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Christian Migrants in the Maghreb : Sharing religious space, the example of Tunis

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The implantation of African churches north of the Sahara is a direct consequence of subsaharan migration in this region. However, the many faces of the process is little studied by the social sciences. Indeed, religious practice and the diversification of African migrants churches are further researched concerning Europe (Fancello, 2008 ; Maskens, 2008 ; Mottier, 2010 ; Ter Haar, 1998 ; Harris, 2006) as their presence is older. In the past fifteen years, sociologist and anthropologist who have tackled the subject of African migration in the Maghreb have shedded light on other dimensions of migrant's lives, more tangible, such as their legal situation or their access to education or healthcare (Bensaad, 2008 ; Lahlou, 2005). They and others have shown that the Maghreb is not simply a transit-region for individuals eager to cross over to Europe (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005). It is clear that as students from Cameroon, Senegal or the Ivory Coast settle down for University, some of them go on to finding employment, which can be more or less stable throughout time. Others fall into financial and legal insecurity, which prevents any mobility (Berriane, 2012 on Morocco). The reality of migrant life in the Maghreb contrasts whether one is in Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia. Nevertheless, in these countries just like in Egypt (Bava et Picard, 2013), religious life, be it Muslim or Christian (Catholic, Protestant or Pentecostal), carries on, is transformed and negotiated within the new national and religious frameworks.

In this article I will analyse the important changes which have occurred in Christian churches in Tunisia in the last two decades, with relation to the migrants from subsaharan Africa, mainly West Africa. The first consequence is the considerable increase of attendance of Christian Churches all over the Maghreb. But I argue that one of the main effect on the Catholic Church and the many denominations of Protestant Churches are the relations between the two main branches of Christianity in the region concerning ritual space management¹.

1. Who are the migrants ?

¹ I will not here be concerned with Tunisian converts to Protestantism who constitute a small and discrete religious community. Their weekly services are either held in house Churches, Protestant Church buildings dating from the 19th century, and in certain cases, recently refurbished buildings (Boissevain, 2013).

In Tunisia, African migration is mainly a student matter, with diverse administrative status and financial situations, going from very little grants for some, while others benefit from comfortable monthly income (Mazzella, 2009). Moreover, those who stay on after their studies may quickly find themselves in dire situations. To these two large categories we must add that of illegal migrants and African workers from Libya who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries after Kadhafi's fall. At the other end of the social scale, and in contrast to the other Maghreb countries, we find the sub-Saharan expatriate, embodied by the international executive figure working at the African Development Bank (BAD). Indeed, some two thousand employees and their families have progressively arrived in Tunis since 2003, amply contributing to changing the religious landscape of the city. Most of them are Christians, natives of the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria or Cameroon. Many of these particular migrants hold their religious practice as an essential element of their weekly routine. The result is an increase in religious diversity which Tunisia had not known (or in lesser proportions) since the 1960s. Since the country's independence in 1957 and the departure of Europeans, the Christian element remained belittled and priests and pastors responsible of the few churches still active in the country were often left to saying mass to fairly sparse assemblies. Only important celebrations such as Christmas or Easter pulled together small crowds among European or American expatriate workers, or among the few French or Italian families who had stayed on after the Protectorate.

« Africans" in Tunisia : an ambiguous figure of otherness

The arrival of the first thousand employees of the African Development Bank in Tunis in 2004 took place over a period of a few months. They were rapidly joined by their families, and sometimes by a house employee (maid or chauffeur), quickly bringing the number of people who had a link with the BAD to 4000. Through the years, other families followed while the number of students also increased. Over a few months, the center of Tunis was - for the first time - frequented by black African men and women, with high economic status and a « way of life» considered ostentatious by many locals.

The BAD, initially settled in Abidjan, moved its offices because of the civil war in the Ivory Coast. As soon as 2005, Mazzella and Boubakri wrote on the changes this move had caused in the Tunisian capital. First, on the economical front, many airlines opened up liaisons with countries of sub-Saharan Africa, which were up to then almost inexistent. The price of rented accommodation soared in the higher end of the market, and new classes were quickly opened up in French and American schools for francophone and anglophone children.

Furthermore, new places of entertainment opened up, catering for this new clientele, richer, more international, and eager to find « African » tastes and sounds. In the first few years, regular weekly events were organized in local night-clubs. From 2010, a specific venue opened every night of the week, attracting a mix crowd of night-owls. Other businesses opened up (restaurants, hair dressers or tailors) around the BAD building in the center of town or in the area of Hay el Nasser or La Marsa which were the main residential locations.

Beyond these material changes caused by the new arrivals, this migration of black, highly qualified expatriates also operated a symbolic effect with very powerful consequences. Indeed, the result was a reinscription of Tunisia in Africa, whereas the country had more or less turned its back on the continent up to then, mesmerized by its Mediterranean identity (Pouessel, 2014). Even the national historiography has rarely been concerned with its African identity and relations with the rest of the continent. The only interest it grants its own black population has long been through the theme of « popular religion » and rituals of Stambeli (Rahal, 2000 ; Boissevain, 2006). Very few scholarly work show interest for the history of the black community in the country (Mrad Dali, 2005, Pouessel, 2013). Thus, it is only due to recent changes in the country, such as the Tunisian revolution and the presence of « Africans », that a shift has occurred concerning the consideration given to black people in general.

Finally, and this is what I will show in this article, a very obvious change in the capital is that of Christian visibility, due to a spectacular increase in the number of church-goers and of religious ceremonies. Of course, African Christian Church goers are divided between French and English speakers, and among each linguistic community, there are Catholics and Protestants.

The Churches of the country have also become refuge places for destitute migrants, places where they can find material assistance for problems such as health, food, education

2. The history of the Church in Tunis

Of course, Christianity has a long presence in this part of the Mediterranean, which dates back to the Roman Empire. After a progressive decline through to the XIIIth century, its activities were reenacted during the French colonial period with the arrival of men and women of French, Spanish, Italian or Maltese origin. In the late nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church embarked on a vast mission of church building and religious mapping, to help and assist the colonial endeavour. This was the case differently according to the political relation which France had imposed on the country (colony for Algeria (1830-1962), or protectorate for Tunisia (1881-1956) and Morocco (1912-1956)). Alongside the installation of the Catholic Church, the Reformed Protestant Church also insured that places of worship were available for their community.

Contemporary Evangelical cults in Algeria and Tunisia reactivate discourses and representations on the Antique Christianity in the North of Africa as a mean of justifying their presence. In the fourth and fifth century, this form of Christianity linked to Rome allowed for the development of the Church of Africa which was directed by the bishop of Carthage. Today, during their cult, pastors frequently make reference to the antique Christian martyrs in a compression of historical time, thus bridging the gap between the tortures endured by the first Christians and the vexations faced by Christians in Muslim lands.

In 1957, year of the Tunisian independence, the country still possessed around one hundred catholic churches. In 1964, the Vatican and the Bourguiba's new government

signed an agreement called the Modus Vivendi, in which the Tunisian government allowed the Catholic Church to remain in the country in exchange of much of the land and religious buildings in its possession. Seven churches were left open for worship while the rest was handed over to the new independent government. The second condition was that the Church should officially renounce to proselytism and solely direct its religious activities towards the existing Catholic community. The Church was also allowed to maintain educational and health oriented activities (hospitals) towards the Tunisian population.

The situation of the Protestant church contrasts with this. Even though the Reformed Church has been present in the region from the late nineteenth century (the first protestant military chaplain, Durmeyer, founded the Reformed church of Tunis in 1882), no such agreement was passed with them, maybe for lack of a single interlocutor. As a consequence, the Protestants did not find themselves tied to this formal prohibition of proselytism nor did they give back any churches.

The main Protestant churches in Tunis are the Reformed Church in rue Charles de Gaulle next to the central Market (today lead by 8 Pastors of various nationalities) and St Georges's Anglican church. Their main mission is to accompany Western or African believers. Next to this worship, during separate services, Tunisian Pastors offer cults in Tunisian dialect, for the local converts. In order to be able to remain in the country without trouble, the foreign Pastors must show no proselytism towards the Tunisian community, and very little contact (Boissevain, 2013).

In 2004, Christians in Tunisia were in a situation where Churches had to multiply the number of church services in order to cater for the strong demand. But more importantly, they had to adapt the styles of their services according to the new audience's desires.

3. The changing face of the Christian community in Tunis : Increasing numbers

Churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, have moved from being fairly quiet venues in the late nineteen nineties' to becoming loud and joyous places with singing and passionate praising. Churches have had to adapt and call upon African priests and pastors to help along with a different style of worship.

Alongside these changes there have been splits in the church. African Pentecostal pastors (mainly from Nigeria, Ivory Coast) have opened up churches (often in private housing) and preach in a style which they are more accustomed to.

A diverse christian identities in a Muslim land

Concerning cults other than Muslim, we can count - in the city of Tunis - four catholic churches, three Protestant churches (Reformed, Anglican, Pentecostal -all welcoming evangelists), as well as a greek orthodox church, a Russian orthodoxe church and a

synagogue. In the rest of the country, the Catholic churches are in Hammamet, Sousse, Gabès and Sfax. For years (approximately from 1970 to 2005), mass was mainly told in empty churches, and preachers were true to their commitment of playing witness to the presence of Jesus. Today, the situation is radically different.

Many of the people working at the BAD I spoke to did not think they would find churches in Tunis. All were relieved to realize that they would be able to maintain their weekly religious practice. Of course, religious practice is far from homogenous among the bank's employees but those who are regular church-goers regularly insist on the fact that the activity is not a social one. Admittedly, meeting up among Christians, sharing a meal or an outing organized by the Church enhances the expatriate's daily routine, with the assurance of a social network, but the emphasis is put on the need to pray and to engage in a relation with Jesus.

Each week, out of synch with the rest of the encompassing society, a large proportion of subsaharan migrants in Tunisia (but this is also true of Morocco, Algeria and Egypt) make their way to Church. Among student friends or with their family, dressed in their fine garments and scent, they take communion and thank God and Jesus through their prayers and songs.

In central Tunis, where both historical Churches, Catholic or Protestant are identified and respected as such by the local population, local residents and Sunday shopkeepers consider these cults as welcomed animations, lively and colorful. Occasionally a couple of curious Muslim Tunisian may slip into Church for a moment to listen and watch part of the Sunday service. Radically different is what happens on the outskirts of Tunis, in an upper-class residential area where the Pentecostal Church called Redeemed Christian Church of God had rented a big villa where they could hold their cults. Residents here have been disturbed by people hanging around after the cult and could not stand the worshippers' gatherings, their comings and goings, on foot or by car, voices, laughter etc...

Catholic and Protestant Churches transformed

Since the middle of the 2000, the catholic church in Tunisia has gone through numerous changes. First of all, a change of Bishop, in 2005, with the replacement of Fouad Twal (from Jordan) by Maroun Latham (a Palestinian), who was at the head of the church from 2005 to 2010, as Bishop, then as Archbishop from 2010 to 2012. He was then replaced by Illario Antoniazzi in 2012.

Also, St Vincent de Paul and St olive's Cathedral, directly opposite to the French Embassy on the main street of the capital, celebrated in 2013 the 10th anniversary of the arrival of the « Institut du Verbe incarné », an Argentinian congregation, which gives a more traditionalist color to the rituals. For example, they have returned to the ritual of « communion on the tongue » as encouraged by the Pope Benoît XVIth, or the celebration

of Christmas in latin. The feminine branch of the « Institut du Verbe Incarné », through the work of the « blue sisters » - named after the color of their garment- has changed the local habits of the white sisters who have been present a congregation since 1875, and individually for as long as 30 years for some of the sisters.

Alongside these institutional changes, the Christian clergy witnessed the installation of the BAD and the afflux of new worshippers with excitement. Churches were regularly filling up and cults had to adapt in order to take into account different religious habits. One of the first changes was the reorganization of the choirs, and the recruiting of African preachers.

The catholic Church in Tunis already had African priests among the priesthood, but in the beginning, when it came to preaching for the new arrivals, the Bishop was opposed to the idea of designating a black priest for the service of an assembly with an African majority. Behind this position, explained to me by a French priest from Tunis, we find the idea of the absolute equality of beings in the service of God and of their interchangeability : « a priest is a priest, origin and skin color do not matter ». In the same time, he argues there was a risk of increasing cultural specificities and of installing a form of racial segregation were an African assembly to be given to an African priest.

As months and years went by, more and more deacons and religious church personnel from the African continent were included in Church. As an example, the cathedral of St Vincent de Paul and St Olive's website stages the radical changes through two photographs. The first shows a choir from the 1950's : young white children and teenagers (boys and girls), under the direction of a white male adult ; the second is a picture of today's choir, made up of young African adults (students and children of BAD's employees), standing around the Bishop Illario Antoniazzi.

4. Overwhelmed churches : a North African phenomenon

As Harris (2006) and Hunt and Lightly (2001) described in Pentecostal Churches in England, from around 2005, ministers of Black Africa were specially called to assist the local ministers who could not find the satisfactory tone for sermons, and who found it difficult to offer a service which would correspond to the wishes of these new Christians in the country. Furthermore, in order to satisfy a wider audience, hymns which were common to the various congregations present were chosen. In the first years, a certain ritual uncertainty reigned, but the discomfort bound to this situation was counterbalanced by the enthusiasm of the priests and ministers to see the churches full.

In order to illustrate the atmosphere of the early days, here is an extract from an interview given in 2005 by the pastor Raymond Yayii-A-Mutombu, detached at the Reformed Church

of Tunis, who is from Cameroon, to J.-P. Waechter for the Bulletin of francophone information of the Methodist Church :

« We have professors, engineers, doctors or bankers. Every nationality : in the beginning it was terrible, some like their service and their prayer time to be quiet and traditional, in silence and meditation, others are more expressive : they like to scream, ask every one to pray out loud at the same time, and it creates problems. We have had to find a good balance We have our differences in denominations, in religious cultures :we have pentecostals, methodists, Mennonites, baptistes, etc... But we manage, all together ».

As early as 2006, the Protestant new comers were overflowing from their churches with limited space, and decided to celebrate their weekly services in community centers which were rented out for the occasion, especially for important celebrations such as Easter. They also used these places for organizing various social activities, directed to the Protestant community, but not strictly religious, such as fund raising for a social action or a biblical study trip, or concerts of religious music. During and around these gatherings, the Ministry of Interior soon realized that tentative proselytism was carried out by some of the African pastors. As this constitute an offense according to the Tunisian constitution, the Ministry began demanding that these reunions be subjected to formal authorizations. When the authorizations where asked for, they were regularly rejected, which amounted to forbidding Protestant religious services to be held outside formal churches. Both Protestant churches (Eglise Réformée de Tunis and St George) began to multiply the number of services but it did not prove enough. The Catholics were aware of the difficult situation and offered to share religious space, such as the Church of St Cyprien in La Marsa.

Moreover, when asked about the style of the service in front of a multicultural assembly (english, americans, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan...), one of the Pastors brings up the difficulty and the tensions he has to deal with, from the transmission of cultural habits, intrinsically embedded in christian religion, and the will to only deliver the word and message of God, stripped from its cultural packaging.

Thus we can say that there was a dual tension surrounding the Protestant cults in Tunis around the first years of the installation of the African Development Bank : firstly an external tension, in the sense that Protestant believers were practicing their cult within the Catholic ritual space, but secondly an internal one, as Protestant pastors are troubled by the necessity to cater to very different types of religious needs.

In theory the Evangelicals are not very concerned with the shape and structure of their ritual space as church is where believers meet, whereas in an apartment, outside or in a church. In practice, even though all acclaimed the generosity and solidarity shown by their Christian Catholic brethren, some had trouble praying in a catholic space, among religious statues and religious paintings. But if we pay attention to the audience towards which the invitations to share sacred space were given out, we soon realize that if the Catholics included some, they also excluded others.

Sharing religious space : Inviting some, excluding others

In this short period, we have witnessed the splitting up of congregations, over the question of style and music. The question of music is very often a sensitive topic. Which kind of hymns ? Which rhythms ? In 2006, after a few months of tentative cohabitation with the more traditionalist evangelicals, the believers who were used to a more charismatic form of worship decide to part and to create their own Church. Despite the separation, and in order to affirm the friendship which unites all the Protestants in Tunis, a few reunions and common rituals were organized. The ethnography shows that these reunions were not very conclusive, not satisfactory for either side. Many of the Evangelicals underlined the fact that they were « ill at ease » when faced with ecstatic modes, such as the trances of certain members of the Agape Fellowship or the Redeemer Church of Champions, or when confronted to believers who « speak it in tongues » (glossolalia).

In spite of the minister being aware of the strong tensions within his Church and agreeing to the necessity of the split, due to the cacophony which the cohabitation entailed, he later expressed regrets for the early days of the afflux of christians in Tunis, when the enthusiasm haloed everything in a positive light. On a personal level, he admitted to being troubled with the paradox of wanting to preach to all the children of God together in a same venue, and the knowledge that the Scriptures recommend to part and found a new Church whenever the need is felt. When the separation took place between the mainline Protestant Church and the Church of the Champions, its Nigerian, Ivory Coast and Ghanaian followers left the church in central Tunis and rented out a villa for holding services. There, it was common to meet a few Tunisian converts, who acted as living proofs of the success of this Pentecostal church to re-christianise the Maghreb.

Needless to say that the invitations from Catholics priests to Protestants ministers to come and hold services in their churches were handed out exclusively to Evangelicals close to the mainline Protestants rather than to the Pentecostals, viewed as agitated, charismatic and enthusiast proselytes, which is even more problematic in this Muslim country.

After the split, the Pentecostal Church called the Church of Champions settled for a few years in a rich suburb, La Marsa. It is a church of Nigerian origin, affiliated to the Assemblies Of God. From 2006, they rented an expensive villa for the purpose, to a Muslim Tunisian owner. The Sunday services gathered some one hundred and fifty followers, from 9:30 am and through to 1 pm.

Contrary to the Evangelicals, rather discreet with the topic of evangelization, and « reaching out » to muslims, the Pentecostal ministers constantly remind the believers of the importance in playing a part in the "Christian reconquest of North Africa". During worship, the pastor loudly calls on his followers to agree to this, through frequent repetitions of sentences such as the following :

"From North to South, from East to West, we pray in the Glory of God and we show of the presence of Jesus the Rescuer!"

The discourse of a mission of conquest is very present throughout the cult. Just like Sabine Jaggi shows in her work on an African church in Switzerland (2010 : 287), one of the key events concerning being a member of the Pentecostal religion is adult baptism. In this church of La Marsa, at the same time as the cult, a Sunday Bible school takes place on the next floor up, intended for the new converts (who are either Africans Catholics converted to Protestantism or "re-born" for the greater part from any Protestant denomination). The Redeemed Christian Church of God understands itself as an enterprise of conversion as its most important mission is to go forth and grow. The pastor once said to me, in a very affirmative manner, that a « Church which does not grow is a dead Church » with reference to the Roman Catholic Church in Tunis and of their " old priests ".

This cult, as all the Pentecostal cults and contrary to the assemblies in the Evangelical Churches, leaves little room for silence or meditation, and even the silent prayers are accompanied by a constant murmur, by incessant oscillating body movements. In these worship, the theme of conquest, or of reconquest, is constantly present, in an attempt to remoralise society. The main purpose is the moralisation of Christians themselves but also to enable others, "renegades", « villains" to redeem. Tackled issues, besides those of the love of God and the various ways in which He choses to bring the believers to him, are mainly the battle against fornication, against debauchery and lust. As "soldiers of God" it is necessary to fight these problems and to extirpate them of the lives of the believers, though prayer and discipline. Everything here is comparable to the many studies carried out elsewhere on African churches (Fancello, 2008 and 2010; Maskens, 2010; Pace and Butticci, 2010; Mary, Fouchard, Otayek, 2005). The main difference being the microcosm which this church represents, and the fact that it is present in a Muslim and Arabic context, which was, in the Antiquity, formerly Christian. Ministers draw the legitimacy of their missionary action from these three specific characteristics.

In just over a decade, the Christian churches of Tunisia have changed from an attitude we can qualify as " low profile » to a radiant, confident and asserted position. With their dynamic and energetic cults, Christian Churches have operated a revolution, which has seen them go from a non-object (for the Tunisians), a simple trace of colonial past of no interest, to an essential places of sociability, faith and fervour of the African community, rich or poor. Since the beginning of 2014, the progressive return of the BAD to the Ivory Coast is taking place. Now that some years have passed, it would be interesting to assess what is left of the passage of the Christians of Africa.

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