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F. Stambouli
A. Zghal

Urban life in pre-colonial North Africa

North African urban society has very specific structural traits. As yet, no adequate systematic studies of it are available. Existing accounts of the social structure of the pre-colonial Maghreb are concerned almost exclusively with rural society. Often they are the work of geographers or historians of Marxist background working in the French academic tradition. The social-anthropological perspective, which in our view is essential for the study of pre-capitalist social forms, is largely lacking.

Moreover, these researchers are too eager to identify the pre-colonial Maghreb with one or the other of the two pre-capitalist modes of production which have received most attention in sociology and historiography: the feudal system and the 'Asiatic mode of production'. In consequence they tend to offer highly questionable interpretations.[1] This general issue we shall leave as it is.

The main question we must answer is this: what are the typical features of Maghrebin urban life? The material at our disposal is varied and of unequal merit. A large number of monographs, thematic studies and even some attempts at theory are available on the subject of Maghrebin towns. The studies which come closest to our analytical approach are mainly those of authors writing in English. These deal almost exclusively with the towns of the Middle East proper, which, whilst resembling the towns of the Maghreb in some ways, nevertheless also possess distinctive traits of their own.[2]

1. URBAN LIFE IN NORTH AFRICA BETWEEN M'ZAB AND MOGADOR

The specific structural features of North African towns cannot be identified either with the cities of European feudalism or with traditional Chinese towns, taken as examples of the 'Asiatic mode of production'.

The structural features of the western city in the Middle Ages[3] can be summarized as follows:

(1) The city is essentially a community of citizens, relatively autonomous *vis-à-vis* the central power, managing its own affairs by means of an administration whose members are elected by the citizens.

(2) Such a community has its own legal institutions and its written regulations (charters).
(3) An institutional tie (an oath) binds the members of the community to each other.
(4) Finally, the urban community is granted a market and fortifications. The market in particular occupies an important place in the definition of the feudal urban community, which is geared to keeping the management of the market (commerce) safely under the control of, and benefit to, the citizens.

We find the total sum of these features in some isolated cases of urban communities in the Maghreb, especially in the towns of M'zab and to a lesser degree in the oases and urban communities of Tafilelt.

(1) The traditional Mozabite towns[4] are urban communities which are relatively autonomous *vis-à-vis* the central power. This autonomy however is explained not so much by the adherence of the people of M'zab to a particular Muslim sect (Ibadism) as by the considerable geographical distance which separates them from the central power. The communities of the M'zab manage their own affairs by means of an elected authority (*jemaa*).
(2) The community possesses its own legal institutions and written regulations (*ittifiqat*).
(3) A very strong moral consensus binds the members of the community to each other.
(4) The community has its own market and the town is ringed with fortifications.

One must stress that this type of urban community is found in the Maghreb only by way of exception. Hence the Mozabite towns cannot warrant any conclusions about urban life in the Maghreb as a whole. The urban community of M'zab may represent an aspiration of the townsfolk of the Maghreb, but it is a hope which Maghrebin society has done little to transform into reality. The dominant role of the central power in the total social structure has done much to prevent the realization of this dream.

This preponderence of the central power might lead one to seek the model of the urban structure of the pre-colonial Maghreb in the classical Chinese towns, taken as representative of the Asian mode of production, whose principal distinctive features could be summarized as follows:

(1) The town emerges as the spatial implementation of a royal plan. It is constructed on a grid, and is intended to be a collection of clearly defined districts.
(2) Through his bureaucracy, the ruler controls directly all the urban groups.

(3) Urban commerce is directly controlled by the central power, which on occasion imports populations, even alien ones (notably Arab and Persian), to ensure the success of this enterprise. The premises of the traders are the property of the ruler, and are let to them by him.
(4) Finally, the Chinese towns—at any rate until the Sung dynasty (twelfth century) appear more as a centre of commercial activity, controlled by the ruler for his own benefit, than as a focal point for the creation of wealth and the development of a region.

All these traits can be found in almost perfect form in *one* single Maghrebin pre-colonial town: Mogador.[6]

(1) Mogador is in effect the implementation of a royal plan, a town created in its totality along a geometric chess-board design, with its districts clearly defined.
(2) The Sultan, through his bureaucracy, controls all urban activities.
(3) Commerce, the major activity of Mogador, is monopolized by the Sultan, who imports alien populations (Jews and Christians), to ensure its success. The premises remain, all of them, the Sultan's property, and he in turn leases them to traders.
(4) Finally, Mogador appears pre-emininently as a trading centre and not as a focal point for the creation of wealth.

Thus Mogador appears as an exception, like the cities of M'zab, and not as typical of Maghrebin urban society in general. Moreover, the rapid failure of the Mogador experiment underscores the limitations imposed on such a type in North Africa.

M'zab and Mogador are marginal and exceptional. Thus, our first conclusion is that we cannot seek the model for the classical Maghrebin city either in Western feudal society or in 'Asiatic' society.

Our suggestion is that urban life in the Maghreb is conditioned by the interaction of three main participants: the central power, the townsmen, and the tribesmen. These three participants are dependent on each other, and co-exist in a more or less peaceful manner. The townsfolk seek the protection of the central power against the tribesmen. The central power in turn is forced to seek the support of a group of tribesmen in order to man its army and to ensure the safety of trade. Finally, the tribesmen need the townsfolk with whom they enter into trading relationships of varying intensity.

Of these three participants, the townsfolk alone are unable to avail themselves of an independent military force or to defend themselves. Hence, they are necessarily obliged to rely on the protection of the central power. At the same time, it is mainly from amongst the townsfolk that the *ulama* are recruited, who provide the basis for the legitimation of power and of the social order as a whole.

But mere knowledge of the Book, for all its sacredness, is not sufficient to protect these scholars, nor the townsfolk as a whole, exposed as they are both to the soldiers of the prince and to the nomad horsemen. It is this vision of the interaction between the central power, the townsfolk and the nomads, which guides us. The questions now are:

(1) What degree of autonomy does the urban population possess in the politico-administrative running of the city?
(2) What degree of autonomy does it possess in the organization of its economic activity?
(3) Finally, what degree of autonomy does it possess in carrying out its religious and cultural activities?

II. URBAN AUTONOMY IN POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT

Consider three representative towns: Fez, Algiers and Tunis. These are indeed three capital cities, but then, all towns of a certain size are under the direct control of the central power.

(1) *The Kasbah*

First and foremost the central power is marked by a conspicuous externality or otherness in relation to the urban population. The social origin of its members, its military character as well as the ecological organization of the space it occupies, all underline its foreign character *vis-à-vis* the urban population.

The members of the dynasty are often strangers to the town. They are either of mountain or nomadic origin (Fez) or of an origin alien to the society as a whole (the Turks in Algiers and Tunis). The Turks are immediately distinguishable from the indigenous population both by language and by religious practice, which accentuates the gap.

Hence, the force on which the central power rests is principally the army, which is its distinctive feature and its natural base. The army is stationed in the centre of the city and keeps it under control. Essentially it is composed of people other than the townsfolk, either of hill tribes and nomads (the famous Chrarga and Udaya tribes of Fez el Jedid)[7] or of special corps of foreigners, well organized and committed to military service (Turkish Janissaries in Algiers and Tunis).[8]

Theoretically, the role of the army, stationed in the Kasbah, consists of protecting the urban population from foreign invasion or nomadic tribal raids. This function it performs with greater or lesser effectiveness in times of political stability. On the other hand, in times of political crisis, the army is let loose upon the urban population and often behaves as if it were in conquered territory. As the urban population does not possess any independent military force or any local

militia for their own protection, it submits to the exactions of the army in times of crisis, and is wholly dependent on it in times of peace.

Even on the spatial level, the gap between the rulers and the urban community is conspicous.

The Kasbah, a kind of politico-military and residential complex, is clearly marked off from the rest of the city. Placed on a height, enclosed behind fortifications, the seat of government, the prince's palace and the military barracks constitute a veritable citadel which is distinct from the city and dominates it. It is, in truth, a fortified town in the heart of the capital city.[9]

(2) *The politico-administrative institutions of the town*

The politico-administrative management of the town is wholly controlled by the state. The administrative institutions are directly dependent on the central power, and the principal personnel administering the town are appointed by the sovereign and remain under his direct control. Apart from the life of the urban district, where a powerful sense of solidarity allows the population to enjoy some autonomy, there is not a single elective institution which would allow an institutionalized participation by the townsfolk in communal affairs.

The administrative management of the town[10] as a whole is undertaken by a governor, chosen by the central power, generally from outside the town. There are no representative assemblies of townsfolk which would enable them to take part in the effective administration of the city. Only the governor is responsible to the central power for the running of the city. He designates the person responsible for the maintenance of order (*Saheb eshurta*), and if the townsfolk participate in this task, they only do so as subordinates.

The participation of the townsfolk in the collection of rates, taxes, and all kinds of presents is effected through the sheikhs of the districts.[11] Each district is administered by a sheikh who, by tradition, is chosen from amongst its notables. The manner of designating the sheikh is variable. But he plays a key role, providing the link between the central power and the inhabitants of each district.

Thus the population takes but a small part in its administrative management, for the organs of control and the power of decision elude it. The pre-colonial Maghrebin city is not a commune.[12] All the same, the effective social life at district level, the shared loyalty which marks off each district, acts as a counterweight to the preponderant role of the central power in the administration of the city.

The districts constitute the micro-spaces of community life and solidarity. Such solidarity is rooted basically in links of kinship and ethnic or regional origin. These links of kinship, so crucial at the foundation of cities, come in time to be tempered by the links of neighbourliness[13]. Community life at district level is facilitated by the availability of

special meeting-places, by trade and by intensified social life: the mosque, the *zawiya*, the Koranic school, the stall. Thus the district seems something of a grass-root reaction to a city administered from above. One might say that the district is the miniature surrogate of the commune; it constitutes the real 'communal base of the Maghreb'. Nevertheless they do not behave as closed solitary enclaves or as ghettoes bound up in their own ethnic or religious adherence.

A separation along religious lines is almost non-existent. Apart from Jewish and Christian communities, there are in the Maghreb no districts defined by religious adherence, such as exist in the Middle East. Even the Mozabites do not inhabit separate districts. Admittedly ethnic differences are observable, notably during the earlier stages of the foundation of cities; but they lead to no segregation. District solidarity also does not in any way exclude access and incorporation of inhabitants into larger urban units, such as the suburbs or the city as a whole.

The identification of the whole population with the patron saint of the city enables them to sense and take part in the rhythm of the city as a whole, *qua* inhabitants of Algiers or Tunis.

This emergence of a communal consciousness, at a district level despite discouragement by the administrative system, can result in a real political force, notably at moments of crisis for the central power.[14] Several times in the history of the Maghreb, at moments of such crisis, the town has, for a time, established itself as a commune endowed with a council of leading citizens (*Majlis shura*), often presided over by the Cadi. Nevertheless, this political form of the city is essentially transitory and ephemeral. As noted, the inhabitants do not possess any regular militia which might maintain order with the town and protect it from nomadic raids. Hence the Maghrebin town cannot turn itself into a commune for any length of time. In the last resort, the town depends for its very existence on the presence and strength of the central power. When the latter is permanently weakened, the town slides into decline, and is from time to time destroyed. This interaction of the Maghrebin city, the central power and the nomadic tribes has already been analysed with great accuracy by Ibn Khaldun.[15]

The structural difficulties which face the pre-colonial Maghrebin city, endeavouring to become a commune, are sometimes accentuated in moments of political crisis and dynastic succession by the emergence of factions (*soff*-s) in the very heart of the city. *Soff*-s are coalitions which cut across ethnic boundaries, and transcend differences in occupation and religion. They are not the expression of class conflict or of some struggle between rich and poor. Essentially the *soff*-s express a structural division of the segmentary kind, which emerges when the central power is weakened.[16] This turns the town into a kind of a segmentary community. This in turn, by creating new cleavages and polarising the city into two or three factions,[17] considerably inhibits the formation of a

communal consciousness and diminishes the prospect of the establishment of an autonomous urban community.

The existence of factions at the heart of the Maghrebin city is one of their weakest points, giving the central power the opportunity to exploit with ease the 'artificial' divisions within the urban population, not based either on economic nor on ethnic differences. They are simply groups of neighbouring districts which combine to oppose another group of districts. Thus the townsfolk do not possess institutions which could give them control of the political and administrative management of their city. It remains to be seen whether these political limitations are counter balanced by a greater autonomy in economic or religious affairs.

III. WHAT IS THE DEGREE OF AUTONOMY OF THE URBAN POPULATION IN THE ORGANIZATION OF ITS ECONOMIC ACTIVITY?

The principal source of wealth in the towns of the pre-colonial Maghreb is constituted by trade, notably long-distance trade which depends on the stability of the central power and its capacity to control the main trade routes.

The central power obtains an important part of its revenues from its control of commerce, customs and in some cases even through monopolies. This source of wealth is important and seems to exceed the revenues which the central power received from local producers such as artisans and peasants.

Nevertheless, the extent of the direct intervention of the central power in economic affairs should not be exaggerated. It never reaches the degree of control which the central power exercised over Chinese cities. And even when it comes about that the central power exercised monopolies, these are generally few in number and limited, though they are sometimes extended when there is a crisis in long-distance trade.

On the other hand, the population itself plays an appreciable part in economic activity and comes to control a large part of the local production, notably in the sphere of crafts. Organized in craft guilds, the townsfolk as economic agents manage to limit the role of the state in the sphere of production.

(1) *The state and long-distance trade*

Until the fifteenth century the Maghreb was the natural link between Mediterranean Europe and black Africa, and controlled the gold trade between the Sudan and the two most highly developed regions of the period, the Middle East and Mediterranean Europe. Thus the Maghreb drew very considerable benefit from its role of intermediary[18] between

regions which had not reached the same stage of technological development, and of which the weaker possessed the kind of wealth then much in demand—gold, spices, ivory and slaves—whilst at the same time being eager to buy salt, cloth from Europe, linen and cotton goods from Egypt, and also increasingly ironware, notably arms.

The power of the Maghrebin states therefore directly linked to the role they assumed in international trade, particularly Mediterranean and trans-Saharan trade. The gold trade, as F. Braudel writes, 'caused new towns to arise in the Maghreb and old centres to expand. Thus North Africa is the purveyor of the yellow metal and the driving force of the whole Mediterranean.'[19]

Nevertheless, from the beginning of the fifteenth century, trans-Saharan trade declined. Piracy, which reached its height in the seventeenth century, came to replace it. But it can be considered as of minor importance compared with long-distance trade. All the same, it provided the foundations of sizeable fortunes, especially in towns such as Algiers, Tunis or Salé. The state took a direct and active part in it and derived important revenues from it. The 'prodigious fortunes of Algiers' of which Braudel speaks, came from piracy, whilst in Tunis the *beylik qua* shipowner took more than 50 per cent of the proceeds.

The extension of monopolies seems to coincide with the decline of the position of the Maghreb in international trade with the difficulties encountered by piracy. It could be said that the monopolies are a surrogate, which the state falls back on at times of waning revenues. From the beginning of the nineteenth century various sectors and products are monopolised for varying lengths of time.[20] From 1800 there were monopolies in Tunis of 'the fisheries of La Goulette, marine salt, leather, tobacco, soda, coral, etc. . . .'[21], whereas 'in Algiers the Deys multiplied the monopolies. The Diwan is the biggest merchant in the land. It alone has the right to sell cereals, animal skins, wax, wool, salt etc. . . .'[22]

(2) *The guilds*

The guilds constitute the participation of the citizens themselves in the organization and management of economic activity. The guilds were extremely numerous in the towns of the pre-colonial Maghreb. They were concerned with virtually the whole of economic activity and incorporated the majority of the working population.[23]

(*a*) Every guild possessed an internal organization which assigned the workers to their place in a three-level hierarchy—masters, journeymen, apprentices. Such an organization had the function not merely of the division and rationalization of work, but above all of ensuring for the producers something of a monopoly of their trade.

Each guild was headed by a chief (*amin*) who in principle was elected by his peers and submitted to the approval of the central authority

through the *mohtaseb* or the *sheikh el medina* according to circumstance.[24] Around the *amin* the most influential masters formed a council whose task was the enforcing of the guild regulations (*majlis el orf*).

The *amin*, placed under the direct authority of the *mohtaseb* or the *sheikh el medina*, is the sole intermediary between the producers and the state.

(*b*) Through their structure and organization the guilds performed various functions—not merely economic ones concerning production, standardizing and controlling it, but also welfare ones, as well as providing cultural and leisure services of a kind.

Through the intermediacy of the *amin*, who is at the same time a master craftsman, the guild ensured the quality control of its products and protected the near-monopoly of the guild. The *amin* kept down fraud and arbitrated in such disputes as may have occurred between buyers and producers. In case of difficulty he consulted the *majlis* which transformed itself into a tribunal. Finally the *amin* examined applications for advancement to the master grade, and protected the privileges of the masters. Its welfare functions include the organization of a collection or the granting of a loan in the case of debts incurred through weddings or funerals. The costs were met from the funds of the guild.

Finally each guild had its own patron saint. The producers organized an annual feast-day for their saint and took part in it as a body.[24] In this way they reinforced their solidarity. The saint himself was an erstwhile master craftsman. Furthermore, all the guilds jointly celebrated the annual feast day of the patron saint of their city, an occasion for much rejoicing, temporarily producing a sense of solidarity amongst all the townsfolk, transcending the limits of individual guilds. Well organized, and enjoying a relative autonomy in economic production, the guilds were also differentiated and ranked.

There is a dividing line and a clear ranking between trades considered 'noble' and remunerative, generally reserved for families of old city stock (*beldi*-s), and humbler and less profitable trades, some of which were considered base and reserved for newcomers, aliens and blacks.

Thus the richest guilds with the greatest prestige, which also enjoyed the greatest degree of autonomy, for example the large merchants of the *suq*-s, the drapers (*shauashia*), the mercers (*hrairia*), were in the hands of old *beldi* families or those of Andalusian origin. By contrast the humbler guilds (water carriers for instance) or those considered base[26] and regarded with suspicion (jugglers, sorcerers, barbers, masseurs), were recruited essentially from amongst newcomers and aliens (in Fez, from among the Swasa, in Tunis, from the oases, from among the Kabyles in Algiers, or again the Zwawa in Tunis[27]).

(*c*) Though the guilds enjoyed a certain autonomy in the organization of production, they did not escape domination by the state. Owing

to their large number, the guilds appear too fragmented and divided. A single activity could be divided between two or three guilds. The guilds were never able to form a federation which would unite all the tradespeople and turn itself into an organized pressure group. This diminished any prospect the guilds might have had of becoming a genuinely autonomous power, free of central control.

Another weakness in the system of corporations was the dichotomy between 'noble' and humble guilds. Such a schism accentuated the divisions and enabled the state to manipulate them to its own advantage. In fact, the noble guilds did achieve a greater autonomy. Frequently they managed to elect their own representatives, to influence the central power in some measure (for example the *shauashia* did so) and thus to constitute a kind of corporate establishment anxious to preserve the status quo for its own advantage.

Nevertheless, the influence of the guilds on the state remained limited. Every time one of the members of the powerful guilds enriched himself to any notable extent, he exposed himself to the arbitrary power of the state, which could confiscate his possessions. This tendency to confiscation has been frequently noted in the towns of the pre-colonial Maghreb. To some extent it explains the difficulties of economic accumulation experienced by producers who were never able to transform themselves into a genuine and powerful bourgeoisie.

The relations between the guilds and the state were not often violent. In the Maghrebin towns prior to colonization the guilds never transformed themselves—as they did in certain towns of the Middle East—into organizations of politico-religious sedition (of the *qarmate* and *Futuwwa* type). This placed them in a favourable position *vis à vis* the state, which encouraged the guilds, and occasionally favoured their creation. On the other hand, the structure and organization of the guilds were not conducive to the emergence of communal consciousness, as was the case in the mediaeval cities of Europe.

Thus the urban population enjoyed a certain autonomy in the management of economic life. But devoid of autonomous economic institutions under their own exclusive control, they remained in a condition of dependence on the state.

IV. THE DEGREE OF AUTONOMY OF THE URBAN POPULATIONS IN CARRYING OUT THEIR RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

What was the ability of towns to manipulate the juridico-religious sphere?

Consider the institution of *habus*, the corps of the *ulama* and the religious brotherhoods.

(1) *Habus*, a religious institution with an economic role, has played

a fundamental part in the protection of the economic assets of the urban population. This is a religious foundation, inalienable, through which a person bequeaths to his descendants, or to others of his choice, or for social or cultural good works, part or whole of his possessions. The object of the *habus* must be strictly what the founder decreed. *Habus* either has a private character (immovable property, whose usufruct is destined for a family or its descendants), or a public character (assets destined for the maintenance of social, cultural or religious institutions such as, for example, hospitals, universities or mosques).

Habus assets attained a considerable dimension in nearly all the towns of the Maghreb. In a town like Fez 'the major portion of municipal needs were covered by funds received from *habus* assets'.[28] In Algiers '*habus* associations are, together with the *beylik*, the town's principal proprietors of real property'.[29] Similarly, 'the major part of the shops and warehouses [and] a sizable number of dwellinghouses in Tunis are owned by the agencies of religious assets'.[30]

These large-scale urban assets protected by religious law provided the financing of a large number of municipal activities. Often the street lighting of a town was covered by funds arising from *habus* assets. The same is true of the maintenance of mosques, universities, and *medersas*, hospitals, charitable institutions, etc. . . . Sometimes the religious institutions concerned themselves with the field of recreation, as in the case of a house in Fez where poor young married couples went to spend their honeymoon.

The placing of an important part of urban capital, out of reach of the sovereign, gave the urban populations the means of retaining the control of nearly the whole of the municipal and socio-cultural functions of their city.

(2) The *ulama* are a religious élite which is very prestigious and powerful and occupies a key position in the life of the city. They perform the principal functions of religious life. Judges (*cadi*-s) are recruited from their ranks, as are lawyers (*mufti*-s), scholars (*alim*-s), teachers (*mudarre*-s), notaries (*udul*-s) and law agents (*okil*-s). From among them, too, a large portion of the administrative élite is recruited: treasurers, market inspectors, customs chiefs, managers of *habus*, as well as a multitude of other minor roles. The *ulama* thus form the educated élite which performs the principal functions of the bureaucracy.

As interpreters of religious law, the *sharia*, the *ulama* occupy a strategic position at the heart of Muslim society. The judicial role is one of their privileges. It is the *cadi* who administers justice by virtue of a permanent delegation by the sovereign. The grand *cadi* of the capital was appointed by the sovereign, the supreme head of justice. This important personage was therefore dependent on the sovereign who personally took part in the deliberations of the council of justice (*Majlis-esh-shorâ*),[31] particularly in the case of delicate and important

matters. In the course of such deliberations, the will of the sovereign was often law.

It is in the multiplicity of mosques, and above all in the great mosque, that the *ulama* assume their cultural and educational function. The great mosque, the centre of the city and symbol of unity for the community, is a privileged place where many functions are performed. First and foremost it is *the* place of religion. Two or three *imams* are specially appointed to lead the faithful in prayer.

The solemn Friday prayer removes barriers between districts and for a while exalts the solidarity of the urban population, which is brought together in the unity of faith. From a number of mosques of varying status alone, as well as from the number of *Zawiya*-s, it is possible to measure the density and extent of religious life in the cities of the Maghreb.

The great mosque is also the place where knowledge is constantly disseminated. It is the seat of the university of the town, alongside a large number of other more or less specialized colleges (*medersa*-s). Universities like the Zituna of Tunis or the Karawiyin of Fez were the high seats of learning and culture. The renown of some of their professors transcended frontiers, and the number of their students was great.

But the most significant fact was that the great mosque was also at the same time a favoured place for political mobilization, particularly in moments of crisis, or in times of grave injustice or excessive arbitrariness. The population looked on the great mosque as their town hall, gathered there freely and unhindered by the central power, and took their deliberations and made their decisions there. There it was in particular, that rebellions were fomented and 'the doctors and the sheiks often play an essential role in this tumultuous atmosphere'.

But the *ulama*, a body of supreme moral standing and the pivot of the social life of the city are not the only ones to give structure to the urban populations. The religious fraternities or brotherhoods are voluntary organizations which form focal points, and within which the urban populations can enjoy an appreciable degree of autonomy and freedom of action.

(3) *The religious fraternities.* By reason of their life style, the refinement and delicacy of their manners, their continuous relations with the central power and the scriptual form of the Islam[33] of which they are the principal depositaries, the *ulama* do not always have easy and frequent contact with the broader masses. As spokesmen for the 'great tradition' they are an embodiment of the urban establishment rather than of the common folk.

Generally the religious fraternities bestride the gap between the *ulama* and the masses, and offer themselves as interpreters of a mystical and ecstatic form of Islam which can be considered to be an expression

of the 'little tradition'.[34] Without doubt, through their work of integration and socialization, the religious fraternities have succeeded in controlling the masses and in mobilizing them in social groupings which transcend the narrow confines of the family, the district, the guild, and which approach the limits of the global society and of the community of believers (*umma*).

(*a*) It is significant that the religious fraternities were well developed and widely spread in the Maghreb, particularly from the XVth century onwards, that is, from the moment when the central power entered into a prolonged political crisis and the societies of the Maghreb were exposed to aggression from abroad, notably from Spain. It is thus during a phase of insecurity and a 'weakening of the collectivity of the Maghreb' that the masses, anxious about their destiny and identity, turned towards the fraternities as guardians of their collective identity, and as a suitable social form for war in the service of the faith (*Jihad*). In some fashion the little tradition took over from the great tradition, enfeebled and incapable of facing the crisis. Everywhere in the Maghreb over a period of centuries the fraternities played a powerful political role, and contended with states in the defence of sovereignty.[35]

(*b*) Over and above this political function which transcended urban limits, the fraternities fulfilled an important function in the social integration of the urban communities.

In fact, the numerous *Zawiya*-s of the fraternities are meeting places for the citizens, whatever their ethnic or regional origin, and whatever their district of residence or their trade.

These voluntary clubs are places where Islamic solidarity and urban solidarity mutually strengthen each other. The townsmen go there to heighten their religious faith and at the same time to find release in the rhythm of the psalmodies (*dhikr*) and, from time to time, in ecstatic dances.

On the other hand, given the variety of urban groupings, the fraternities can be differentiated according to the high or low station of their favoured catchment areas. Thus at Fez, for instance, the élite of the *ulama*, the high functionaries of the *makhzen* and the wealthy merchants of the *suq*-s join for preference the fraternities Tijaniya, Kerkaoua, Kettaniya, Wazzaniya and Nassiriya. By contrast, the Issawiya, Hmadcha, Qadiriya fraternities recruit among the populations of the suburbs and the small artisans.[36] In a town like Tunis, the two fraternities Tariqa, Shadlya and Tijaniya would recruit among the great bourgeois families such as the Djait, Lasram, Mohsen, Bairam, and among the political aristocracy. The Qadiriya fraternity recruited among the urban masses as was also done by the Rahmaniya of Algiers.

However this hierarchy of fraternities is not rigid or inflexible. The bourgeois *turuq* are not closed to the common people and vice-versa. On the other hand the transethnic composition of the fraternities does

not necessarily imply that all ethnic differentiation is suppressed at the level of the organization of social groups within the fraternity. There is one single exception, however, to the transethnic aspect of the *turuq*: the fraternity of the Gnawa admits only negroes as members.

(4) *The religious élite and the central power.* What is the true nature of the relation between the body of the *ulama* and the political power? It is probably the most difficult and crucial question, and a complex and ambiguous one.

The *ulama* performed a large number of important functions. The big events of the social life of the citizens are solemnized by them. As principal interpreters of sacred law and the *ulama* stand out above all as the defenders of the material and moral interests of the population. Also, their rectitude and a certain exemplary quality in their life style make them models with which the citizens seek to identify.

This social and moral position, together with the deep roots of the *ulama* in the life of the city, and the manifold alliances they have with other social groups, the well-to-do artisans and traders in particular, make them the interpreters of the legitimate rights of the citizens and as their defenders, especially in times of grave injustice and excessive fiscal demands. They can mobilize the population and put pressure upon the central power. A mobilization of this kind could occur on a deep and sensitive communion between notables of the city and the leaders of districts, *imams*, sheiks of fraternities, *amins* of guilds and so on. In the course of a mobilization of this kind it may even happen that the *cadi*-s who are appointed by the central power transform themselves into popular leaders, and the sheiks of districts into clients of local leaders, instead of servants of the central power. At such moments, as Jacques Berque observed, 'defence of the family, defence of the city and defence of orthodoxy become fused in the kind of consensus through which, throughout centuries, the political spirit of the city frequently expressed itself'.[37]

Nevertheless, such a form of challenge to the political power on the part of the *ulama* must not lead us into the error of regarding the latter as a body which is formed and organized so as to be capable of rebellion against the central power. Apart from the role of defenders of the urban community, which they perform in an intermittent and ambiguous manner, the *ulama* appear mainly as legitimators of political power and the social order: a fundamentally equivocal function, and a source both of their strength and of their weakness.

Though the sovereign requires of them that they legitimize his authority (practices of the *Beya* and the *fetwa*), this is in reality only a recognition of a fait accompli of power acquired by force. They did not have the power to choose between pretenders, least of all to impose some form of government or control on the latter.

In the final analysis the *ulama* are in a situation of dependence vis à

vis the central power. They depend upon the sovereign who appoints them and can dismiss them. Hence, objectively, they are the allies of the central power rather than its enemies, for only the sovereign has the strength to maintain order within the community, and order is something to which the *ulama* are attached to above all things. Therefore even if the *ulama*-s sometimes shake the royal authority, they never reach the point of calling the central power in question, overthrowing it or trying to take its place. The *ulama*, who very often originate within the indigenous populations, have never in the Maghreb managed to form an organized force, to consider themselves as true leaders of the people, to propose alternative policies or to seize power. In the words of Ibn Khaldun, it is above all the co-operation between men of the sword and those of the pen which is the norm.

The *ulama* and the sovereigns had every reason to come to an understanding. The former exercise moral authority, and the latter, violent force. The *ulama* lacked the strength to decide between one sovereign and another, between one dynasty and another, but they were influential in determining the general nature of the social order.[38]

In order to defend themselves against the redoubtable nomads and the more or less disciplined army of the central power, the citizens found in the 'great tradition' of Islam an ally which could provide them with a source of order (the *habus* are an example), and in the 'little tradition', a kind of institution (the religious brotherhoods) which enabled them to regroup themselves in a form which transcended the narrow limits of family, districts and guild.

V. CLASS CONFLICTS IN URBAN SOCIETY

As with all pre-industrial societies, the question of the urban classes in the pre-colonial Maghreb is difficult, inadequately investigated and understood. Hence we propose to put forward only an overall assessment of social stratification.

We distinguish three principal classes: the élite of the central power (*El Khassa*), the class of notables (*El-ayan*) and the broad urban masses (*El-amma*).

1. *The power élite* (El Khassa)

The social base of this class is formed essentially on its military strength (mountain and desert tribes in Fez, Turkish Janissaries in Algiers and Tunis). In fact, it is due to the army that the élite of the central power in the Maghreb manages to ensure the safety of long distance trade routes, to draw profits from business deals and to control, at least partially, local production (levy of taxes on tribes).

As a class it is also distinguished, apart from its military character,

by the fact that its members are generally strangers to the town where they exercise their power.

2. *The notables* (El-ayan)

We distinguish two categories of notables: the *ulama* and the category of rich traders and well-to-do artisans.

(*a*) The *ulama*. The *ulama* draw the essence of their authority from the exercise of the religious function in its manifold forms. They constitute a social group which plays the role of intermediary between the urban population whom in principle they must defend, and the central power, which delegates to them the exercise of their functions.

On the other hand, the *ulama* have genuine economic interests.[39] Often they are not only landed proprietors but also traders, well-to-do artisans, customs officials etc. In all cases they have actual family connections with the rich traders and well-to-do artisans of the town. With these groups they share objective interests which they must defend against confiscation by the central power.

Hence, the ambiguity of the position and role of the *ulama*. In their capacity as agents of the sovereign in the juridico-religious functions they are obliged to submit at least partially to the central power and be loyal to it; but in their capacity of property owners and allies of property owners, the *ulama* are obliged to resist the frequent attempts of the central power to encroach upon private property.

We observe that the category of the *ulama* is neither homogeneous nor monolithic: it is subdivided in strata of which the lowest is formed by those who exercise ancillary or subordinate functions such as notaries, bailiffs, the masters of Kouttab, etc. This is the least privileged of the strata and it is interesting to note the fact that leaders of urban revolts and various protest movements are often recruited from among its members.

(*b*) *Rich traders ana well-to-do artisans.* These form the principal representatives of major urban activity. Their prosperity depends essentially on the stability of the power of the ruling class and on the wealth and prestige of the dynasty. Ibn Khaldun has clearly analysed this relationship and neatly brought out the correlation between urban civilization and political power. He has shown well how the upswings which bring forth a powerful dynasty and flourishing urban civilization on the one hand alternate with a declining dynasty accompanied by growing poverty of the urban population and a decline of the cities.

This great dependence of traders and artisans in the Maghreb upon the central power is explained by the fact that, unlike, for example, the merchant bourgeoisie and the artisans of the Italian cities of the Middle Ages, the bourgeoisie of the Maghreb has never been able to

safeguard its autonomy and to present itself as a redoubtable rival to the central power. Though in charge of its own affairs, it always remained subordinate to the central power obliged to submit to great arbitrariness in the form of confiscation of property, excessive taxation or the institution of monopolies.

Surely there is *here* one factor which can help explain the unstable status of the Maghrebin merchant and the difficulty which this class experienced in the accumulation of capital, and the fact that it has never been able to transform itself into a real bourgeoisie after the pattern of Western Europe.

3. *The broader urban masses* (El amma)

Here our concern is essentially with the mass of small artisans, small shopkeepers, ambulant pedlars and all those in employments such as journeymen, apprentices, and various kinds of workers. These are the petty urban folk. The terms *amma* and, in its onomatopoeic form, *ghawgha*, give a good indication that this 'proto-proletarian' class was held in some contempt by the *Ayan* and the *Khassa*. This, however, is not accompanied by a caste spirit or any sort of systematic segregation.

The urban folk suffered exploitation on two accounts: on the one hand from the ruling class (taxes, forced gifts and forced labour of all sorts) and on the other from rich traders and well-to-do artisans. Examples therefore abound of those movements of urban protest where the same people can be seen, guided now by *ulama* of inferior rank, now by the sheiks of a *tariqa* or by a local saint, to protest against abuse of some sort, and, to make their voice heard by the dispatch of delegations or by causing the temporary closure of markets. But such protest movements could not culminate in total challenge to the very nature of the central power. Part of the explanation is that neither the urban masses nor the notables possessed a political or professional organization at the level of the city as a whole. Neither of these classes possessed an organization serviceable for long term aims.

On the other hand, the dependence of the whole urban population on the state has its effect that the real conflicts of interest between the notables and the urban masses often appears as secondary, compared with those which set them off both as against the central power, whence naturally there is some difficulty in the emergence of an adequately lucid class consciousness amongst either the notables or the urban masses.

SUMMARY

Our aim was a specification of the structural traits characteristic of urban life in pre-colonial Maghreb.

First of all we have shown the inadequacy for Maghrebin urban life of the two models of towns, drawn from the two pre-capitalist social

forms which have received most attention: the towns of the feudal system in the West and those of classical China, taken as typifying the Asian mode of production. Our next step was to apply to the classical Maghrebin city three questions concerning the degree of autonomy of their political, economic and juridico-religious institutions.

We have stressed above all that if the townsfolk are in a position of political dependence vis à vis the central power, by contrast they have far more initiative at the economic level, and we have shown that their real defence system is based on their ability to manipulate the juridico-religious agencies to their own advantage.

The sum of these traits has been extracted from the study of social relations at town level. But from the start we have stressed that the town is but one element in a social structure which embraces the totality of relationships between town and country, and that the presence of nomads on the periphery of this structure constitutes a key factor which must be taken into account, if one is to appreciate both the extent and the limits of the power to diverse social groups and of the central authority itself.

Fredj Stambouli, Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Centre for Economic and Social Research, University of Tunis

A. Zghal, Head of Department of Sociology, Centre for Economic and Social Research, University of Tunis

Notes

* Translated from the French by Diana Ferguson and Ernest Gellner.

1. See particularly the following publications of the Centre d'études et de recherches marxistes: *On the Asiatic Production Process* (1969); *On Pre-capitalist Societies* (1970); *On Feudalism* (1970), Paris, éditions sociales.

See also A. Zghal, 'La participation de la paysannerie maghrebine a la construction nationale' in *Revue tunisienne des sciences socials* (*RTTS*), no. 22 (July 1970), pp 125–62; and by the same author, 'L'edification nationale au maghreb' in *RTTS*, no. 27 (December 1971), pp. 9–29.

2. Among these publications we mention in particular: A. H. Hourani and S. M. Stern (eds), *The Islamic City*, Oxford, 1970; Ira Marvin Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Mass., 1967; Ira Marvin Lapidus (ed.), *Middle Eastern Cities*, Berkeley, California, 1969.

3. Max Weber, *The City*, New York, 1966.

4. On the cities in the M'zab see particularly: E. Masqueray, *Formation des citiés chez les populations sédentaires de l'algérie*, Paris, 1886; Marcel Marcier, *La civilisation urbaine au M'zab*, Genthner, Paris, 1922.

5. On the structure of the Chinese town we refer particularly to: Etienne Balasz, *La bureaucratie céleste*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968; J. Gernet: 'Note sur les villes chinoises au moment de l'apogés islamique' in *The Islamic City*, op. cit., pp. 77–85.

6. Among the few works dealing with Mogador we refer to: Henri Terrasse, *Histoire du Maroc*, edit. Atlantide, 1950—see vol. II, pp. 70–5; Joint publication, *Les villes. Ecole pratique des hautes études*,

Paris, 1958, pp. 70–5; M. E. Pobequin, 'Notes sur Mogador' in *Documents de la Mission Maritime*, rev. cassette, Paris, 1905.

7. Roger Letourneau, *Fez avant le protectorat*, edit. Casablanca, 1949, pp. 80–5.

8. Arthur Pellegrain, *Histoire illustrée de Tunis et de sa banlieue*, Tunis, edit. Saliba, 1955, pp. 88–9; P. Boyer, *La vie quotidienne à Alger à la veille de l'intervention Francaise*, Hachette, 1963, cf. p. 92.

9. R. Letourneau: *Fez avant le protectorat*, op. cit., p. 63.

10. As to administrative management see particularly: R. Brunshvig, 'Justice religieuse et justice laique dans la Tunisie des Deys et des Beys jusqu'au milieu de XIX siècle' in *Studia Islamica*, vol. 23 (1965), pp. 27–70; R. Letourneau, *Fez avant le protectorat*, op. cit., pp. 211–216; P. Boyer, *La vie quotidienne à Alger*, op. cit., p. 124.

11. R. Letourneau, *Fez avant la protectorat*, op. cit., pp. 217–31.

12. There are a number of researchers who have come to the conclusion that the Islamic city is not a commune. We cite particularly the names of Max Weber, Von Grunebaum, G. Marcais, Claude Cohen, Bernard Lewis, A. Hourani, S. M. Stern, I. M. Lapidus.

13. It is interesting to observe that Mahomedan law legitimates the importance of family and neighbourhood ties and gives them a dominant place in their relationship with other characteristics of urban social life. See, in this sense, R. Brunshvig, 'Urbanisme médiéval et droit musulman' in *Rev. des études islamique*, 1947, pp. 128–55.

14. Jacques Berque, 'Ville et Université—Aperçu sur l'histoire de l'ecole de Fez' in *Rev. historique de droit Francais et etranger*, 1949, pp. 66–114.

15. Ibn Khaldoun, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* trans. Vincent Monteil, Beyrouth, 1968—see ch. IV, vol II, 'La civilisation sédentaire, ville set cités', pp. 709–79.

16. Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas*, London, 1969—see ch. 2, pp. 35–70.

17 M.Ch. Noel, 'Les coffs de Tunis' in *Revue Tunisienne*, no. 125 (1918), p. 314; P. Boyer, *La vie quotidienne à Alger*, op. cit., p. 74; Roger Letourneau, *Les villes musulmanes d'afrique du Nord, Alger*, 1957—see ch. I, para. V. Detailed particulars are given in these three works on the phenomenon of the *coffs* in Tunis, Algiers and Fez respectively.

18. Samir Amin, *Le développement inégal, Essai sur les formations sociales du capitalisme périphérique*, édit. de minuit, Paris, 1973—see particularly pp. 29–48.

19. A. Zghal, *L'édifications nationale au Maghreb*, op. cit.; F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranée a l'epoque de Phillippe II*, A. Colin, 1949—see particularly pp. 364–74.

20. H. Cherif, 'Expansion européenne et difficultés tunisiennes de 1815 à 1830' in *Annales*, no. 3 (1970), pp. 714–45.

21. A. Pallegrin, op. cit., p. 101.

22. P. Boyer, *La vie quotidienne a Alger*, op. cit.

23. The major inquiry into the guilds of North Africa is by Louis Massignon: 'Enquiête sur les corporations d'artisans et de commercants au Maroc (19- - - 1924)' in *Revue du monde musulman*, vol. 58, Paris, 1924, 250 pp.

24. For a detailed description of the organization of guilds, cf., in addition to Louis Massignon, A. Atger: *Les corporations artisanales en Tunisie*, Paris, Rousseau, 1909. R. Letourneau already cited P. Pannec, *Les transformations des corps de métiers de Tunis sous l'influence d'une economie externe de type capitaliste. ISEA*—A.N. (March 1964), unpublished, pp. 574.

25. R. Letourneau, op. cit.—see p. 297; Charles Lallemand, *Tunis et ses environs*, Paris, 1890—see pp. 70–1.

26 George Marcals, *Métiers vils en islam in Studia Islamica*, vol. 16 (1962), pp. 41–60.

27. Germaine Marty, 'Les allogenes a Tunis in *Revue IBLA*', nos. 43–4 (1948 and 1949).

28. Roger Letourneau, *Les villes musulmanes d'Afrique du Nord*, Algiers, 1957, p. 44; Joint publication, *Les villes, Ecole Practique des Hautes Etudes*, Paris, 1958. On p. 62 Jacques Berque observes that more than one third of the houses in Fez belong to one single *habus*, that of Moulay Idriss.

29. P. Boyer, *La vie quotidienne à Algers*, op. cit., p. 48.

30. R. Letourneau, *Les villes musulmanes d'Afrique du Nord*, op. cit., p. 44.

31. The University of Zitouna in Tunis mustered, in 1850, 102 members of the teaching staff and 800 students; on their side 15 medersas courses of advanced education (information obtained from Ben Dhiaf by L. Carl Brown). In about the same period the Karawiyin University of Fez had one thousand students according to J. Berque in his article 'Ville et Universite', op. cit.

32. Robert Brunshvig, 'Justice religieuse et justice laique dans la Tunisia des deys et des beys jusqu'au milieu du XIX siecle' in *Studia Islamica*, vol. 23 (1965), pp. 27–70.

33. This dichotomy between scripturalist and mystical Islam has repeatedly been noted, particularly in the publications of Ernest Gellner and Clifford Geertz: E. Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas*, London, 1969; Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed*, Yale University Press, 1968.

34 As to the typology: high culture *v.* low culture, see Robert Redfield, *The Little Community*, University of Chicago Press, 1960.

35. Among the numerous publications on the subject of fraternities we refer more particularly to Louis Rinn, *Marabouts et Khouan*, Algiers, 1886; Octave Depont and Xavier Coppolani, *Les confréries religieuses musulmanes*, Algiers, 1897, Alfred Bel, *La religion musulmane en berbérie*. TI, Paris, 1938; Emile Dermenghm, *Le culte des saints dans l'Islam maghrébin*, Paris, 1954; Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *The Tijaniyya: a Sufi Order in the Modern World*, Oxford University Press, 1965—see particularly ch. LV, 'The Tijaniyya and Politics in the Maghreb', pp. 58–99.

36. R. Letourneau, op. cit.—see the fraternities; L. Massignon, op. cit., p. 140.

37. J. Berque, 'Ville et Université', op. cit., p. 94.

38. Ernest Gellner, 'Doctor and Saint' in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, edited by N. R. Keddie, University of California Press, 1972.

39. Recent research into the status and roles of the *ulemas* of the Maghreb lay particular stress on their social origins, their economic power, their system of alliances, etc. . . . We refer in particular to the contributions of Leon Carl Brown, 'The religious establishment in Hussainid Tunisia', pp. 47–91; Kenneth Brown, 'Profile of nineteenth century Moroccan Scholar', pp. 127–48; Edmond Burke III, 'The Moroccan Ulama, 1860–1912: an Introduction', pp. 93–125. All these contributions have been published in the book edited by Niccie R. Keddie, *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions since 1500*, University of California Press, 1972.