meant to him.

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<sup>132</sup> See chapter 1 for the ways in which the term *harga* implies a fast-forward movement, a “burning” of the steps to cut straight through to the end goal.

<sup>133</sup> As seen in chapter 4, *clocharat* comes from the French word *clochard*, meaning homeless person. This word in *derja* however means criminal, druggie, and is usually employed to refer to young men who misbehave and engage in illicit or immoral activities.

Say I go to France and then my mother is ill, I can't go see her. If my friend or neighbour dies, I can't visit him. My brother Abdelmalek, he couldn't even return home to say goodbye to our father before he died. Our uncles told him he shouldn't return, he should wait to get his papers sorted in France first. So he did not return and he became angrier with France. He was patient for a while, and then he could no longer take it. When he finally got caught after all those years it's because he *hraq dhaw* ('burnt', sped through a red light). He had stopped caring, he was just going through the motions. It was 2012, I don't remember exactly, but things were not stable in Tunisia, if he had wanted to, he could have asked to stay in France, they couldn't return him to a country with no government. But he told them no, I want to go home I am done with this. His heart had died there (*gelbu met*), he had become ill (*marid*) from being far from home for so long, with too much stress on his mind. When the heart dies, the person does things, but he doesn't even understand or know what he is doing. He suffered a lot, he was alone. He lost his hair because his brain was always working. Always wondering if his father, mother and sisters were doing ok. France doesn't work out for everybody.

Abdelmalek had described to me that difficult period himself. When he returned to Zarzis, he had not seen any of his family members in the *bled* for ten years. Adjusting back to life at home was not easy. He knew people were talking behind his back about his returning from France empty handed. One night, he heard somebody slandering him, and got into a fight that resulted in eight months of jail time. He remembered feeling humiliated and angry, and lonely. Most of his school and neighbourhood friends had left at around the time he had. He had been away when his father died, the dynamics in his house had changed, and he had no friends to confide in. Reflecting on that period, he believes he was depressed, and had a nervous breakdown.

Thinking about their younger brother Ghali and his desire for *harga*, Kamel concluded:

Every person has his own ideas, everyone thinks differently. Not all people are the same. When it comes to Ghali, he knows what I think. The *harga* is more bad than it is good. Why would I want to travel like that and risk my life? It is not a fair way to get to France. I'd rather not go anywhere than to have to go like

that. If I decide to travel, I want to do it on a plane, like the tourists who come here. A lot of people died, and not just during the *harga*. I have friends who went and then died on construction sites too, having to do dangerous work over there. I'm staying here, in Zarzis, I can work, I can earn money, I am beside my loved ones. But the 'Akkara are all ill (*marid*) with France. Zarzis is ill (*maridha*). The whole of Tunisia is (*Tunis al kullha*).



Figure 5.3: Kamel's horse and the *carcasse* the brothers were building in preparation for Abdelmalek's wedding. November 2016.

## The jealousy trope

Let us take a step away from this close-knit family to consider some other perspectives. The image of young men contracting the *harga* as one would a disease was also prevalent in the discourses of older generations of emigrants and stayers in Zarzis, as well as in those of mothers, as described in chapter 4. Disagreements and tensions surrounding the *harga* also existed within the same generation, among brothers, as seen in the previous sections. As an obsession associated with “young men”, the *harga* was believed to spread through jealousy (*ghyra*): through seeing and thus wanting (*‘ayn fi*) emigrants’ ways of life for oneself.

Did you notice how Zarzis changes in the summer? All of those who live over there come back, and when they return, even if over there they are barely getting by, they need to show off and they need to prove that they have made it. So they buy this and that, speed along the beach in shiny cars. And the others see them – it’s like jealousy [*gelosia*] – those who never left feel they want the same and they don’t care if they live or die to get it.

This quote from Wajdi, one of the sixty-two *harraga* who jumped on the first boat to Lampedusa the day Ben Ali fled in 2011,<sup>134</sup> perfectly captures how people in Zarzis understand the *harga* to spread, and who is to blame for it. Those who return from Europe spread jealousy, and thus fuel the perpetuation of the *harga*. Yet who exactly among Zarzis’s residents abroad were accused of being guilty of spreading jealousies very much depended on the interlocutor’s point of view. Those known as the *Zarzisiens de France*, or as the *jama’t franza*,<sup>135</sup> meaning the group that belongs to France, were seen by some as the problem, despite it being quite a difficult category to pin down, given that generation after generation of ‘Akkara had emigrated. Similarly to the *harraga*, the *jama’t franza*, as discussed in Chapter 1 with reference to Mabrouk’s work (2010), is a category of emigrants that exists in other Tunisian towns. In Zarzis, however, it spanned several generations, and it was thus hard to fully ascertain whether some younger migrants who left as *harraga*, but who had then obtained papers and had

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<sup>134</sup> This episode was described in the introduction to chapter 1.

<sup>135</sup> The ways in which these categories were deployed in other Tunisian towns was discussed in chapter 1 especially in reference to the work of Mabrouk 2010.

established a life abroad, like for instance Said, could be counted as being part of this group or not.

Nevertheless, acknowledging that the *harga* is triggered and perpetuated by the jealousy caused by flamboyant emigrants returning to the *bled* and showing off wealth, thereby making life in France seem rosier than it actually is, was a common stance among inhabitants, older emigrants, and successful and aspiring *harraga* alike. It had become somewhat of a trope in Zarzis, which masked the fact that young men like Ghali knew and understood the *harga* and France intimately, in tangible ways, despite having never tried it nor having ever travelled there. Being surrounded by family members who lived abroad, these young men were not fantasising over illusory desires: their wish was to emulate a well-trodden path, of which they knew the pitfalls. What is more, neither Wajdi, cited above for describing this very trope, nor anyone else I spoke to, counted themselves in the jealousy-inducing group. “Although we do drive off the ferry from Italy with a loaded car every summer”, his Italian wife interjected, pointing to the fact that jealousy might arise despite one’s best efforts, or that jealousy might be an inevitable outcome of travelling back to Zarzis from Europe. Wajdi, though, insisted that he had left in order to have a more stable and dignified present and future, centred on his role as the primary provider for his family. He hadn’t ‘burnt’ because he lusted after extravagant luxuries, and his desire was not to become rich, but simply to be able to move forwards in life, and to attain an everyday existence less fraught with worry, uncertainty and a sense of depressing stuck-ness.

### **A sense of a loss of bearings**

Abdallah, a man in his early seventies, and a member of the generation of retired Zarzis ‘intellectuals’ described in chapter 1 – some of whom had studied and lived in Europe in their youth, or had continued doing so throughout their lives – explained to me how his own migration differed from that of younger generations, and why it was particularly immoral to cause others to feel jealousy (*ghyra*). He remembered that when he was young every house in Zarzis looked the same and people used to wear loose, unassuming, monochrome clothes. Visual homogeneity was customary because it reflected people’s understanding of sameness in the eyes of God and because people didn’t want others to feel jealous, they didn’t want to trigger desires for something (*‘ayn fi*) by showing off what was in their houses and under their

clothes. People knew how to work enough to be comfortable, and were not obsessed with accumulating or displaying wealth as they are, in his view, today.<sup>136</sup> Similarly to the ways in which the past was conjured up in the post-war Lebanese border town of Aarsal during Obeid's fieldwork, an at times romanticised 'humbler' past "resurfaced to shape, shift, endorse, and contest the present", especially through the discourses of men from Abdallah's generation (2019: 3).

Despite not being a particularly religious person, Abdallah nevertheless felt that it was important to recognise the positive values coming from one's heritage, instead of trying to emulate France. In his youth he had gone to study history at university in Paris, and was on the verge of marrying a European woman. In the end, despite being very much in love, he decided against it, because he did not want to live in Europe, and he felt that one day their cultural differences would break up the marriage. He knew that there would come a day when he would have had to take care of his elderly parents in Zarzis – a duty which he now expects his sons to fulfil towards him – and he wanted to live up to those obligations and get away from the individualistic, money- and work-obsessed life he experienced in France. He had no regrets about his decision to return and build a life back home. Basing himself on this personal history, he felt that it was unfortunate that today young men in Zarzis seemed to engage in relationships with often considerably older European tourists for the sake of obtaining visas to France, and that their families encouraged them to get married for these ends instead of feeling disturbed by these tendencies. A friend of Abdallah's went further in critiquing this practice and the array of consequences it has in Zarzis:

This *marriage blanc* (visa wedding) is shocking to me and also inhuman. Often there are children born out of first marriages in Zarzis, but these women and children are abandoned when the men remarry abroad. There is no love anymore. Young men in their twenties especially marry elderly Europeans and go live abroad, while their cousin is waiting for them in Zarzis [to return so they can marry]. There are even cases where the woman pushes her husband to go to France and divorces him so that he can remarry a European and get his papers, and then divorce and re-marry her again. *Voyez le drame* (do you see the tragedy)?

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<sup>136</sup> A similar depiction of a more egalitarian past was provided by a member of the same generation in chapter 3.

In tracing their personal biographies, men of Abdallah's generation would also often signal to the history of how the 'Akkara managed to independently make a living in the Zarzis peninsula, and would narrate that, right from the start of their settlement, they had taken the initiative to dig water wells for their homes and for agriculture, with each family planting fig trees, palm trees for dates, and vegetable gardens so as to be self-sufficient, as well as olive trees to create economic revenue for themselves in the future. They also started fishing for sponges, a market that later became quite lucrative. "Being autonomous is in our genes, we don't wait for the state." This was a crucial virtue of the 'Akkara in Abdallah's eyes: they never asked for help, they never waited for the authorities to provide them with anything, and they maintained their dignity and built a future for themselves and their descendants through their own sense of vision and hard work. As another friend of Abdallah's expressed in both French and Arabic in a Facebook post accompanying a photo of an olive tree field:

Gratitude and appreciation to the 'Akkara, for what remains of their activity and enthusiasm is wealth created by sponges that they turned into olives [the money from selling natural sponges was re-invested in buying land for planting olive trees], for sticking to their duty towards this country. Glory to the 'Akkara, creators of riches and transformers of values into durable value (*"transformateurs des valeurs en valeurs... durables"*).

Here the author of the post is expressing a local perspective on what dignity ought to be: transforming something short-term into something long-term. He is referring to the ideal of leaving something behind that will last and that others will be able to benefit from in the future. As discussed in chapter 3 with reference to the land that is donated for the establishment of cemeteries as *sadaqa* (charity that is believed to bestow blessings – *baraka* – that will continue bearing fruits for the person even after their death), contributing to creating something that will outlive you and that will be a source of good for others is highly valued. This could be in the form of good deeds, or having children who will continue doing good as an extension of you, or contributing to building a school or a mosque that the community can make use of for improving themselves, or, indeed, donating land for a cemetery or planting olive trees.

Many older men shared this feeling, arguing that the 'Akkara sense of doing things themselves was what distinguished them from neighbouring tribes, some of whom, significantly, did not

share with them a history of migration. Feeling a sense of pride in these qualities, they viewed their generation of migrants in continuity with this spirit of seeking a future for themselves instead of waiting for the state to deliver. These views offered an interesting flipside to the stereotypical narratives<sup>137</sup> other Tunisians held about the ‘Akkara: where others saw unpatriotic behaviour and opportunism, Abdallah and his generation of university-educated men saw a history of a people who managed to thrive despite structural injustices and state neglect. Similar discourses held by older generations taking pride in their self-sufficiency in times of state hostility, while believing younger generations to be over-dependent, have been noted elsewhere (James 2007: 68-77). Indeed, Abdallah also saw younger generations of emigrants as somewhat breaking with their path.

Unlike Kamel (cited above), and unlike Umm Akri (whose views are outlined in the introduction to the thesis), who felt the *harga* itself to be an undignified mode of travel, Abdallah recognised in the *harga* a familiar impulse for independence and initiative. Despite these young men being denied free movement by Tunisia, their home government, and Europe alike, they found ways to make it across. The autonomous character of the people of Zarzis was, in Abdallah’s eyes, reflected in the way so many young men left straight after the revolution when the police could not stop them. Instead of sitting around in cafés unemployed, waiting for the state or international organisations to find a solution, they left to try and make a living abroad and send money back to improve their family’s situation. The *harga*, as the actualisation of the drive to build one’s fortunes independently, therefore matched the values that made the ‘Akkara who they were for Abdallah.

However, he also felt that there was a problem with the younger generations’ attraction to Europe and capitalism. He believed they had been lured to do the *harga* by the illusion of easy money and exorbitant wealth propagated by the television and the internet, as well as by flamboyant returnees – all aspects of the widespread jealousy trope described above. This, he felt, had caused more traditional values in Zarzis to be eroded. As another man from this generation put it:

There is a moral crisis unfolding in Zarzis. People don’t believe in anything anymore. The sharing of inheritance, traditional solidarity, brotherhood,

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<sup>137</sup> These were explored in chapter 1.

traditional laws. Immigration and violent contact with Europe have resulted in these things falling apart. Now people go to the court and settle things that way. People have also become very materialistic. Getting through your studies doesn't count for anything anymore. Only euros count, only making money counts, regardless of the means used to obtain it. People don't believe in anything anymore, they are just focused on bringing back the most money. When young men go back home, they give off the impression of social success. It's reflected on the façade and the size of the house they build – it needs to be a palace, despite them being from modest families. We don't know how they gain money abroad. Some say drugs, some say the *harga* traffic. They buy houses, buy olive trees, they want to become the new notables. They might have ten different rooms in their houses, but you find them making tea on thin mattresses in front of the garage.<sup>138</sup> One of the things that puts a temporary halt on these changes are more conservative sermons coming from the mosques that tell young men about traditional values that are being lost: the love for one's family, charity, solidarity. But often these preachers are too strict, they take it too far, they also bring in foreign ideas [different interpretations of Islam coming from the Gulf], so traditional morality is also floored through their speeches.

For Abdallah and many of his contemporaries, an additional tragedy was that most of the young men who sought the *harga* appeared uninterested in pursuing their studies and in changing things for the better around them. They seemed more focused on going to France to work in lowly-skilled or even illegal trades rather than in getting an education and being able to aspire for better jobs, whether in Tunisia or abroad. What Abdallah identified to be foreign values, linked to individualism, short-termism and accumulation, had turned Zarzis into a town where everybody strove to build bigger houses, wear flashier clothes, and ride in shinier cars. A retired university professor, originally from Zarzis, summarised his peers' worries that the 'Akkara had lost their bearings thus: "There is a mosaic in the Bardo museum [in Tunis], on the first

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<sup>138</sup> This comment implies that the *harraga* often show off new-found wealth, pretending to be worldly, but continue enjoying the more modest life they were brought up in. The show of wealth therefore becomes, in this man's view, a race for prestige and grandeur that betrays the *harraga*'s wishes to seem of higher status than they actually are.

floor, of Ulysses trying not to give into the song of the sirens. The *harga* is a mirage: we have to plug the ears of young men like Ulysses did with his crew.”

### **Ships without captains**

The generational ideological break that these men perceived might have also been due to the fact that, when they were growing up, Tunisia was a newly-independent state, and Bourguiba’s rule promulgated a sense of pride and faith in building the country by encouraging education so as to gain skills to that end. “This was a society under pressure, but a dignified and above all relatively egalitarian society, in which social gaps were not very wide (...). It was also a society where the appeal to the common good (...) systematically took precedence over the values of personal enrichment and individualism” (Dakhliia 2011: 81, my translation). During those years, Tunisia became a substantially middle-class society (Hibou 2011), with its prosperity founded on state-oriented growth and state-provided employment. Ben Ali’s subsequent rule, in contrast, shifted the country from a partially state-run economy to a market economy, passed neoliberal reforms and encouraged more consumerist values. In the years leading up to the revolution, when the economic boom that had allowed some to amass considerable wealth had ended, social and economic divides among the population became more and more dramatic and apparent. The public personas of the two leaders also played a role. While Bourguiba was a lawyer, and a charismatic and erudite public speaker who believed and invested in education, Ben Ali, and especially his wife Leila Trabelsi, often referred to by Tunisians as *al hajjema* – the hairdresser, as Ghali points out in the beginning of this chapter – projected an image of *nouveau-riche* wealth disassociated from schooling, while staffing the higher echelons of the state with a new ruling class who profited from their running of Tunisia through patronage and corruption.

Habib – an uncle of Ghali and his brothers residing in France, with whose children and wife Afifa I lived in Zarzis – had finalised the arrangements for family reunification.<sup>139</sup> He had travelled to Zarzis to help Afifa with preparing their move, and with putting wooden bars on the windows, in view of the house having to be locked up soon. He felt that it was best for their two younger children to finish their schooling in France. Tunisia, he affirmed in the spring of

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<sup>139</sup> These arrangements were discussed in chapter 1.

2017, a few months before his family were to join him in his flat in a *banlieue* south of Paris, “is like a ship in the dark without a captain, we don’t know where we’re going”.

Being in his early fifties, he had lived through Bourguiba, Ben Ali and the revolution, but this uncertainty, he felt, was the most challenging period. He was speaking as a simple citizen, he emphasised. He did not favour Nida or Ennahda (the political parties in power at the time) - or any faction or leader for that matter. He felt that the country had lost its direction. Life was less secure, terrorist attacks were happening more often, workers’ strikes and protests were appearing in different parts of the country – who would be able to drive Tunisia out of this? “Young people can’t build a house and buy a car and put money aside, simple things like that are impossible for them.” When Habib is home he is the one to do the grocery shopping for the family, and is always shocked at the prices getting higher and higher: “I spent 40 dinars for just very few tomatoes and peppers, I’m not talking about bananas. Poor families that couldn’t afford meat before now have a hard time even buying basic vegetables.” Habib felt that people were struggling in Tunisia, people were poorer, and the gap between the rich and the poor had widened.

Before you never used to see people begging in the street or outside the mosque in Zarzis, before there were no poor people in Zarzis, people could live off tourism and if you went to the beach in the summer you’d feel like you were in Europe. All the restaurants were open, you could hear tourists from all over speaking different languages, all the little shop keepers could profit. Now people beg, they struggle, there is great poverty and it has only been on the rise since the revolution.

When Habib was home from France he often told me he was proud at how studious his children were: their son was first in his class, and his two daughters both studied in the Lycée Pilote in the governorate capital of Medenine – a prestigious state school which admits only pupils with top marks. Habib praised Afifa’s mothering as the key success factor, acknowledging that from France he could not have helped in keeping them on track with their studies. Yet, in observing the situation in Zarzis, he recognised that his children were an exception, even among their cousins. Habib often wondered how young men managed in France. Without a *métier* and without having followed through with schooling, what could the *harraga* do in France? Why

would they take the risk of the crossing to then have a choice between being exploited or falling into *clocharat*?

Despite recognising that the times had changed and that the youth faced considerable obstacles to personal advancement, the *harga* constituted a problem for the story the older generations wished to tell themselves about themselves, and for what it meant for them to be a moral person, and to hold one's head high. Yet when listening to how young men talked about dignity as a driving force for the *harga*, and how much value some of them – such as Ghali above – placed on education despite realising that it could not guarantee them a secure future, their understandings of what made for an accomplished person, a responsible adult man, might not be so different from those of the older generations after all.

#### **“The *harga* is women's fault” – wives-to-be**

Ghali's belief outlined in the opening vignette of this chapter that even his girlfriend would replace him with somebody who worked in France echoed a widespread conviction in Zarzis. It constituted a trope similar to the ‘jealousy-inducing emigrants’ one explored above, since, in this case too, no woman explicitly avowed to prefer a man with a visa or a French passport over a man who had stayed in the *bled*. Many unmarried women, though, believed this to be true of some of their peers. Men, in turn, used this as an explanation to justify their *harga*: unless we migrate, nobody will want to marry us.

Much as it was never quite clear who exactly was to blame for creating jealousies and inciting immoral desires leading to more *harga*, no woman ever overtly stated that she aspired to marry a man who lived in France. This was instead talked about by both men and women as a superficial aspiration of a new materialistic generation of women *in general*. “They would rather marry a man who lives in France, even though they don't know exactly what kind of job he is doing there, or whether he might be involved in drugs, than a doctor who lives in Zarzis”, was a refrain I often heard from teenagers and women in their twenties and thirties themselves. These statements resemble James's observations about marriage aspirations and obligations among South Africa's new black middle class, for whom “[g]eneral profligacy, then, is acknowledged and condemned, but is disavowed in particular cases. People spoke to me disparagingly of the bad borrowing habits of their peers, and of the pressure brought to bear

upon them by such peers, while pointing to their own prudence and ability – or at least intention – to withstand these pressures” (2017: 10). Avowing to prefer to marry someone with access to Europe, and thus somebody potentially wealthier, was not socially acceptable, but this was nevertheless assumed to be a widespread desire.

Despite the *harga* being principally a male activity, accusations of who is to blame for it often fall on women, whether they be mothers, as seen in chapter 4, accused of pushing sons to go, or wives-to-be, only accepting to marry a man with promise of access to physical and social mobility. Within the nexus of goals that *harraga* viewed as unattainable if they were to stay put, weddings were also often singled out as being a factor of central importance, since, while they had always been expensive, men reasoned that they were never as expensive as they are today. According to both young and older generations of men, this was due to the fact that women these days had grandiose expectations for their big day. Thus, while older men accuse younger ones of being materialistic, both groups agree in charging young women with the same immoral and reprehensible tendencies.

In view of his own wedding, for example, Abdelmalek reasoned that, while his grandmother Umm Akri had married three times, a poor man today had to work all his life, and even then had slim hopes of finding a bride unless he had a visa to France. Abdelmalek had thought long and hard about marriage, but now that he was in his thirties, he reckoned that he did not want to be alone forever. He had met his fiancé in a clothing store near Gabes, a coastal city north of Zarzis, where she was from. After nine months of getting to know one another via social media and phone conversations, they had become engaged in order to allay her family’s apprehensiveness. She worked at the post office, which was a positive thing in Abdelmalek’s view. His work as a cook in one of the fancier beach cafés of Zarzis – which only returning emigrants could afford due to its prices, with other inhabitants going there only on special occasions – would have supported with difficulty a wife who aspired to stay at home after marriage. Abdelmalek was not fully happy to be working in the catering sector, it is what he had been doing in France for ten years, and it was the only job he was qualified to do when he was deported. He hoped that after the wedding he might find time to take a pause and think of what else he might be able to do for a living that might be more gratifying. These considerations, however, would have to wait, as he needed a job in order to first finish his house and marry.

## Conclusion – Creating one's world

Despite brothers and cousins from the same generation disagreeing on whether the *harga* is necessary (*obligé*, as Ghali put it) if one wants to advance in life, or whether it is a compulsion or illness (Kamel's view), most young men, whether they be migrants or stayers, ultimately avow a wish to become financially independent – if not financially successful – so as to build a house next to their father's, marry, and found a family of their own in Zarzis. The relationship to the *harga*, and the life trajectories of the five brothers described in the above sections, address, in different ways, the question of whether a dignified life that is in continuity with that of their fathers and grandfathers is attainable in Tunisia without migration. They do not, however, disagree on what a dignified life (*hayet karima*) entails at its core. It means not having to beg for a job, not having to depend on others or on one's family, being able to afford decent housing and having a wife and children, caring for one's family and elders. These were goals shared by all of these brothers.

Some of the female peers of the *harraga* – women in their twenties and early thirties – often told me they were not sure why some of these men felt “socially dead” in Zarzis. Rania, an unmarried after-school club (*garderie*) teacher with a law degree, told me, basing herself on her own experience, that women adapt more easily to lower paid positions and to working in fields other than those they studied or trained in. “Men are more spoiled” (*dalul*), she felt. But she also understood that they might be feeling the pressure to need to earn more money to maintain their self-worth and social standing, so they would find it more difficult than women to accept small salaries. Another friend who worked in the same *garderie* said that her brother worked as a mechanic in her father's workshop, and made more than twice her salary every month. Nevertheless, he was still looking to do the *harga*, which both his older brothers had done in 2011. “For these generations of men, the *harga* is a phenomenon.”

## Chapter 6

### The place of others

#### Catherine's place

*Late afternoon, April 2017, Zarzis*

Unlike other European retirees, who mostly sought to reside by the beach, Catherine lived in the hinterland of Zarzis. Her home, painted a warm orange, sat on top of a small hill, and was surrounded by a garden of lavender shrubs, succulents of all sizes, prickly pears, and olive trees. She lived there with her ducks, chickens, cats, dogs, and, until a couple of years prior, a donkey and a horse. Twice a day, early in the morning and late in the afternoon, she took her four dogs on walks over the hills near her house, and rested for cigarette breaks in spots where she knew she'd enjoy the best views of the small white houses and the sea below. The sky, red with rays rising from the water at dawn, painted in shades of purple and pink in the evening, was what called for those breaks.

At sixty-seven, Catherine had no regrets over her decision to move to Zarzis: "I've had several husbands, a fascinating job, a full life. Now I'm happy to settle down a bit." She had been travelling to Tunisia since 2000 and had taken up residence in Zarzis in 2008. The first time she had visited the country was during her mother's illness. She had just divorced from her first husband when her mother started suffering from serious breathing problems, which required Catherine, a nurse by profession, to assist her with respiratory physiotherapy. It was a difficult period, and a big commitment. After several months, her mother convinced her to go take a holiday somewhere: she was too tired, she needed a break. Catherine chose Tunisia as a destination because it was close to France in case her mother needed her to fly back at short notice. She surprised herself by booking an all-inclusive package holiday that she never thought she would be tempted by and set off for Djerba – the island facing Zarzis.

Given the state I was in, it felt like paradise. Many expats come on holiday in one of the big hotels and then decide to move here once they retire. When my mother died, I started having health problems of my own. My hearing deteriorated very rapidly; I couldn't work anymore. The senior management at the hospital suggested I retire early. I receive 1700 euro a month, which is

absolutely reasonable for having retired at fifty. I came back to Djerba for another holiday, and then I met my second husband, which motivated me to stay.

When Catherine met the Tunisian tour guide, originally from Zarzis, who would become her second husband, she was exactly twice his age. They always had huge respect (“*énormément de respect*”) for one another, she affirmed, and so when she realised that the fact that they were together without being married was becoming difficult for his family, she agreed to marry. After living as a married couple in Zarzis for a year, pressure from her husband and his family came for them to move to France so that he could find a more stable and better paid job. Their marriage allowed him to obtain his papers relatively easily, and for some time they lived in France together. He was unemployed, however, and found it hard to adapt. He was becoming paranoid, recalled Catherine: he saw enemies everywhere. His brother lived in Brittany where he managed a pizzeria, so Catherine suggested he join him and try and work there. One day, she passed in front of a mirror and looked at herself. “You’re old”, she thought. Her relationship with her husband started feeling uncomfortable – she felt “*mal à l’aise*” with their situation. “*J’ai poussé, poussé, et il a fini par partir*” – she pushed him away, and eventually he left and settled permanently with his brother in Brittany. She, on the other hand, moved back to his neighbourhood in Zarzis.

Right after their wedding, they had bought a terrain with an old ruin close to Catherine’s husband’s family. Everything had to be rebuilt, and Catherine remembers her husband’s father and sister-in-law (her husband’s older brother’s wife) “parading around” the property with the architects, barely allowing her to put in a word. In the end, she gave up trying to argue and let them do as they wished, eager as she was to move out of her in-laws’ home. Catherine and her husband parted on good terms, and as soon as she obtained Tunisian nationality, he donated the house to her, which had previously just been in his name due to legal requirements. “It was a beautiful story, and I know that if one day I’ll need anything he’ll be there for me, he is truly a good person. He never asked me for anything. Neither do my neighbours or his family. People are very dignified [*les gens sont très dignes*].” Despite at times feeling frustrated at having to fulfil the obligations that come with being part of an ‘Akkara family, such as driving the family’s women to *souq Libya* in the border town of Ben Guerdane for more affordable shopping, having to show face at weddings and other festivities, or being financially and logistically part of troubleshooting in the event of medical or other emergencies – Catherine felt she had come to find a good compromise.

Whenever I visited her place, there were often either young men or children from the neighbourhood, assisting her in taking care of the animals, the garden, or with other errands, or simply socialising. Catherine sometimes helped her neighbours' children with their French homework, although due to her hearing difficulties, she feared that they might not be advancing quite as their parents would have wished. Some young men also liked visiting Catherine because they knew she would not reprimand them if they smoked or had a beer at her place – activities which Catherine was however careful not to let them undertake if there were children around. “I don't want to offend anyone, but in my home I like to live in my own way.” Some of these young men confided that Catherine's was a place where they could take a break from external pressures. Marouan, a cousin of her ex-husband's, often helped Catherine when she needed to carry home carts of water bottles, or lift fertiliser bags for the garden. He was in his early thirties, worked odd jobs such as fishing, summer performances in the tourism sector, or at times with the olive oil bottling factory. He was adamant not to want to marry. Referring to Marouan's situation, Catherine commented: “If young men decide they don't want to marry, *c'est s'enterrer vivant*, it's like burying yourself alive. It seems unthinkable to families that someone might not want that. But confronting your family and doing things your way also seems unthinkable. *C'est mortifère*, all of this is deadly.”

Walking past half-built houses as her dogs ran ahead, Catherine could list the names of the young men who were sending money home to have them built, and for each she recalled the circumstances of departure. She had known the neighbourhood from before the revolution, when everybody left. Since then, a great deal of construction work had taken place, making it much more crowded with buildings, despite there being considerably less people living there for most of the year.

Tunisians who've lived abroad for a long time come back and tell the youth that they're good here, that they have everything here. I don't agree. I don't think I could have endured living here as a young woman. We are less proper when we're young, we have a lot to live. But young people don't live here, it's like there's a big concrete screed. I could write a book about what you can and can't do in Zarzis. Everything needs to be hidden. I think I would have exploded if I'd lived here when I was younger. My Tunisian husband was very intelligent, and I used to tell him to stay calm, he wasn't going to be able to change things around

here. Everything is flat in Zarzis, nothing ever happens, but then again, maybe it's similar everywhere.

In the spring of 2019, two brothers in their twenties from Guinea-Conakry, Mohamed and Ousmane, who had recently fled the violence of a migrant centre in Libya, also became friends with Catherine. She tried to help them find work with the French and European retirees' community she was reluctantly part of – believing many of her countryfolk to be leading lives too detached from their surroundings. Mohamed and Ousmane looked out for Catherine, and every now and again proposed to cook or prepare a barbecue for her and their friends. Even if only temporarily for some, since the brothers voiced a desire to try heading back to Libya once they had earned enough money for the crossing, while Marouan was thinking of moving to Tunis, Catherine reflected on how, through their disparate paths, the different people who made up her everyday had for now come to find their place, “*ils trouvé leur place*”, in Zarzis.



Figure 6.1: View of Zarzis from Catherine's daily walk, in mid-afternoon light. April 2017.

## Introduction

*Khalliti blastik*

You left your place

*Ya simha ya 'asal*

Oh beautiful oh honey

*Yj'alik labes fi bled ennes*

May God bring you all the good in the country of others

My neighbour's elderly mother would repeat the above sentences to me every time I told her I would be travelling to Tunis to see my partner, or to Italy to see my family. "She left her place" would also be the sentence used by Afifa, my host, to refer to her oldest daughter, who had gone to study medicine at university in France. When someone dies, after the period of mourning has passed, loved ones would also start thinking back to the dead and reflecting on the many ways in which they "left their place". When Umm Akri died in 2019, she left a place so big that one of her granddaughters – the same daughter that had left home at eighteen to study medicine in France – felt that Zarzis itself would never be the same. *Bled ennes* (the country of people, of others) and *bledi* (one's country or hometown) could also at times become indistinguishable categories, both functioning in identical ways, the *nes*, people, inhabiting them influencing each other's lives, creating places for themselves in other people's places, and leaving behind a trace of themselves when moving on.

Marriage and death in Zarzis are intertwined with the emigration of different generations of 'Akkara to Europe, and with tourism and the presence of mostly post-retirement-age Europeans who take up residence in Zarzis. As a place that offers more employment possibilities compared to towns of the Tunisian interior because of the fishing and tourism sectors, and due to a shortage of manual labour caused by the large numbers of men who left, Zarzis also attracts workers from other regions. More recently, the arrival of people from different African and Asian countries fleeing violence in Libya and settling for different periods of time in southern Tunisia, and the finding of the bodies of deceased migrants, have also had an impact on people's understandings of the links between a dignified death and a good life. Similarly to Gluckman in his "Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand", where he examined the social structure of the Union of South Africa as comprising of the interdependency, opposition and moments of temporary equilibrium between Black and White colour-groups as part of the

same “community”, focusing in on how marriage and death occur among these different groups of people is “an approach which I had forced on me by my material” (1940: 10). It would be meaningless to consider the desires of young women to marry in isolation from the desires of young men to get to Europe, or to consider marriage between ‘Akkara men and European women as ways of facilitating mobility for the men without also taking into account the motivations of European women to settle in Zarzis. It would be equally challenging to understand the difficulties families of missing migrants face in mourning in the absence of bodies without considering the importance of the dead body in the first place, the importance placed by the Tunisian government and families on repatriating bodies of loved ones who died abroad, and the efforts made to either repatriate or bury Europeans who died in Zarzis, and unknown migrants.

Marriage and death in Zarzis unfold in certain ways through the presences and absences of different groups of people which make Zarzis what it is, simultaneously a concrete and an imagined locality inhabited as such but also lived transnationally (see Olwig 2002). My analysis therefore takes into account all those involved in strategizing to or in getting married, in repatriating and burying bodies, and in remembering the absent, as being part of one “community” that is at once local, transnational and global. This paints an intricate picture of the different hopes, tensions, paradoxes and responsibilities that come with marrying and dying in Europe and in Tunisia, or *en route*. Thinking about the different meanings and practices related to marriage and burial also makes people in Zarzis question their own place in the world, the similarities and differences between their ways of living and dying and those of others. These “social situations” therefore carry a political and moral weight that are brought to the fore through their occurrence as part of migration projects.

### **Summers are for weddings**

In Zarzis, no season is looked forward to like summer. “It’s the season of the discothèque *halal*”, joked a friend who grew up in Italy, but who every summer returns to the *bled*, like most emigrants, where she inevitably attends numerous weddings of family members, neighbours, friends. In the summer of 2016 I joined the mother, teenage daughters, and children of the household I was staying with in their wedding-hopping. For two weeks straight we didn’t eat dinner at home once, and spent several nights going from one wedding to the other so as

not to upset anyone who had invited us. Summers are also characterised – for young men – by flings with European and Russian tourists, which simultaneously serve a way for them to potentially obtain a visa in the future.

Zarzis is a different kind of place in the summer. The houses that had remained shut throughout the rest of the year light up in the evenings. The streets near the beach and the *centre ville* suddenly incur traffic jams. Cars with European licence plates are paraded by their owners, only to be noisily overtaken by shiny motorbikes on side roads that cut through olive tree fields. The beaches in the *zone touristique* become crowded with mainly Russian and Northern European tourists, entertained by either hotel staff leading yoga, swimming, volleyball, or dance classes, or by young men leading them on rides on horses or camels. Different beaches are full of either tourists, or men and children – the women swimming for the most part in the early hours of the morning. At any hour of the day, streams of honking mini-vans, cars, mopeds, motorbikes, and pick-up trucks filled with people of all ages singing, dancing, clapping, leaning out the windows might zoom past. These are wedding parties, either heading to the municipality for the *sdeg* – the signing of the wedding contract – or to the bride’s house for the *kiswa* – the procession of relatives from the groom’s family bringing wedding gifts to the bride’s family.

As explained by one of the residents, all events are overshadowed by weddings: “There is no point organising concerts or any kind of big event in Zarzis in the summer: nobody will show up. One summer Amina Fakhed [a famous Tunisian singer] came to Zarzis to give a concert, which was a big deal since she is so well-known. The municipality had booked the football stadium for the concert, but when it came to it, the evening was really poorly attended, and the municipality were embarrassed that so few people came. But that’s the thing, there’s no point doing things like that in the summer, people have weddings to attend.”

### **End of life in Zarzis**

During one of her many walks on the beach of Zarzis, Catherine found shoes, and she rebuilt a whole story in her head about who they could have belonged to. It touches her a lot what’s happening in the Mediterranean. She had heard that there was a cemetery in Zarzis hosting the dead bodies of unknown persons, and she wanted to be taken there. She even thought that she’d

like to be buried along side them – in the cemetery of the unknown (*dans le cimetière des clandestins*). Nobody, however, was able to ever tell her where this place was. Catherine thinks that people know about it, but just don't want to talk about it. Once she'd gone over to a Tunisian couple's house for dinner, they were two teachers, and that day word was going around that seven bodies had been found on the beach, the current had brought them to shore together. The husband of the couple quickly felt that he needed to reassure Catherine that the fish in Zarzis was still good, she needn't worry, the fish don't eat dead bodies ("*c'est pas grave les poissons ne mangent pas ça*"). This hadn't crossed Catherine's mind, who found it shocking that this is the first thing the teacher cared to tell her about, instead of discussing the gravity of these persons having lost their lives in this way.

Catherine intends to stay in Zarzis for the rest of her life. She looks forward to a senior age without a sense of anxiety that she believes would have been part of her life were she to stay in France. This is due to an economic advantage – her French pension is enough to hire a nurse should the need arise. She also appreciates being surrounded by an intergenerational community, where she plays multiple roles emanating from her status as a familiar stranger. Her move to Zarzis has compensated for her not having had children in France. Catherine's wish to be buried in the cemetery of the unknown is a poignant reminder that she never fully integrated into the kinship constellations in Zarzis that would have affirmed her belonging in a family cemetery, at the same time her unwillingness to be repatriated suggests her sense of belonging in Zarzis' cosmopolitan worlds.

### **The local death of foreigners**

While sipping a cappuccino with heart shaped foam at Café Lounge – one of the many European-style cafés of the touristic island of Djerba – the French Honorary Consul tells me that, seen as the residing European population is made up mainly of retired expats, one of his roles is to oversee the fulfilment of their wishes regarding funerals and burials. Djerba and neighbouring Zarzis were assigned an Honorary Consul by the French Embassy in Tunis due to their relatively large number of French residents: approximately 2500 European residents, of which over half were French, out of a total of around 22,000 French residents in the whole of Tunisia.

The Consul estimated that 80% of the local French population were post-pension age and tended to be either more well-off individuals who had bought a holiday home here or retirees. It was harder for younger people to come and settle in southern Tunisia and start a business. He identified lack of French schools on the island as one of the main reasons for the over-representation of a single demographic. There were almost no French families in Djerba, while a few mixed families were present and some had launched small businesses. To address the gap, the islanders had struggled to get a French school to open for a while and they finally succeeded in September 2017, when a new school named after Victor Hugo opened near Homt Souk (the island's biggest town). The Consul hoped it would encourage and attract more business to come work in the Tunisian south.

As for the post-pension age group, its reasons to move to Tunisia were self-evident for the Honorary Consul:

Say your pension amounts to 1500 euro per month or less. In France you'd get to the end of the month with some difficulty or only just about, while in Tunisia you'd be able to live very well and comfortably as you'd be receiving more than the salary of a PDG [French abbreviation for *Président-directeur général* – the title of director of a company]. And what is more, there's the sun.

As the purchasing power the pensioners in France decreases, more and more French are moving here after their pension, the number has augmented over the years. "Here they live like kings", the Consul emphasised. The prevailing opinion is that the pensioners benefit from the island's six private clinics and other medical services. In addition, people live in clusters of friends.

Over the past five to six years the Consul has been more and more engaged on the question of the Christian cemetery as well, which is positioned on the route from Homt Souk to the airport. The German and French Consuls from Tunis came on a visit recently to see how to better its conditions. They are in touch with expats who are thinking of being buried in the cemetery, or who have parents already buried there. The municipality of Homt Souk, with all the issues they have to face and with a very modest budget, cannot take care of the Christian cemetery as well. Eight years ago funds were raised to build a cloture around the cemetery, but it would have been too expensive to build a wall around the entirety of the terrain, so they enclosed just a part, but now it will soon become too small. The cloture needs to be enlarged and the consuls

have been in talks with the local authorities to convince them to give them more land at the disposal of the cemetery. Usually around ten people are buried in the Christian cemetery per year, and about twenty are repatriated.

The choice for the retired French population living in Zarzis, and for other foreigners, is for their body to be repatriated to France or for it to be buried in a multi-confessional cemetery. The cemetery and the repatriation represent the honorary consul's duties, but for him the trickiest task is how to preserve the belongings ("*les biens*") – the things the dead owned. For example, a man passed away once, and his car and scooter were immediately stolen. Often the Consul is called the same day of the death by either the authorities or friends and has to act to fulfil the various duties vis-à-vis the dead.

For the French who converted to Islam it depends whether they will be buried in Djerba or in France. Usually, cemeteries here are family based even if in theory they are meant to be managed by the municipality. In the case of mixed couples ("*couples mixtes*"), where one partner converted, it is up to the family to assess whether such a partner can be buried in their family cemetery. Some family members will say they do not want them in the same burial ground because someone who converted was not born a Muslim. When a foreigner passes away in Tunisia, the Consul in any case ensures that the family are informed. He keeps in close contact with the gendarmerie, and strives to reach the family before the funeral parlours do, as the Consul deems that this kind of sad news should be delivered by him personally. There are about seven or eight funeral parlours in Tunisia, and they all work almost exclusively with foreigners.

The district attorney ("*procureur de la république*") in Medenine usually automatically orders an autopsy to be carried out when the deceased is a foreign national, to make sure the death was natural. As an example, the Consul points out that on the previous day to our meeting, he was alerted of a case of a drowned woman. She was an older partner of a young Tunisian, and so the attorney felt suspicious about the real cause of the death. The autopsy was to be carried out in Gabes, at the regional centre, but sometimes the analysis are also sent to Sfax (a Tunisian city further north with an important port and a long stretch of coast, from which departures of Tunisians were often still happening) to a more specialised centre – “if the body doesn't speak enough” ("*si le corps ne parle pas assez*").

The formalities for repatriation are usually covered by insurance or by the family of the deceased. France intervenes only if there is no traceable family. The Consul judges that in such cases, it is better to bury the person in Tunisia as in France they would end up in a communal grave. Deaths are declared both in France and in Tunisia, both the local Tunisian municipality and the French consulate register the death. Once France issues the inhumation authorisation the repatriation of the body is put in motion. The body will usually travel to the consulate in Tunis and then to Gabes for the sealing of the coffin and to authenticate the body. Usually the coffin will not be reopened in France, and as such it is up to the consulate to certify it is the right person. The funeral parlour in France will be working in tandem with the consulate to make preparations for burial on the other side.

### **Disappeared loved ones, unknown dead**

*August 2017, Zarzis*

Rida sat on a plastic chair under his biggest fig tree as his three-year-old grandson Saber, named after his disappeared son, ran around in the sand. Like several other fishermen from Zarzis, he had recently gone to Ben Guerdane, the neighbouring town, to get the cartilage of his left ear pierced with a copper ring by a Chinese doctor: the latest of promised remedies for the sciatica that most seafarers suffered from sooner or later.

Saber didn't want to be a fisherman – he didn't like it. He wanted an easier job, he couldn't handle hard work. He left school at fifteen, worked for a while at sea, but not with me, he worked on bigger fishing boats at the port. He didn't earn a lot of money. He wanted to buy clothes and shoes, but he didn't make enough money. He wanted to buy fancy clothes like his peers. He left with other friends from the neighborhood.

After a brief pause, Rida sighed: “what can you do, *gharga sharga* (either we drown or we burn)”, echoing the words of his son and his friends, tinting them with his own sense of powerlessness and grief at what had happened. Saber was twenty-three in February 2011 and had not told his father he was going to do the *harga*. Rida would have been against it: he believed that young men should not be leaving in that way because it was too dangerous, and

the authorities should not allow it to happen. But in 2011, right after the revolution, what was left of “the authorities” in Tunisia were unable, or perhaps also unwilling, to guard its coasts, and so especially young men started embarking to Italy in big numbers from Zarzis and other coastal towns. Most arrived safely, as in Zarzis the organisers took care to only let the *harraga* (burners) leave on sturdy boats and to not overcrowd them, as those on board were *awledna* (our sons). Saber’s vessel’s bad luck had been to have encountered at sea a Tunisian military ship returning from Lampedusa with other *harraga* that Italy had managed to make them repatriate. Its captain, determined to stop these new *harraga* too, crashed into their wooden boat and sunk it. Beyond the specificities of this case – for which Rida and the other families are still seeking justice<sup>140</sup> – Rida maintained that the sea is in itself a dangerous option, it devours (*yekel*) people, and he would know, having worked his whole life off the swampy beach of Lemsa.

Lemsa is the name of a long stretch of deserted marshland on the road heading south out of Zarzis city centre in the direction of Ben Guerdane, the last Tunisian town before Libya.<sup>141</sup> The few vertical interruptions to the landscape’s flatness are dry palm-leaves huts built by fishermen for shade. On closer inspection, though, the beach is crowded with remains washed up from the sea, as the currents are particularly strong here. Mounds of brown algae, turtle shells, plastic bags, shoes, clothes, wood, oil tanks, water bottles. The bodies of deceased persons, or just limbs or parts, are also sometimes found here.

Last year I was there [in Lemsa] and I found two corpses [*juthath*] of black people [*wesfan* – a word meaning servants (*usif* for the singular), considered derogatory and racist, its use now sanctioned by law,<sup>142</sup> but still commonly employed in southern Tunisia<sup>143</sup>]. The municipality came and took them away, we called them on the phone.

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<sup>140</sup> The final sections of chapter 4 recount the viewpoints of another family who lost two members to this same incident.

<sup>141</sup> Lemsa has also been described in chapters 2 and 3, as it is the beach closest to the cemetery of unknown persons in Al Gatt’aya, and is where sea currents often carry dead persons to shore.

<sup>142</sup> “[I]n civil society, several black rights associations have emerged and started addressing the phenomenon of racism against ‘blacks’ in Tunisia, bringing racial problems to the fore. They lobbied for the introduction of a law punishing racist acts and words, which was eventually introduced on 9 October 2018. Law 11/2018 would have been an unimaginable achievement in pre-revolutionary Tunisia, as would the very existence of black rights associations.” (Scaglioni 2020: 18).

<sup>143</sup> See Scaglioni (2020) for how legacies of slavery and processes of racialisation affect access to education, work, and marriage for black Tunisians living in the governorate of Medenine.

They were probably from Senegal or Mali. There are lots of bodies on the shores of Zarzis.

He went on to talk about a survivor from Niger who had been found fifteen days earlier near Ben Guerdane, close to the port of El Ketef. Rida had heard about him on the radio, everyone else on that boat had died, around one hundred and twenty people, they had left from Libya. He remembered that four years ago with other fishermen he had found a sunken Tunisian boat (*balansi*), which they figured must have left from Sfax (a Tunisian city further north with an important port and a long stretch of coast, from which departures of Tunisians were often still happening) and shipwrecked on its way to Sicily. As he got up and scanned the tree for ripe figs for us to taste, his thoughts returned to Saber.

People who were with him on the boat and were picked up in Sfax saw him dying. He was dead. Only Allah knows where his body is right now. It could be in Italy, Malta... Only Allah knows. I think about him all the time. Each time I go to the sea, I think of him.



Figure 6.2: The beach of Lemsa, from which Rida goes fishing. June 2016.

## Conclusion

This chapter reveals Zarzis and its surroundings as communities and affective spaces that emerge around the practices and after-effects of marriage and death. Marriages as events and forms of connection-making are embedded in Zarzis' social composition and its annual calendar: marriages between European female pensioners and younger Tunisian men explain new unexpected arrivals in Zarzis, while marriages between Tunisians that live across Tunisian and European geographies are heavily attended summer events. The thesis argues that marriage and death are linked idiomatically and notionally as two sides of a coin – not being married is likened to being “socially dead”, and wanting to have enough money to marry is an important motivation for pursuing the *harga* and thus risking death at sea. Death in Zarzis is marked by spatial disparities and diverse regimes of burial. European pensioners extend their lives here as they can afford exclusive healthcare and, in the event of death, a diplomatic apparatus is

mobilised to ensure a respectable resting place for their remains. At the same time, beaches located near Libya and in Zarzis contain belongings and remains of the unknown dead. Zarzis is a terrain on which these inequalities of authentication of remains, custodies of dead bodies, and levels of institutionalisation of the procedures around death, map onto the town, its cemeteries and its beaches.

## Conclusion

### **The arrest of the fishermen<sup>144</sup>**

On the night of Wednesday 29 August 2018, six Tunisian fishermen were arrested in Italy (Tondo, 2018b). Earlier that day, they had set off from their hometown of Zarzis to cast their nets in the open sea between North Africa and Sicily. The fishermen then sighted a small vessel whose engine had broken, and that had started taking water. After giving the fourteen passengers water, milk and bread – which the fishermen carry in abundance, knowing they might encounter refugee boats in distress – they called the Italian coastguard, who told them they would be coming soon. After hours of waiting, though, the men decided to tow the smaller boat in the direction of Lampedusa – Italy’s southernmost island – to help Italian authorities in their rescue operations. At around 24 miles from Lampedusa, the Guardia di Finanza (customs police) took the fourteen people on board, and then proceeded to arrest the six fishermen. According to the precautionary custody order issued by the judge in Agrigento in Sicily, the fishermen stood accused of smuggling, a crime that could have gotten them up to fifteen years of jail if the case had gone to trial. They were held in Agrigento prison for over a month, and their boat was seized.

This arrest came after a summer of Italian politicians closing their ports to NGO rescue boats (BBC, 2018), and only a week after far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini prevented for ten days the disembarkation of 177 Eritrean and Somali asylum seekers from the Italian coastguard ship Diciotti (Tondo, 2018a; Vogt, 2018). The arrest of the Zarzis fishermen was yet another step towards dissuading anyone – be it Italian or Tunisian citizens, NGO or coastguard ships – from coming to the aid of refugee boats in danger at sea.

Among those arrested was Chamseddine Bourassine, the president of the Association “Le Pêcheur” pour le Développement et l’Environnement. The Association was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for the Zarzis fishermen’s continuous engagement in saving lives in the Mediterranean. Chamseddine, a fishing boat captain in his mid-forties (not to be confused with the Chamseddine who cared for the cemetery of unknown persons, who was in fact his

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<sup>144</sup> An earlier versions of this section was published on the website of the media organisation openDemocracy (Zagaria 2018).

cousin), was one of the first people I met in Zarzis when I moved there in the summer of 2015. On a sleepy late-August afternoon, my interview with Foued Gammoudi, the then Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Head of Mission for Tunisia and Libya, was interrupted by an urgent phone call. “The fishermen have just returned, they saved 550 people, let’s go to the port to thank them.” Just a week earlier to our first meeting, Chamseddine Bourassine had been among the 116 fishermen from Zarzis to have received rescue at sea training with MSF. Gammoudi was proud that the fishermen had already started collaborating with the MSF *Bourbon Argos* ship to save hundreds of people. We hurried to the port to greet Chamseddine and his crew, as they returned from a three-day fishing expedition which involved, as it often did lately, a lives-saving operation.

The fishermen of Zarzis had been on the frontline of rescue in the Central Mediterranean for over fifteen years. Their fishing grounds lying between Libya – from which most people making their way to Europe undocumented leave from – and Sicily, they were often the first to come to the aid of refugee boats in distress. “The fishermen have never really had a choice: they work here, they encounter refugee boats regularly, so over the years they learnt to do rescue at sea”, explained Gammoudi. For years, fishermen from both sides of the Mediterranean were virtually alone in this endeavour.

Before the Tunisian revolution of 2011, Ben Ali threatened the fishermen with imprisonment for helping migrants in danger at sea – the regime having been a close collaborator of both Italy and the European Union in border control matters. During that time, Tunisian nationals attempting to do the *harga* were also heavily sanctioned by their own government. Everything changed though with the revolution. “It was chaos here in 2011. You cannot imagine what the word chaos means if you didn’t live it”, recalled Anis, the secretary general of the “Le Pêcheur” association. In the months following the revolution, hundreds of boats left from Zarzis taking Tunisians from all over the country to Lampedusa. Several members of the fishermen’s association remember having to sleep on their fishing boats at night to prevent them from being stolen for the *harga*. Other fishermen instead, especially those who were indebted, decided to sell their boats, while some inhabitants of Zarzis took advantage of the power vacuum left by the revolution and made considerable profit by organising *harga* crossings. “At that time there was no police, no state, and even more misery. If you wanted Lampedusa, you could have it”, rationalised another fisherman. But Chamseddine Bourassine, the president of the association,

and his colleagues saw no future in moving to Europe, and made a moral pact not to sell their boats for migration.

They instead remained in Zarzis, and in 2013 founded their association to create a network of support to ameliorate the working conditions of small and artisanal fisheries. The priority when they started organising was to try and secure basic social security – something they are still struggling to sustain today. With time, though, the association also got involved in alerting the youth to the dangers of boat migration, as they regularly witnessed the risks involved and felt compelled to do something for the younger generations, amongst which unemployment rates were hitting staggering heights. In this optic, they organised training for the local youth in boat mechanics, nets mending, and diving, and collaborated in different international projects, such as NEMO, organised by the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies in Bari (CIHEAM-Bari) and funded by the Italian Cooperation. This project also helped the fishermen build a museum to explain traditional fishing methods, the first floor of which is dedicated to pictures and citations from the fishermen's long-term voluntary involvement in coming to the rescue of refugees in danger at sea.

The fishermen's role was getting more and more vital since, as the Libyan civil war drew out, the boats refugees were being forced onto in Libya were getting less and less fit for travel, making the journey even more dangerous. With little support from Tunisian coastguards, who were not allowed to operate beyond Tunisian waters, the fishermen juggled their responsibility to bring money home to their families and their responsibility to rescue people in distress at sea. Anis remembers that once in 2013, three fishermen boats were out and received an SOS from a vessel carrying roughly one hundred people. It was their first day out, and going back to Zarzis would have meant losing petrol money and precious days of work, which they simply could not afford. After having insured that nobody was ill, the three boats took twenty people on board each, and continued working for another two days, sharing food and water with their guests. The situation on board became tense with so many people, food was not enough for everybody, and fights broke out. Some fishermen recall incidents during which they truly feared for their safety, as they occasionally came across boats with armed men from Libyan militias. It was also hard for them to provide medical assistance. Once a woman gave birth on Chamseddine's boat – the same boat that was later to be seized in Italy – thankfully there had been no complications.

During the summer of 2015, therefore, Chamseddine felt relieved that NGO search and rescue boats were starting to operate in the Mediterranean. The fishermen's boats were not equipped to take hundreds of people on board, and the post-revolutionary Tunisian authorities didn't have the means to support them. MSF had provided the association with first aid kits, life jackets, and rescue rafts to be able to better assist refugees at sea, and had given them a list of channels and numbers linked to the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome for when they encountered boats in distress. They also offered training in dead body management, and provided the association with body bags, disinfectant and gloves. "When we see people at sea we rescue them. It's not only because we follow the laws of the sea or of religion: we do it because it's human", said Chamseddine. But sometimes rescue came too late, and bringing the dead back to shore was all the fishermen could do.<sup>145</sup> During 2015 the fishermen at least felt that with more ships in the Mediterranean doing rescue, the duty dear to all seafarers of helping people in need at sea did not only fall on their shoulders, and they could go back to doing more fishing.

The situation deteriorated again though in the summer of 2017, as Italian Interior Minister Minniti struck deals with Libyan militias and coastguards to bring back and keep refugees in detention centres in Libya, while simultaneously passing laws criminalising and restricting the activity of NGO rescue boats in Italy. Media smear campaigns directed against acts of solidarity with migrants and refugees and against the work of rescue vessels in the Mediterranean poured even more fuel on already inflamed anti-immigration sentiments in Europe. In the midst of this, on 6 August 2017, the fishermen of Zarzis came face to face with a far-right vessel rented by *Generazione Identitaria*, the *C-Star*, cruising the Mediterranean allegedly on a "Defend Europe" mission to hamper rescue operations and bring migrants back to Africa (Henley, 2017). The *C-Star* was hovering in front of Zarzis port, and although it had not officially asked port authorities whether it could dock to refuel – which the port authorities assured locals it would refuse – the fishermen of Zarzis took the opportunity to let these alt-right groups know how they felt about their mission. Armed with red, black and blue felt tip pens, they wrote in a mixture of Arabic, Italian, French and English slogans such as "No

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<sup>145</sup> A couple of days before news of the six fishermen being arrested became public, on 1 September 2018, French media *Konbini News* created a [crowd-funding](#) campaign to sustain the work of another member of the fishermen's association *Le Pêcheur*. They launched an appeal to help [Chamseddine](#) in upkeep and buying new land for the cemetery of unknown persons, victims of the European Union's Mediterranean border, buried in Zarzis.

Racists!”, “*Dégage!*” (Get out of here! – the same slogan that had been used against Ben Ali during the revolution), “*C-Star: No gasoil? No acqua? No mangiato?*” (C-Star: No fuel? No water? No eaten?), which they proceeded to hang on their boats, ready to take to sea were the C-Star to approach. Chamseddine Bourassine, who had returned just a couple of hours prior to the impending C-Star arrival from five days of work at sea, called other members of the fishermen association to come to the port and join in the peaceful protest. He told the journalists present that the fishermen opposed whole-heartedly the racism propagated by the C-Star members, and that having seen the death of fellow Africans at sea, they couldn’t but condemn these politics. Their efforts were cheered on by anti-racist networks in Sicily, who had in turn prevented the C-Star from docking in Catania port just a couple of days earlier.

It is members from these same networks in Sicily together with friends of the fishermen in Tunisia and internationally (including myself) who were later engaged in finding lawyers for Chamseddine and his five colleagues once they were stopped in Lampedusa. Their counterparts in Tunisia joined the fishermen’s families and friends to protest in front of the Italian embassy in Tunis. Three busloads had arrived from Zarzis after an eight-hours night-time journey for the occasion, and many others had come from other Tunisian towns to show their solidarity. Gathered there too were members of La Terre Pour Tous, an association of families of missing Tunisian migrants, who joined in to demand the immediate release of the fishermen. A sister protest was organised by the Zarzis diaspora in front of the Italian embassy in Paris on Saturday afternoon. Fishermen networks from Morocco and Mauritania also released statements of support, and the Tunisian State Secretary for Immigration Adel Jarboui urged Italian authorities to release the fishermen, who are considered heroes in Tunisia (RTCI, 2018).

### **‘Burning’ injustice**

This thesis is about the ways in which dignity, understood as both an existential and relational claim to respect and recognition, is the motor for both the *harga* and for revolutionary demands in the south-eastern Tunisian town of Zarzis. It focuses on how different inhabitants of Zarzis – a peripheral town that is nevertheless enmeshed in global and regional power dynamics and inequalities – conceptualise and attempt to pursue a dignified life through irregularised migration in a politically and economically unstable context. Its six chapters focus on the ordinary experiences of migration of both border crossers and their families, neighbourhoods,

and communities in a post-revolutionary society where the demands of the revolution are yet to be addressed, and where many feel disenchanting at the prospect of change really coming about. Part of the “ordinary” in a Mediterranean coastal town such as Zarzis, located in the EU border’s “buffer zone” (Del Sarto 2010), is the finding and burial of persons who died on their migration journey to “Europe”. As the above episode concerning the fishermen of Zarzis shows, however, border struggles and political demands for dignity, respect, and recognition – ubiquitous drives of the 2011 Arab revolutions – go hand in hand for many activists and citizens on both sides of the Mediterranean.

The thesis operationalises dignity as a political affect and demand at different scales, as well as showing the effects that EU border regulations have had on life and social and family relations in this emigrants’ town. The *harga*, as the enactment of the right to freedom of movement and to decide to seek one’s future wherever one wishes, echoes other demands for freedom and justice of the 2011 Tunisian revolution (Cassarino 2018; Dini & Giusa 2020; Garelli, Sossi and Tazzioli 2013). At the same time, the *harga* is often understood by young men to be the only way out of “social death” that is available to them, thereby foreclosing other forms of engagements and rebellion locally, and often results in retrenching a conservative vision of social life and social reproduction in Zarzis. The *harga* nevertheless also allows for some gender roles to shift, and for new caring communities and marriage patterns to emerge.

While the chapters of this thesis have shown the ways in which dignity is played out within families and in intimate social relations, as well as what dignifying the dead entails for the living, this conclusion returns to the broader politics of dignity addressed in the introduction and in chapter 5, involving who counts as human, and who gets to dignify whom, or take dignity away. The following sections will therefore explore the ways in which this ethnography speaks to the themes of death at the border and social death, the gendered aspects of the *harga* and of dignity, and the ways in which the notion of dignity might be extended to non-citizens, bestowing them their “place” in Zarzis, and expanding the baseline for collective liveability and justice.

### **Border death and social death**

The concept of “social death” has often been used as an analytical tool in extreme situations of coercion and injustice, such as the transatlantic slave trade (Patterson 1982) or occupied Palestine (Hage 2003). It is thus important to qualify this rhetoric by noting that social death in Zarzis was nothing like that of the slaves that Patterson (1982) was describing when he coined the term – much less the very specific experiences of African American women under Chattel slavery documented by Hartman (1997) that later became central to Mbembe’s (2003) notion of “necropolitics”. It is also crucial to remember that actual death during migratory journeys is unequally distributed within Africa, within Tunisia, and within Zarzis. The inhabitants of this coastal town know this all too well, since the Mediterranean is a liquid border, inconsistently liable to bring back to shore those who died on the crossing, as is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. However, it is precisely because the European Union’s border regime pushes people to embark on ever more dangerous, even deadly, journeys that it is important to understand how it also amplifies possibilities for social death in countries of departure. Social death in Zarzis is not solely a result of global inequalities and documented mobility restrictions, but the risk of becoming socially dead has become more salient as a result.

The feeling of being already dead that young people in Zarzis evoked is closer to the “boredom and despair” identified by Schielke (2008) in Egypt, and similarly felt in both other North African countries and in those countries undergoing economic crisis neighbouring the EU that are likewise constrained by its mobility restrictions, such as the entrapment felt in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia described by Jansen (2009). In Zarzis, as in these settings, there is a sense of systemic injustice that makes young men’s search for a dignified life an urgent and irrepressible one. But there are additional factors too: the ordinary constraints which relate to a generalized condition of life under neoliberalism and capitalism (Narotzky 2016). Although the possibilities available to young men in Zarzis are broader, and their mobility much less restricted, than that of Palestinians under Israeli military occupation, this generalised feeling still retains the baseline of Hage’s definition of “social death” as the “impossibility of making a life”, and even of an “inability to dream a meaningful life” (2003: 77, 79). Vigh’s (2006) description of young men in Guinea-Bissau’s capital Bissau, whose chances of “social becoming” and of escaping “social death” can only be realised by either making themselves “absent” via migration or by engaging in armed conflict, also resonates, although again in much less extreme ways.

In Zarzis, there is a widespread sense that the only way to realise oneself and avoid social death in the *bled* (hometown/country) is by leaving it. Social death here is an ethnographic term employed by aspiring *harraga* to explain their motivations to leave: they are already socially dead, so they might as well risk physical death in order to start living on the other side of the sea, and eventually be able to construct a dignified life back home. A dignified life (*hayet karima*) thus becomes the baseline for leading a decent life, while social death is understood to comprise prolonged and potentially eternal “stuckness”, a life of just making-do, making ends meet, of “running after bread” (Meddeb 2012) without being able to move through the “normal”, socially valued life-stages that make up the good life in Zarzis. The thesis thus wishes to counter misconceptions about migration, often framed as a problem of integration in the European Union, by showing how the *harga*, from the point of view of its protagonists – who in this ethnography are both the young men who undertake it and the families, neighbourhoods, and communities who make it possible and whose social death is also at stake – is in fact about attaining and reproducing a dignified life back home. Dignity as a drive for *harga* and as a political, revolutionary claim is sustained by ambivalent structures of feelings that uphold it as an aspiration while revealing the moral uneasiness both migrants and stayers hold about having to leave in order to attain dignified futures that resemble those cherished by parents and grandparents in the *bled*.

### **Engendering dignity**

The differences between young people’s motivations to do the *harga* and older generations’ self-professed drives to migrate come under scrutiny in Zarzis by both migrants and stayers of different ages. What emerges from the ways in which people belonging to these different generations describe their own mobility compared to that of other generations is a deep-seated sense that what is at stake in embarking on migration projects is the social reproduction of Zarzis. Yet the coming and going, circular migration between Tunisia and Europe that had been available to older generations of migrants is no longer possible in the aftermath of the creation of the EU’s Schengen Zone in the 1990s. The movement from Zarzis to Paris is now non-reversible, it is not circular. Legal and infrastructure changes in European border politics had substantial social implications for kinship and social relations in Zarzis. Inhabitants are now having to operate in the face of social fragmentation and more prolonged absences of loved ones, who at times go missing indefinitely. Pursuing dignity via migration to Europe thus folds

into the question of change for those who feel they belong to Zarzis: the discontent voiced by young men about their lives contains an element of nostalgia for the good, dignified life that they perceive their parents and grandparents to have been able to lead, but which is no longer available as an option (and, perhaps, following Derrida's notion of nostalgia, never was in fact achievable). It is impossible for them to recreate that social formation, which nevertheless remains desired, and which they foreground as a motive for 'burning'. The thesis thus records a historical change, as gender and family dynamics are altered locally in Zarzis by recent legal and technical changes to the EU border regime.

Yet if dignity in Tunisia became revolutionary through citizens demanding political and economic circumstances that could allow them to pursue and reproduce living standards that they knew had been attainable and valued in the past – and was not in fact a call to revolutionise social, gender, and generational relations – then what kind of politics does the pursuit of dignity via the *harga* “engender”?

Dignity is inextricably gendered in the context of Zarzis, and involves both individual aspirations and collective social standing. As shown in chapters 4 and 5, mothers, sisters, and wives-to-be are often blamed by men of all ages and by society at large for pushing young men to do the *harga*. What these blame games perhaps point to, though, is the social anxiety surrounding the potentially subversive, unintended effects of generations of male emigrants leaving for France. This, for one, led women to bring up children often in the absence of their husbands, who were working and living abroad for most of the year, and also to seek employment locally. Shifting power structures and relations within families are emergent in Zarzis, as mothers and sons create alliances to enable the migration aspirations of to latter, to let them “keep some hope”, and build futures for themselves, whether or not the patriarch is in the know or agrees. The *harga* therefore reconfigures gender roles and generational hierarchies, while side-lining the possibility of making futures in Zarzis without it.

### **The life and death of others**

The question of the rights, dignity and “place” of non-citizens in Tunisia, whether they be living or deceased, has also come to the fore since the 2011 revolution. As chapter 6 shows, the French retirees living in south-eastern Tunisia are occupying a very different place as guests

with certain abilities to stake claims to the territory compared to the citizens of other African countries fleeing war in nearby Libya and ending up in Zarzis. Retirees are located legally and socially in Zarzis, and so the ways in which their bodies are treated after death is also completely different from the fate of the bodies of unknown migrants found on its shores. The border dead have neither social nor territorial connections to the people who bury them. Procedures to return these dead are not activated, while they are for elderly Europeans living out their retirement in Zarzis. The relationship between the law and territoriality therefore emerges as fundamental in determining these cases, since in the absence of social and territorial ties, the unknown migrant dead fall into a “black hole”, while locals are left to do what they can to make their burials dignified and their presence visible. The human body is not just an object, and yet it seems difficult to know what to do in Zarzis to find a solution to the border dead in the absence of a higher form of authority able or willing to step in.

In Zarzis, it is the family that takes over and becomes the institution governing death matters. The weight of responsibility for the dead falling on families results, however, in being an even more exclusionary process. Relations of care among kin are of course also relations of domination, as care generates entitlements, a sort of property in people (Lewis 2019). Care and social reproduction can indeed be conservative platforms. A revolutionary question therefore might be: if pursuing dignity via the ‘burning’ of unjust, deadly borders could entail a fairer, more inclusive, and more human approach to social reproduction, then what could it be the social reproduction of? And could a different approach to citizenship from below, beyond state laws and institutions, recognise and dignify a “place” for others?

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