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Albert Samama, a Tunisian Filmmaker
in the Ottoman Empire at War (1911-1913)

Morgan Corriou

Translated by David Motzafi-Haller

One day in 1912 in downtown Tunis, a young Qur’anic student steps into a cinema. The excited young man, led by his cousin, is about to watch a motion picture for the first time. To his astonishment, he notices that the two of them are the only Muslims in the audience. The projection starts with an Italian newsreel on the war in Tripolitania, which he finds grossly biased. Indignant, he leaps from his seat, protesting loudly, and is soon forced out by the other spectators, angered by the interruption.¹ Many years later, the young man, Ahmed Tewfik El-Madani, would describe that day as a key moment in the development of his political awareness. Reconstructed newsreels were a common feature at the time, but the question of how a colonial conflict is represented on-screen is explicitly raised here by a novice viewer. This may, of course, be an imprecise rendering (El-Madani’s memoirs were written in the 1970s). The episode nevertheless attests to the significance of the Italo-Turkish war to both the history of Arab nationalism and to the broader struggle over image in the Maghrib. The conflict constitutes, in fact, one of the earliest political claims within the realm of cinema in Tunisia under the French protectorate.

Only one contemporary image from the war would eventually etch itself into the collective memory: that of the hanged men of Tripoli. While contemporary media coverage of the conflict leaned heavily in favour of Italy – despite some expressions of indignation at the brutality of the Italian repression, there is a certain irony, and, no doubt, poetic justice in the fact that history has ultimately retained the least favourable image of the Italian aggressor. The scene is immortalized by film: at the time, there were no less than four filmmakers in Tripoli – another example of this informational imbalance (Zaccaria, 2003: 67–68). On the Ottoman side, however, one Tunisian Jewish filmmaker had also recorded the hostilities. Upon his return to Tunis, he witnessed the consequences of the conflict for his native country (especially during the trial that followed the riots around the Jellaz cemetery). A few months later, he packed his bags and left for the Balkans, where

¹ ‘Ce film n’était pas réaliste. Des acteurs et actrices italiens, vêtus d’habits arabes grotesques et montant des ânes et des chameaux, fuyaient, loufoques et apeurés devant les Italiens. Je ne pus me contrôler et me retrouvai debout à hurler: C’est faux! C’est de la falsification! C’est de la tromperie!’ [‘This film was not realistic. Italian actors and actresses, dressed in grotesque Arab garbs and riding donkeys and camels, scattered in terror before the Italians. I couldn’t control myself and found myself standing up and screaming: This is wrong! It’s a lie, a sham!’] (El-Madani, 1989: 65).

war was also raging. A rare indigenous filmmaker, Albert Samama, also known as Samama-Chikli, is an exceptional figure, an outlier in the history of early film in the Arab world.

Historians have often retained from his lengthy career just two fictional films he released in the early 1920s, *Zohra* and *Aïn-el-Ghezal ou La fille de Carthage*, both not without a tinge of exoticism. In reality, Samama crossed the boundaries between colonizer and colonized, personifying in many ways the phenomenon of *métis de la colonisation* [‘half-breed of colonization’] described by Albert Memmi (2002 [1957]: 19; 1991: xvi). It is through the prism of the prevalent idea of cultural intermediary, a role commonly – and all too hastily – associated with Maghribi Jews, that I wish to revisit Samama’s cinematography here. Archives recently acquired by the Cineteca di Bologna afford us a broader perspective on his oeuvre. In this chapter, I have chosen to focus on his work from the period for which he is the least well-known, but which is also the richest in possibilities of his career, that is the period before the First World War. At a time when film distribution channels virtually did not exist and film production was still very limited, the dichotomy of centre and periphery held little sway. It is only with the advent of feature film and the establishment of several hegemonic centers of cinematic production and distribution that this dichotomy has emerged more acutely (Braun and Keil, 2010: 125–29). It is in this context of rapid evolution and formation of the early cinematic landscape that we will examine the place of newsreels covering the Maghrib and the role of a filmmaker from a colonized country in the global film market.²

Towards a Professionalization of the Filmmaker’s Work

Albert Samama was born into an upper-class Jewish Tunisian family in 1872, some ten years before the establishment of the French protectorate. He did, however, have French citizenship, acquired by his father, who was a banker. Samama had had a turbulent youth, and his inventive exploits often made their way into local newspapers. He also distinguished himself from a young age through his scientific curiosity and a passion for new technologies that would lead him to experiment with photography, X-rays, and eventually, of course, filmmaking.³ This fascination with modern objects was not uncommon among Maghribi Jews who had chosen to align themselves with France.

² I would like to express my gratitude to Giuliana Cerabona (Cineteca Di Bologna) who guided me in the exploration of this hitherto unclassified fund. I also extend warm thanks to Agnès Berthola (Gaumont Pathé Archives), Antonio Bigini, Antoine Guichard, Mariann Lewinsky, and Stéphanie Salmon (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé) who introduced me to valuable sources on Albert Samama. Finally, I would like to thank the participants of the workshop *Dynamic Maghribi Jewish–Muslim interaction across the Performing Arts (1920-2020)* (Cambridge, 5–7 December 2018) and members of the ANR *Ciné08-19* project for their informed comments on various drafts of this work. During my research at the Cineteca Di Bologna, I benefited from funding from the Programme d’aide à la recherche at the University of Paris 8 Vincennes – Saint-Denis.

³ For Samama’s biography, see Sanogo, Cenciarelli, Lewinsky, and Mejr (2015: 50–67); Corriou (2011); Guillot (2017); Mansour (2000); Veray (1995).

For them, this was a token of their commitment to assimilation with the colonizers, as is illustrated by the enthusiastic way that Tunisian Jewish merchants became involved in the most revolutionary products of the time (motorcars, radios, refrigerators, etc.).⁴ We find an early reference to cinematic invention in a letter by Samama dated August 1897, in which he attempted to acquire some films in France.⁵ He then organized a series of screenings across the country with his mobile cinema, the *Cinemat-Chikli*.⁶ His first films date back to 1905 at the latest.⁷ Samama was above all an innovator, between inventor and enthusiast. In the early days, he oscillated between amateurism and professionalism, and appears to have had little interest in developing a business.

It was from 1906 onwards that he began professionalizing his activities. Abandoning the mantle of amateur photographer – as he often fashioned himself at the end of the nineteenth century – he began selling his films to European firms.⁸ This development is obviously linked to the evolution of the film industry itself and, in particular, to the shift towards renting, which led to the inauguration of the first cinema in the protectorate (*Omnia Pathé*) in October 1908.⁹ No longer filming only in Tunisia, Samama travelled to Germany, Austria, and France. At the end of 1908, he visited the Sicilian city of Messina, in the wake of a particularly violent earthquake.

In late 1911 and early 1912, Samama toured southern Tunisia and Tripolitania. This trip was a watershed moment in his career, because it allowed him to film the Italo-Turkish war not as it was seen from the vantage of the Italian side, but from that of the Turkish one. The invasion of the last Ottoman provinces in Africa had engendered a seismic shift in the Muslim world. In Tunisia, the Arabic-language press issued calls for pan-Islamic solidarity (Yacoub, 1980) and a campaign was organized to extend aid to the resistance in Tripolitania, at the initiative of the *Jeunes Tunisiens* [‘Young Tunisians’] movement. Altercations between Tunisians and Italians, who formed the largest European community in the country, were on the rise. France, which had just occupied Morocco, was not opposed to the Italian offensive, but tensions soon arose between the two European countries as Ottoman weapons and reinforcements streamed into Libya from the Tunisian border.

⁴ See Sebag (1998: 413).

⁵ Cineteca Di Bologna, the Albert Samama Archives, Album documenti nero 3 (provisional classification).

⁶ A photograph depicts the Sfax Municipal Theatre in which the *Cinemat-Chikli* screened films (Mansour, 2000: 60).

⁷ In December 1905, he showed several films by Ferdinand Zecca but also his own work in the Tunis Municipal Casino: *L’Embarquement des pèlerins* [‘The Pilgrims Embark’], *Les Courses de Tunis* [‘The Tunis Races’], *La Fantasia arabe* [‘Arab Fantasia’], *Les Souks* [‘The Markets’] and *La Pêche du thon de Sidi Daoud* [‘Tuna Fishing in Sidi Daoud’].

⁸ His archives preserve correspondence with Pathé in 1906 (Album documenti nero 1-2, letter from the Pathé Company to Albert Samama, 18 July 1906), and his name appeared in Pathé’s accounting journals in September 1907 (Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé, accounting journal no. 12, May 1907 to April 1908).

⁹ The year 1907 was marked by a coup of the Pathé firm, which led to an abrupt halt in the sales of its productions. From then on, they were exclusively rented, a revolution which led to a sedenterization of film projections.

The Italo-Turkish war was highly publicized. A contingent of European journalists arriving in Tripolitania to cover the war was promptly placed under the strict supervision of the Italian army, which escorted them, censored them, and briefed them through daily press conferences (Chéreau, 2018). In his study of Gaston Chéreau, the special correspondent for *Le Matin*, Pierre Schill points out strong similarities in the photographs appearing in the reports of nearly all the war correspondents. Italian filmmakers, including Luca Comerio and Bixio Alberini, who both worked for Pathé, were also present in Tripolitania (Zaccaria, 2003: 67–68). Samama, meanwhile, seemed isolated in his filming tour, and never mentioned encountering any of his colleagues in his field notes. In fact, few foreign journalists chose to cover the war from the underrepresented Ottoman perspective.¹⁰ Photographs were nevertheless taken by men such as Pol Tristan or Georges Rémond. The latter, a correspondent for *L'Illustration*, reported numerous times on how invested Arab and Turkish fighters were in their image in the press, well aware that the audience for these images exceeded European readership and that they were circulating widely in the Muslim world.¹¹ Photography was also used in the Sultan's army – much to the surprise of the Italians, who discovered as much when they stumbled upon numerous negatives in abandoned Turkish military camps (Zaccaria, 2003: 85–88). Still, these photographs appear to have had either a private or a military use, as photography rarely featured in the Ottoman printed press. The issue of the moving picture, by contrast, was never brought up, due to the small number of filmmakers and studios in the Ottoman Empire at the time (Arslan, 2011: ch. 2). Samama's work was therefore ground-breaking in the media landscape in which he operated.

Samama followed the traditional smuggling route from Sfax to Zouagha via Ben Gardane which Arab and Turkish fighters used to reinforce and supply provisions for the Tripolitan rebellion. Details of this trip are known to us thanks to a journal preserved by the archives of the Cineteca di Bologna: '*Voyage Tripolitaine pendant la guerre italo-turc [sic]*' ['Tripolitan journey during the Italo-Turkish war']. Samama's text, laboriously handwritten in a school notebook and full of erasures and misspellings, was written *a posteriori*. The narrative, unfortunately, is incomplete and is cut off on 8 November 1912, when the author was supposedly approaching 'Aïn Zāra. Its purpose remains unclear. Did Samama intend to rework these field notes for publication? Samama was, without a

¹⁰ Notable exceptions include Ernest N. Bennett, who was present in Tripolitania in 1911, as well as Georges Rémond, who was there between January and May 1912 (Yacoub, 1980, fol. 206–11); Rémond (2014).

¹¹ '*Le kaymakam s'est pris d'une amitié profonde pour L'Illustration et pour moi, mon interprète ayant eu l'idée heureuse de lui dire que le numéro, avec sa photographie, avait été affiché dans les mosquées et les cafés maures de l'Algérie, et qu'à cette vue tous les Algériens, sans le connaître, mais sachant avec quelle valeur il combattait pour l'islam, faisaient des prières pour lui*' ['The *kaymakam* fostered a deep friendship with *L'Illustration* and with me, as my interpreter had the fine idea to tell him that the issue, along with his photography, had been displayed in the mosques and Moorish cafés of Algeria, and that at the sight of this all Algerians, without knowing him, but knowing with what bravery he fought for Islam, prayed for him'] (Rémond, 2014: 53).

doubt, an avid seeker of glory and recognition. Had he been hoping to complement his photographic and cinematographic oeuvre with a book chronicling his exploits? This is the most likely hypothesis, despite the fact that Samama was not a man of the written word. Detailed lists documenting expenditure appearing here and there in the text, alongside sections in which Samama took particular care to describe how Arab and Turkish fighters felt about France and Italy, suggest another possibility. Could it have been a report for the French authorities? The idea is not implausible if Samama's deep-seated patriotism were to be taken into account: he would go on to voluntarily enlist in the Film Unit of the French Army at the age of forty-four, in 1916.¹²

If providing intelligence was one of the objectives here, however, any contact with the French authorities could have only been made afterwards. It was Parisian film companies who were behind his expedition:

[...] traînant à Paris au moment où éclat la guerre italo-turcs de septembre 1911. [...] Plusieurs maison de cinématographe surtout que j'étais Tunisien m'on proposer d'aller en Tripolitaine pour prendre des vues comme ont savez que j'étais Tunisien que je connais très bien les arabes et je parle leur langue ont m'a proposer de partir en Tripolitaine. J'ai décider de partir au plutôt me promettant de prendre des choses sensationnel [*sic*].¹³

His Tunisian origins and his mastery of Arabic are presented as an asset in his dealings with the French film companies. In the notebook, his choice of covering the war from the Ottoman side is described as part of a commercial strategy:

À Sfax plusieurs amis à qui je leur avait dit que j'allais à Tripoli m'on conseiller de ne pas y aller 1°) parce que le choléra battais son plein et 2° que à Tripoli il y avait déjà plusieurs photographe et opérateur de cinématographe italien que certainement je n'aurai put rien faire d'intéressant vue les limites très restrein où on pouvait circuler et les difficulté que les autorités italien faiser pour laisser photographier.

Après réflexion je me suis dit je parle arabe je connaît la vie des arabes. Aucun photographe n'a encore été du côté des arabes ; je vais tenter le coup si je pourrai aller du côté des Turcs. Je rapporterai des vues inédites et unique [*sic*].¹⁴

¹² See Mansour (2000: 216).

¹³ 'Being in Paris at the time of the Italo-Turkish war of September 1911. [...] especially because I was Tunisian, several film companies approached me and suggested that I go to Tripoli to film, since they knew I was Tunisian and I that knew the Arabs very well and that I speak their language they proposed that I go to Tripoli. I decided to leave as soon as I could, promising to take sensational shots'.

¹⁴ 'In Sfax, several friends with whom I shared my intentions to go film in Tripoli advised me against it (1°) because cholera was rife there and (2°) because there already were numerous Italian photographers and filmmakers in Tripoli,

Samama sold his footage from Tripoli to *Gaumont*, signing a contract on 14 August 1912 ‘pour [d]es vues panoramiques et documentaires’ [‘for panoramic and documentary footage’] as well as materials for the *Revue Hebdomadaire Gaumont Actualités* [‘Gaumont News Weekly Digest’]. He was given instructions regarding the interval between the images in order to meet the firm’s strict standards.¹⁵ The war in Tripolitania thus provided Samama with the opportunity to establish a professional career in filmmaking.

The Maghrib in the Global Film Market

Professionalizing meant closer ties with the French film companies that dominated the international film trade at the time. Here, once again, the Italo-Turkish war represented an opportunity. Numerous competitors populated the burgeoning newsreel industry: Pathé Journal was founded in 1909, closely followed by Gaumont in 1910 and Éclair in 1912. It is difficult to assess the presence of the colonies in the news during the 1910s, but it seems clear that the routine coverage of privileged subjects (sporting events, visits by heads of state and ministers, crimes, etc.) normally excluded territories considered ‘peripheral’ (Baj and Lenk, 2004: 270). These were mentioned in the news only when they involved conquest, armed conflicts or historic diplomatic visits. Samama regularly encountered difficulties in selling his North African materials and attracting the interest of French film companies.¹⁶ While he appeared to film more and more in Europe, the war in Tripolitania represented a real windfall in his career.

The days of the *Ciné-Journal Chikli* seemed to be over. Even though no footage of these newsreels survived, its logo, a caricature of a pink flamingo,¹⁷ suggests that these news reports were more parody and prank, typical of Samama’s initial experimentations, than actual Tunisian news.¹⁸ From then on, his footage of the Maghrib travelled more widely and found a place in the global film economy. This is not insignificant when we consider that the main issue in Tunisian cinema at the

and [they said] that I certainly couldn’t expect to achieve anything interesting given the restraints placed on free movement in the city and the difficulties Italian authorities caused photographers.

After reflection, I thought to myself that I speak Arabic [and] I know the life of Arabs. No photographer has yet been on the side of the Arabs; I’m going to give it a shot and see if I can go to the Turkish side. I will bring back new and unique views’.

¹⁵ Album documenti blu 1-2, contract of 14 August 1912.

¹⁶ In the 1920s, for instance, Pathé criticized Samama for the dullness of his films (Album documenti nero 1-2, letter dated 28 August 1922). After the war, several of his films were repurposed for educational series.

¹⁷ 03–Cinema Sc 1. The coat of arms of the ‘principality of Chikli’ (Chikli, in reality, was no more than a modest island in the Lake of Tunis, once acquired by his father) already depicted pink flamingos (CFSC–DOC–SC.1).

¹⁸ His photomontages and humorous mises en scène abound. Some appear in Guillemette Mansour’s book, such as a scene depicting a card game pitting him against two other Albert Samamas, or a self-portrait in bed alongside a skeleton which tenderly caresses his forehead (the only decent image in an entire series depicting him in intimate domestic settings with a skeleton).

end of the colonial period and at the beginning of independence was distribution.¹⁹ The colonial and post-colonial situation has denied Tunisian cinema the mantle of ‘universality’ so self-assuredly claimed by French and American cinema, and reduced it to the local and particular.

The film market in the 1910s was slightly more open than it would be in subsequent decades. The Samama Archives suggest a much larger cinematic range than has been previously acknowledged. Only a few fragments of his work have survived the passage of time, but the impressive photographic collection kept at the Cineteca should enable scholars to eventually credit the Tunisian filmmaker with most of the footage shot in Tunisia and Libya during the 1910s: Samama was unique in taking still photos and films in parallel, a pattern he would continue when filming the front lines of the First World War (Guillot, 2017).²⁰ While authentication of his work is still underway, we can already mention the examples of *Gabès, Tunisie. Délégation du Croissant rouge* [‘Gabès, Tunisia. Delegation from the Red Crescent’], and *La Tripolitaine. Zouagha: guerre italo-turque* [‘Tripolitania. Zouagha: Italo-Turkish war’].²¹ These films, each only a few seconds long, represent a radical break with most footage taken in North Africa at the time, most of which consisted of ethnographic scenes or records of official ceremonies featuring the army, colonial officials, or the Sultan of Morocco. *Gabès, Tunisie. Délégation du Croissant rouge* does not depict decadent sovereigns full of pomp or fierce warriors on horseback brandishing swords, much less ethnographic ‘types’, but rather everyday Tunisians expressing their support for the resistance in Tripolitania. Samama’s camera lingers on the motorcar transporting the delegation. This choice is unusual at a time when most films persisted in portraying the inhabitants of the Maghrib in traditional settings, as if they were untouched by modernity. In *Zouagha*, an old man – could this be the sheikh mentioned by Samama in his notebook? – makes a fervent speech in front of the camera. If the caption, enigmatic to say the least, casts doubt on the meaning of the scene, the importance of the latter lies perhaps more in this close-up of a Libyan haranguing the crowd. This shot contrasts with the almost uniform invisibility of the North African populations on screen at the turn of the century. Except for isolated individuals posing in front of the camera in ethnographic films, Arabs were by and large depicted as faceless men, often filmed from the back, from a long way off, their figures appearing as ghostly silhouettes in longshots of landscapes. The most representative example of this is also the most

¹⁹ Tahar Cheriaa’s dictum, ‘Qui tient la distribution tient le cinéma’ [‘He who controls distribution, controls cinema’] remains famous. See Cheriaa (1978).

²⁰ Several photographs of his stay in Tripolitania have been published in Mansour (2000: 201–6).

²¹ Gaumont Pathé Archives, *Gabès, Tunisie. Délégation du Croissant rouge*, Journal Gaumont, 1210GJ 00023; *La Tripolitaine. Zouagha: guerre italo-turque*, Journal Gaumont, 1407GJ00004.

exaggerated one: *Colomb-Béchar*, a film more than seven minutes long depicting the Algerian city of Béchar, in which almost no face appears, the inhabitants mostly filmed from a distance.²²

Gabès, like *Zouagha*, is marked by the low quality of the footage. In *Gabès*, the framing appears particularly clumsy (heads cut out of frame in the first shot, members of the delegation blocked out of frame by the crowd in the next). Still, what might appear as a sign of amateurism also testifies to Samama's uniqueness, namely his proximity to the subjects of his films: the cameraman in both films records from within the crowd. Samama thus differs from the position of detached spectator adopted by many European filmmakers who, by and large, kept away from indigenous crowds and preferred to film them from a safe distance. Admittedly, they usually filmed orderly processions, unlike Samama, who often filmed spontaneous gatherings. A later work like *Tunis: rues et paysages* ['Tunis: Streets and Landscapes'], which can most probably be attributed to him,²³ is characteristic in this respect: Samama, in the middle of the wedding procession, seems driven by the crowd he films frontally, departing from traditional representations of a faceless Arab mass.

The conflict, and, indeed, a stroke of good journalistic fortune, caught up with the filmmaker when he left Tripolitania. As he crossed the Mediterranean from Marseille to Tunis aboard the *Carthage* ocean-liner in January 1912, it was unexpectedly boarded and seized by the Italian navy: the liner was accused of transporting 'war contraband' destined for the Turkish forces. While the boat was detained in Cagliari, Samama found himself, with his filming gear and camera, in the midst of an unfolding play of Franco-Italian diplomatic theatre. His exclusive still photographs from this event made the front page of *L'Illustration* (27 January 1912), which did not hesitate to add a special supplement to cover the case. Meanwhile, his film footage was published by the Agence Générale Cinématographique. Once again, unforeseeable circumstances played into the filmmaker's favour, adding buoyancy to his effort to internationalize his business. However, the *Carthage* incident is also illustrative of the limitations within which the film industry in Tunisia developed. In fact, the film was never screened in the country itself: following the events of Jellaz (7-8 November 1911), all films about the Italo-Turkish war were banned.²⁴ This did not prevent the French member of parliament from Bouches-du-Rhône, Auguste Bouge, from denouncing the failures of the General Residence in the National Assembly, accusing cinema owners in Tunis of projecting scenes of the conflict in Tripolitania 'devant une foule de musulmans surexcités' ['in front of a crowd of agitated

²² Gaumont Pathé Archives, 1914EGHI 00874, Film Service of the General Government of Algeria, Éclair Ghilbert, first projected in 1914.

²³ The images bear a strong resemblance to the photographs of a wedding procession published through Mansour (2000: Gaumont Pathé Archives, 1922GHIDOC 01064). This scene was certainly an inspiration for *Aïn el-Ghezal ou La fille de Carthage* (completed in the autumn of 1923 and released in Tunisian cinemas in May 1924).

²⁴ 'Cinéma et Parlement. Une remise au point des allégations de M. Bouge', *Ciné-Journal*, 17 February 1912, 182: 5. On the events of the Jellaz, see footnote 26, below.

Muslims’].²⁵ Here we find not only the first expression of concern about the presence of Muslim audiences in cinemas, but also the first example of film censorship in the protectorate of Tunisia.

Although the local press had nothing but praise for their progressive fellow compatriot, Tunisian cinemas ultimately took little advantage of this proximity. Faced with a lack of infrastructure, Samama was forced to resort to French companies not to have his films printed and edited, but also to release them. Thus, his films systematically passed through Paris and only rarely did the film companies grant exclusive rights to Tunisian cinemas. As cinema became institutionalized, films were in turn subject to the severe political control that was already afflicting the press in colonized countries. Censorship of films about the Italo-Turkish war is only the first example in a long series of events signalling the impossibility of cinematic production in the French colonial empire.

Albert Samama, ‘Bold Explorer’

In this context, the notebook left by Samama testifies to his ability to play with different registers of belonging. He is employed as a Tunisian by French film companies, mistaken for an Italian spy by Tunisians who almost attack him, and presents himself as a ‘Français à Tunis’ [‘Frenchman in Tunis’] in front of the Tripolitan fighters. In Ben Gardane, he only avoids getting into trouble thanks to the intervention of a former porter of his, who identifies him as an ‘enfant du pays’ [‘local lad’]:

Autour de l’auto très nombreux les arabes se sont réunies et me regardent d’un air malveillant surtout voyant que j’étais arrivé seul et voyant débarquer tout mon matériel appareil, ciné, pédale ciné (qu’ont du prendre pour un pied de mitrailleuse) arrivée à Ben Gardane a produit un très mauvais effet sur les Arabes. Et voici pourquoi [:] le matin de ce jour même un groupe du Croissant rouge avait quitté pour la Tripolitaine et voyant que j’étais arrivé quelques heures après seul en auto avec tous mon attirails et ayant un peu les types italiens surtout voyant que je parlais cette langue : les arabes m’ont pris pour un officier italien – et dans les cafés maures entre eux ils disaient qu’il ne comprennent pas que le gouvernement français autorise des officiers italiens venir jusqu’à la frontière pour épier les arabes et suivre à distance les membres du Croissant rouge. [...] Parmi eux se trouve un arabe qui me dit : Tu n’es pas Tunisien[,] toi[?] je te connais[.] Ce n’est pas toi qui est monté en ballon à Tunis[?] je répond que oui : il me dit moi j’étais portefaix à Tunis et je t’ai fait souvent des commissions : tu es Samama : tu habites près

²⁵ ‘Cinéma et Parlement’, *Ciné-Journal*, 17 February 1912, 180: 6–7.

de l'avenue de Londre : cet arabe sans se douter a été mon sauveur. Je me met à causer avec lui et il s'est mis à me porter mes appareils : Mais tous les Arabes de Ben Gardane lui demande qui j'étais ceux que je faisait. Il leur a répondu que j'étais enfant du pays et qu'il s'était tous trompé sur mon compte [*sic*].²⁶

Only the French expression 'enfant du pays' is given in the text, but we can assume that it is a translation of the Arabic *weld el-bled* ['local lad'].

Thus, Samama symbolized, offhandedly, this 'métis de la colonisation' that Albert Memmi wrote so poignantly about, the man who belonged neither to the colonizers nor to the colonized. The nascent film industry relied heavily on such intermediaries – Jewish Tunisians, but also Italians (Corriou, 2011). Samama seemed to mingle with relative ease in the different strata of this complexly hierarchical society. His freedom is consigned to a particular social environment, of course, but perhaps also to a specific era, the beginning of the twentieth century, where it was still possible to juggle identities to one's advantage.²⁷

Should the choice of covering the Ottoman side be construed as taking a broader political stance? Samama does not hesitate to cover the trial of the Jellaz. We have already mentioned the rupture caused by the riots in November 1911. Following the decision by the municipality of Tunis to register the *hubūs* property of the Muslim Jellaz cemetery, intercommunal tensions arose in the already delicate atmosphere caused by the war in Tripolitania. The decision was eventually rescinded, but the distrustful protesters gathered outside the cemetery on 7 November, where they were confronted by soldiers and the police. The demonstration soon devolved into confrontations and clashes throughout the city, claiming the lives of many Tunisians, Italians, and French residents (Ayadi, 1989: 166–75). Repressive measures were directed primarily against the Tunisians, who were caught in the cogs of a colonial machine, panicked by the events. Samama followed the trial in June 1912 and turned 81 metres of footage that seem to have disappeared.²⁸ He also took photographs that could be read as a denunciation of the proceedings, like one portrait of an eight-year-old child

²⁶ 'Many Arabs gathered around the motorcar and looked at me with a malevolent air especially seeing as I had arrived alone and unloaded all my equipment, camera, camera pod (which must have been taken for a machine gun mount), my arrival in Ben Gardane has produced a very bad effect on the Arabs. And here's why[:] on the morning of that very day[,] a group of the Red Crescent had left for Tripolitania and since I arrived a few hours later[,] alone by motorcar with all my paraphernalia and seeming a bit like an Italian, especially seeing that I speak this language: the Arabs took me for an Italian officer – and in the Moorish cafés they talked among themselves and said that they did not understand that the French government would allow Italian officers to come to the border to spy on the Arabs and follow the members of the Red Crescent. [...] Among them there was an Arab who said to me: ["Aren't you a Tunisian[,]you[?] I know you[.] Isn't it you who went hot air ballooning in Tunis[?"] I said it was: he tells me ["I was a porter in Tunis and I often did commissions for you: you are Samama: you live near London Avenue[?"]]: this Arab was undoubtedly my saviour. I got talking to him and he started carrying my devices for me: but all the Arabs of Ben Gardane asked him who I was and what I was up to. He told them that I was a local lad and that they were all wrong about me'.

²⁷ See, in particular, Oualdi (2005) and Dewhurst Lewis (2013).

²⁸ Album documenti nero 1-2, scribbled list.

standing accused and whose head, covered by a *chechia*, barely protrudes above the bar (Mansour, 2000: 210–11). In the autumn of 1912, he was prevented from filming the execution of two convicts by the head of security, who held him for two hours and briefly confiscated his devices (Valensi, 1912: 22).

In Tunis, Samama also frequented and filmed Abdelkader, the grandson of the Algerian emir.²⁹ These connections infuriated the Italian press, which did not hesitate to accuse the filmmaker of spying for the Turks.³⁰ Arriving from Damascus, Abdelkader and his father Ali had crossed Cyrenaica and Tripolitania to organize the resistance of the local Arab tribes. As Ottomans, the two men had an apparently cordial but deeply ambiguous relationship with France – Emir Ali was received in Tunis by resident general Gabriel Alapetite (Bardin, 1979: 179–89). On 22 February 1913, an issue of the *Courrier cinématographique* announced Samama’s return from the Balkans. Unfortunately, this is the only mention we have of this trip that left no other trace in the archives. Did he film the war between the Balkan League and the Ottoman Empire? That would be the most likely explanation for his expedition. Did he cover the Turkish side? Again, we could surmise as much, given his network of friendships in the Sultan’s army.

These different choices appear to be the reverse of the positions held by a majority of the French population in Tunisia at the time. It would be imprudent, however, to exaggerate the role of Ottoman heritage in the filmmaker’s work. It is possible that Samama initially saw the war as a way of uniting Tunisians and the French around a shared hostility towards Italy. What is particularly striking in his written notes, by contrast to some of his films and photographs, is first of all the way in which Samama distances himself from the Arab world, whether in his travel diary or in his photographs captioned according to scenes and types – ‘type arabe de la région de...’ [‘Arab type from the region of...’]. Samama obviously makes use of the pre-established categories that enable him to sell his films and photographs abroad. However, in an undated letter, probably dating back to the early twentieth century, he describes himself above all as a ‘hardi explorateur’ [‘bold explorer’], a ‘digne et intéressant successeur des Stanley et des Livingstone’ [‘worthy and notable successor to the Stanleys and Livingstones’].³¹ It is indeed under the gaze of an explorer or a tourist that the filmmaker subjected his country of birth. While these allusions may be surprising, they should not merely be considered as a kind of schizophrenia. The figure of the tourist equally expresses a relationship to modernity centred around the idea of speed, freedom, and worship of the body, which Catherine Bertho Lavenir aptly describes (1999: 87–95). Samama’s passion for canoeing, motorcars,

²⁹ Album documenti nero 1-2, scribbled list.

³⁰ ‘Espionnage turc en Italie. Les vicissitudes d’un Tunisien’, *La Tunisie française*, 14 August 1912.

³¹ Album documenti nero 1-2, unfinished letter.

and especially bicycles in this regard is telling.³² Bertho Lavenir links the advent of cycling to tourism during the Belle Époque. We also know that Samama worked extensively on a travel guide to Tunisia, which he never succeeded to publish due to a lack of investors.³³ A common thread runs through the figure of the tourist, the bicycle, the camera that always accompanies him on his wanderings and, finally, the cinema itself. Being a tourist is first and foremost about being modern. To be modern in this sense and at this time was to have a chance to escape ‘indigenous’ status – symbolic for Samama, since he had French nationality – and to re-appropriate in a positive way a certain marginality in a Muslim-majority society (Memmi, 2002 [1957]: 38–41).

Conclusion

Finding a balance between the exceptional and the commonplace is the inevitable challenge of any biography. In the case of the self-proclaimed ‘Prince of Chikli’, the first pitfall is certainly the weight of his extraordinariness. Samama’s eccentricities make him akin to a character from a novel; many have succumbed to the temptation to approach his biography from the point of view of the extraordinary – an angle that tends to obfuscate the colonial context.³⁴ Although certainly idiosyncratic, Albert Samama was also an ordinary man, increasingly constrained by political restrictions and his country’s marginality in the global film market. He probably did not have the career and recognition he had hoped for. The outbreak of the First World War interrupted its momentum: the French film industry was turned upside down, and the big companies lost interest in films from the Maghrib. After the war, his attempts to capitalize on the ‘cheikh film’ wave failed. Racked by bankruptcy, the first Tunisian director died in 1933. His frantic rush towards innovation constituted a demonstration of modernity that was relatively common among Maghribi Jews. He converted with great fanfare to Catholicism, was dubbed a member of the very selective Institut de Carthage [‘Institute of Carthage’] and the Cercle Européen de Tunis [‘European Circle of Tunis’], but the first words devoted to him by the *Livre d’or de la Cinématographie* made reference to ‘sa physionomie élégante, vive et expressive d’Arabe très parisien’.³⁵ ‘Plus ou moins mystifi[é], plus ou moins bénéficiair[e]’,³⁶ Samama embodies Memmi’s ‘métis de la colonisation’ (2002 [1957]: 41).

³² He joined the Union vélocipédique de France [‘Cycling Union of France’], and in 1893, he organized a bicycle expedition to southern Algeria.

³³ *Sur les grands chemins de la Tunisie* [‘On the Great Roads of Tunisia’].

³⁴ Note the revealing title of the documentary dedicated to him by Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud in 1995: *Albert Samama-Chikli: ce merveilleux fou filmant avec ses drôles de machines* [‘Albert Samama-Chikli: That Wonderful Filming Madman and his Odd Machines’].

³⁵ ‘The elegant and lively features of a very Parisian Arab’. Unfortunately, the work cited is not dated (Mansour, 2000: 61).

³⁶ ‘More or less fooled to the point of accepting the system, more or less profiting from it’.

And yet it would be equally wrong to understate his exceptionality. He is a pioneer who, in Tunisia, experimented with everything: the submarine, the wireless telegraph, the hot air balloon. While there is no doubt that the history of early cinema has tended to underestimate the number of indigenous films in the colonized territories,³⁷ Samama's example, considering the longevity and the prominence of his career, seems an outlier nonetheless. The concept of the intermediary, so commonly used to describe Maghribi Jews that it has become somewhat of a truism, must therefore be more closely scrutinized. Admittedly, it was Samama who introduced Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb to the world of cinema. Despite their many disagreements,³⁸ the prince-turned-bey reciprocated a long friendship with him, lending him his palace in La Marsa for the filming of *Ain-el-Ghezal*.³⁹ But ultimately, Samama appears to have been too isolated and too unconventional for his experiences to have a real impact. There is a chronological disconnect between his own ground-breaking individual initiative and figures like Mustapha Bouchoucha, not to mention associations such as Tunis Films or Tunis Cinéma that strove at the end of the 1930s, with great difficulty and little success, to forge a national film industry in an increasingly repressive colonial context (Corriou, 2011: 327–33). This did not discourage a new generation of Tunisian film lovers and filmmakers in the 1960s from dubbing him another link in the chain of national cinema going back to the beginning of the century.⁴⁰ But the mediatory role the figure of Samama played here appears to be more symbolic than concrete. What, then, remained of his works? No trace, it would seem, given that, in a 1963 report, Tahar Cheriaa copied the summary of *Ain el-Ghezal* that appears in Maurice Bataille and Claude Veillot's book, *Caméras sous le soleil* (1956). This suggests that even the president of the Fédération Tunisienne des Ciné-Clubs ['Tunisian Federation of Film Clubs'] and director of cinema at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs had never seen the film for himself.⁴¹

'Il n'eut ni succès ni descendance', writes Tahar Cheriaa, accusing colonial policy for 'l'échec et la stérilité de cet avorton [*Ain el-Ghezal*] admirable et émouvant'.⁴² On balance, it is more through his subsequently forgotten films in the 1910s, which we are only now beginning to

³⁷ Even though these films have apparently been forever lost, it is safe to assume that the first indigenous ambulant exhibitors did indeed film and that their films were more numerous and produced earlier than is commonly acknowledged (see, for example, Ruppin, 2014: 13).

³⁸ On several occasions Samama complains about having provided Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb with filming materials without getting paid in return (Album documenti blu 1-2).

³⁹ 'Un film tunisien', *Mon Ciné*, 30 October 1924, n° 141.

⁴⁰ Nouri Zanzouri, who opens a section on the history of Tunisian cinema in the journal of the Fédération Tunisienne des Ciné-Clubs, describes *Ain-El-Ghazal* as 'la première tentative de faire du cinéma spécifiquement tunisien' ['the first attempt to make specifically Tunisian cinema'] (1959: 1). In September 1965, Omar Khlifi devoted an article to Samama in *Mağallāi al-masraḥ wa al-sinimā* (6–8).

⁴¹ Tahar Cheriaa, 'Cinéma et culture en Tunisie', Paris, 11 October 1963. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report to the second Beirut roundtable on Arab cinema and culture from 28 to 30 October 1963.

⁴² 'He knew neither success nor progeny'; 'the failure and the stagnation of this moving and admirable stunted effort'.

rediscover, that it becomes possible to truly approach Albert Samama as an ‘homme-relais’ [‘relay man’].⁴³ Mediation does not play out here on the level of technological transmission, but in representation: one fine day in 1911, a ‘local lad’ left for Tripolitania in search of a scoop (consciously or unconsciously?) to film Muslims committed to resistance not as extras of a story that would unfold without them, but as political protagonists on the world stage.

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⁴³ Bendana’s expression (1992: 70) was used to designate Tunisian intellectuals, with a dual culture, who made the link between the French and Tunisian cultural circles.

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