

The oasis disrooted: the transformation of a social system

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Towards a modern oasis?

“On dit que les gens ne veulent plus travailler dans l’agriculture mais ce n’est pas vrai. C’est à cause du modernisme.” In the oases around Gabès - Chenini, Chatt Essalem and Ghannouch - in the south of Tunisia, local small farmers are experiencing the consequences of the continuing marginalisation of their region. The policy of modernisation and neoliberalisation has highlighted problems such as the pollution of the surrounding industries and access to water. The systematic focus on export in the Tunisian agricultural policy has made the position of small farmers even more precarious.

These issues have not only seriously damaged the trust in government, but have also had a real impact on the social fabric of the oasis. In particular, the traditional way of farming was accompanied by a social system based on the family. The decline of the oasis also meant the disintegration of this family context. The individualisation of small-scale agriculture is one aspect of this. In this article we focus on the personal stories of the farmers we have met; how did they perceive the metamorphoses of their oasis and what consequences did they experience as a result?

(Figure 1)

The traditional oasis: a true family business

Until the late 1980s, the entire family was integrated into the oasis. There was enough income from small-scale agriculture to meet the families' needs. In the oasis of the past, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, aunts and uncles were engaged in the whole process from sowing and growing to harvesting. There was an equal division of labour between men and women. In addition, one plot of one family was actively and collectively worked by not only the family itself, but also by other family members or neighbours in the oasis.

For people who grew up in this environment but left afterwards, the oasis is still close to their hearts, even if it is only a memory of something that is no longer there. Messouda, a farmer who

spent her whole life in the Chenini oasis, but eventually moved to the city, explains it clearly: "Before the 1980s, our whole situation was better. It was easier for small farmers to survive and the oasis was self-sufficient for the whole family that lived there."

There was a balanced oasis system: a three-storey oasis, with palm trees (the highest level), pomegranate and other fruit trees (the middle level), and the vegetable fields that were constantly supplied with water through natural irrigation. But life in the oasis was not separated from the sea or the steppe, farmers were often also fishermen and cattle farmers in the steppe (*terre tribale*¹).

Background: the eternal urge to modernise

With Tunisia's independence in 1956, this system largely starts to disintegrate. Tunisia as a developing state strives for economic development and progress, and the state itself plays a prominent role in it. *Terre tribale* in some parts of the steppe around Gabès – previously free to use by small farmers - was nationalised by the state, heavy industry came under the control of the state and enormous efforts are made to industrialise and intensify agriculture. Since the 1970s, economic policy has focused on exports and attracting foreign capital. The increase in scale of agriculture was accompanied by the development of large agribusinesses at the expense of small-scale agriculture in the oasis.

In '72, the state factory *Groupe Chimique Tunisien* (GCT) settled in Gabès. The arrival of Groupe Chimique created employment in a region that had been systematically marginalised since the colonial period, but at the same time brought about pollution of air and water, with enormous consequences for the yields of small agriculture in the oasis.

The neoliberal wind blowing into Tunisia at the end of the 1980s, continued the policy of modernising, mechanising and increasing the scale of the agricultural sector. The 1988 structural adjustment programme provided for further liberalisation of the agricultural sector. In addition, the programme also introduces a number of large-scale policy reforms in the field of irrigation. Local associations of the Ministry of Agriculture are beginning to manage access to water, as is the case for the Gabès oases. De facto this means that small-scale farmers have to pay for water to irrigate their parcels from then on, and over the years this price constantly

¹ The steppe around Gabès had the status of *les terres collective de tribut*: collective land on which specific tribes had the usufruct before the colonisation, but without individual property. This *terre tribale* concerned one third of the total arable land at the time of Tunisia's independence in 1956. More about this: [hyperlink article Juliette and Tim](#)

increases. In addition, a new irrigation system is being built in the oases, with concrete channels disrupting the entire natural irrigation process.

(Figure 2)

Since the 1990s, the Tunisian government has placed even greater emphasis on attracting large-scale agribusinesses that spread the use of imported, hybrid seeds. For these companies, in the hands of large investors, it is allowed to irrigate the steppe around Gabès and to establish, for example, gigantic plantations with olive trees. All these things are leading to an increasing marginalisation and dependence of the small farmers in the oasis. The entire oasis system consisting of the oases of Chenini, Chatt Essalem and Ghannouch, the sea and the steppe, is completely disrupted, which has consequences for the social fabric of the oasis itself.

From a family business to an individualised system

All these changes brought about by the modernisation project, left a deep mark on the structure of the oasis. This is also visible in the oases around Gabès: some of the parcels are deserted, others are worked on but do not seem to be part of an integrated family system. Sometimes hidden behind self-made hedges - in order to protect the plots - usually older men work tirelessly. They are often the only ones left of their families in the oasis.

(Figure 3)

We talk with the cheerful Abdelhamid, 64 years old, in Chatt Essalem who, as a small-scale farmer, saw the situation in the oasis changing over the years. He - like many other farmers in the oases around Gabès - now works the field on his own. Previously, the family had sown and harvested collectively - aiming at self-sufficiency - and the rest of the family lived in the oasis itself, he says. Especially water is a big problem for the farmers here because the regional industry exploits the underground water sources (too) intensively. Moreover, the pollution of the surrounding factory - the Groupe Chimique - plays a major role in the degradation of the oasis as an agricultural area. Activities such as the harvesting of fruit and vegetables or the production of *legmi*² (from palm trees) on agricultural land no longer yield enough money to survive. The idea of modernisation, which emphasises on export, also affects the farmers in the oasis, with the presence of competing agribusinesses increasingly encouraging small farmers to sell their crops on a larger scale instead of offering them on the local market or consuming them

² A sweet drink based on palm juice, popular in southern Tunisia

for their own needs. But farmers like Abdelhamid feel that the government does not support them, thus many leave small farming.

Under pressure to adapt to these changes, the *paysans/paysannes* in the oasis are looking for all kinds of techniques to make the land as profitable as possible or are looking for alternatives to provide for themselves and the family. Large family plots are usually divided between different family members, but often the owners of the land (usually the father) stay behind and family members look for a full-time or part-time job outside the oasis. Sometimes the owners themselves do not live in the oasis, but move to the city or abroad. Not all small farmers in the oases around Gabès still own land: Abdelhamid, for example, rents his plot from a large investor who does have the capital to buy land. In general, the practice of agriculture within the oasis has evolved from a family practice to an individualised practice.

Away from the family system, to the opportunities in the city

With an intensification of industrialisation (stimulated by the activities of Groupe Chimique) around Gabès, urbanisation also increased in the region. Oases such as Chatt Essalem and parts of Chenini are becoming more and more intertwined with the city of Gabès, and even seem to be part of it. It is no coincidence then that young people, in particular, come to the city from the oasis. Chased away from the oasis by these difficult agricultural conditions, they try to build a different life here. Many fathers who still cultivate farmland in the oasis realise that their children are forced to look for other opportunities. Nevertheless, some farmers still have the idea that young people are no longer interested in agriculture because they don't want to do the "dirty work of the oasis".

(Figure 4)

In Chenini we meet Mejdi, a young man of 24, who tells a different side of the story. He still regularly helps his uncle on the field and if he could, he would prefer to work in the oasis. Many young people of his age go to the city of Gabès or looking to study in Sousse or Tunis. They still regularly help with work in the fields, but during holidays or at the weekend, in addition to their permanent job or study. Young people like Mehdi no longer have a place in the family system within the oasis, but still make their way into today's individualised agricultural system.

"If I didn't have my permanent job, I would never be able to help in the oasis", Mejdî tells us. He himself works for the GDA (Groupe Développement d'Agriculture³) and is therefore lucky. A job with the GDA or even the Groupe Chimique sounds like music to the ears of young people from the oasis. First and foremost: there is the guarantee of a better salary. Moreover, the public sector often offers a better form of social protection than the private sector.

Mejdî realises that moving to the city, to work or study, is not always the solution for the youth in the oases. Youth unemployment in Tunisia is sky-high (around 30%) and affects mainly the marginalised regions in the south of the country such as Gabès. Young people who start their studies, therefore have no guarantee of employment, especially in the public sector, which often offers more security.

The growing demand for day laborers

As many family members leave the oasis to work and agricultural land is becoming increasingly difficult to cultivate, small local farmers are not always able to do the work on their own. Although there are still various forms of solidarity between families and within families, these are not sufficient to compensate for the structural labour shortage. In the oasis of Chenini, Chatt Essalam and Ghannouch the small farmers feel compelled to hire day labourers (wage workers) to work their fields. This is essentially cheaper than hiring the family. According to the small farmers we spoke to, their wage workers received between 12 and 25 dinars (3.5 to 7 euros) per day; a difference with large agricultural companies in the region that often pay their day labourers less (rather around 12 dinars per day).

(Figure 5)

During one of our field visits we met the 26-year-old Mohammed. He works as a day labourer for a buyer. Many small farmers in the oases around Gabès are working nowadays with a buyer. This is a relatively new phenomenon. Because of the individualisation of small-scale agriculture, it is often difficult for the farmer to deal with all the different processes of agriculture (production, distribution, sales, etc.). Thanks to the buyers, the farmer only plants crops such as lettuce, while the former often buys these crops before the actual harvest.

In this way, the production process is split up: buyers themselves take day labourers such as Mohammed with them to collect the harvest and sell it afterwards. It is a job opportunity for

³ At the end of the 1990s, Tunisia restructured its rural institutions by decentralising and further liberalising its agricultural policy. Local organisations, the Groupe Développement d'Agriculture, are also responsible for the protection of natural resources in cooperation with national agricultural institutions and international organisations such as the World Bank

young people who do not have the money to invest in a piece of land in the oasis. "But we mustn't forget," says Mohammed, "that the buyer receives the largest part of the income." The farmer in the oasis, the actual owner of the land, only receives a small percentage of the yield, while the day labourers work on a low wage that does not offer them the necessary security.

The feminisation of agriculture: women as wage earners

Women make up a large part of these day labourers. Small farmers or buyers choose to employ women. Many do this based on the assumption that they work harder than men. Because, from this point of view, they are often paid fewer hours for the same turnover, these female day labourers become a form of cheap labour. Even cheaper than their male colleagues. In addition, some farmers or buyers simply pay less to female day labourers than to men, even though they do the same work and work for the same length of time. The use of female workers has become a global trend in the agriculture around Gabès. It is also linked to the fact that young men in Gabès tend to look for jobs in the industrial sector or in tourism.

Women thus play an increasingly important role in the agricultural sector as day labourers, as well as in the large agricultural companies that influence the agricultural structure within the oasis. When we talk to the owner of an agribusiness in the steppe around Gabès, it becomes clear what logic the large agricultural companies apply in appointing women to the plantations. Apart from the occasional tea breaks, they work hard all day long in the vast fields full of olive and peach trees.

Moreover, the owner can pay them less and they receive no social security. The dominance of women in employment in the agricultural sector now also takes place in the traditional oases of Gabès. These female wage workers sometimes do not even come from the region around Gabès, Messouda notes.

We met Messouda during one of our visits in the oasis of Chenini. She has worked as a *paysanne* in the oasis all her life. But over the years, she and her family had to look for other job opportunities and part of the Chenini oasis has also undergone a metamorphosis. The *Association de Sauvegarde de l'Oasis de Chenini* turned part of the oasis into a protected eco-tourism zone (Ras El Oued) to ensure the sustainable development of the oasis. Today, Messouda works as a cook in this protected area and has thus been able to maintain her presence in the oasis.

Le Vieux Sage and the paysanne in the margins of the oasis

The role of the man in the oasis has also changed over the years of modernisation. The man had traditionally the role of "*vieux sage*", which both distributed the revenue of agriculture among the family members and resolved conflicts over land or water. The fact that it has always been fathers and grandfathers who "*font la justice et pas la police*" and we met many peasants who expressed "*ce qui se passe à l'oasis, reste à l'oasis*", is an indication of the mistrust towards government institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture and the police. This mistrust still prevails today and is central to the story of the small farmer.

This is almost the only role that has remained intact in the oases around Gabès. Now that older men like Abdelhamid continue to work alone, their role as a *vieux sage* is actually further confirmed. The focus on export as part of the modernisation and neoliberalisation project that has infiltrated the oasis, has brought about the marketing of social relationships. The man does not only pay wages to external workers who come to work on his land, but also manages the distribution of income if family members still help - and this is no longer based on solidarity.

(Figure 6)

The same goes for Mustafa, a farmer in Ghannouch, who still works the field together with his wife. She has never been able to enjoy the income directly; everything goes through her husband or her brothers, she tells us. Moreover, she also struggles with the consequences of the fragmentation of the land: both her husband and her six brothers own a piece of land and she works on both plots. When her father died, his land was divided; she herself did not get a piece of land. The progressive *Code du statut personnel* (in 1956) of the first president Habib Bourguiba of independent Tunisia, established – for a large part - the equal rights of men and women following the modernisation discourse. However, these equal rights did not incorporate inheritance laws. These are still based on Islamic traditions.

Thus, there is a form of gender inequality in the process of disintegration of the oases around Gabès. Traditionally, women play a central role in agricultural processes such as selecting the best plants for seed production, as well as in conflict mediation in support of *le vieux sage*. Now that the equal division of labour between men and women has disappeared, some families from Chenini and Chatt Essalem tell us that women are more likely be activated in the household. In Ghannouch we meet women like Mustafa's wife, who still work the field together with their husbands or fathers, but are more "supervised" by *le vieux sage*. It is also often women who are

pushed away from the oasis system, and thus make up the majority of the low-paid seasonal workers both in large agribusinesses and in smaller agricultural plots in the oasis.

Without a doubt there are also women who do own a plot of land in the oasis and who are accomplished *paysannes*. In the Chenini oasis, the aforementioned *Association de Sauvegarde de l'Oase de Chenini* is working on the protection of the oasis. This ranges from water issues and pollution to support in the use of local seeds⁴. ASOC actively involves women in their organisation and thus gives them a place in their projects within the oasis. In this way, the social roles of women can be partially protected. Nevertheless, many farmers feel that ASOC does not sufficiently involve them or cannot bring about effective changes. As a result, the potential mobilisation or protection of the traditional social structure is partially lost.

System change from self-sufficiency to export orientation

By constantly increasing the costs for the traditional and small agricultural sector as opposed to the support given to large farms, farmers in the oases around Gabès feel that the state is not listening to them. As we have shown, this also has a real impact on the social structure of the oasis. It is becoming increasingly disintegrated, with older men - as often the only remaining family members - playing a more important role in the redistribution of resources. The global tendency of young people leaving agriculture to look for a job in the city and women who are mainly employed as cheap labour in the agricultural sector, can also be found in the oases of Gabès. At the same time, we see that certain processes that are rather associated with the large agro-industry, such as day labourers and investors, also penetrate the more traditional sector in the oasis and give it a different face.

It is important to see this in the context of Tunisia's modernisation and neoliberalisation. Agricultural policy has structurally concentrated on the export of goods and has lost sight of the small farmer. The oasis, which is at the heart of farming and family life, could hardly count on the support of the government. This has had far-reaching consequences, especially since the 1980s. Whereas previously the state still provided employment after independence, with the state-led modernisation project of the first president Habib Bourguiba, neoliberalisation ended precisely this particular social contract.

According to many farmers, the fact that the 2011 Tunisian Revolution is presented as a radical break with Ben Ali's authoritarianism in exchange for political freedom has no bearing on them.

⁴ Hyperlink article Myrah and Kobe

Small farmers in the oasis of Gabès feel themselves in the grip of the politics of an export-oriented modernisation and the systematic marginalisation of the region. Here and there however, the revolution did bring freedom and more space for organisations such as ASOC. In this way, the revolution indirectly gives the farmers associated with these organisations a larger voice. But many other farmers in the oases of Chenini, Chatt Essalem and Ghannouch feel that these organisations cannot offer them sufficient certainties, and moreover: "*ils ne remplacent pas l'état*".

List of figures

Figure 1: the oasis of Chatt Essalem is within walking distance of one of the polluting industrial sites around Gabès, the Chimique Tunisien Group.



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Figure 2: the three oases, Chenini, Chatt Essalem and Ghannouch, around the city of Gabès, between the steppe and the sea, and the Groupe Chimique.



Figure 3: the small-scale farmer Abdelhamid cultivated his rented plot now only further



Figure 4: the 24-year-old Mejdi, belongs to the younger generation that is now looking for a job outside the agricultural sector.



Figure 5: Mohammed, a day labourer at a buyer who collects the harvest in the oasis of Chenini.



Figure 6: Mustafa's wife works on both her husband's and her brothers' plots, but sees a gender difference in terms of income distribution.



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