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Female Agency and Colonial Repression: Memory and Archives in Tunisia

MECAM Papers | Number 10 | January 8, 2025 | <https://dx.doi.org/10.25673/117660> | ISSN: 2751-6474

Reflecting on the role of women under colonialism crucially contributes to debates on how to write the history thereof in contemporary Tunisia. Based on a corpus of original archives relating to French repression of women designated “rebels,” it is shown how a focus on women’s agency makes it possible to write the history of colonisation differently and to cast issues of memory in a new light.

- Proposed is a methodology for analysing colonialism and its mechanisms of repression and intrusion into bodies and society. This involves constructing a typology of regimes of female agency in the colonial context, from direct involvement in resistance movements to engagement via male relatives.
- Through a series of interviews based on the reactions of contemporary actors to these archives, also presented is a typology of regimes of memory. The latter is defined as the ways in which mechanisms of remembrance and interpretations of past events influence present-day social, gender, and political identities.
- Advocated herewith is a twofold focus on micro-level dynamics: archival material should be analysed in connection with the day-to-day mechanisms of colonial repression. An additional layer of temporality comes in through identifying the inner workings of the memory of oppression and resistance in contemporary societies.

CONTEXT

Laying the foundations for deciphering colonialism’s contemporary inertia, with its mechanisms continuing to broadly structure relations with the region, is key. European colonialism traumatically shaped both local societies and the categories typically used for their study. Deconstructing the latter and the dominant narratives inherited from colonialism in rejecting their uncritical use is vital for the present.



FEMALE AGENCY AS A CHALLENGE TO COLONIAL AND PATRIARCHAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

On 5 February 1916 in Tataouine, southern Tunisia, the landed property of various people accused of rebellion by the colonial system of repression was put up for public auction on the town market. Among the victims of this violent act of eviction were several women, including Mariem and Mabrouka Ben A. as well as Aicha and Mariem K., Rim Bent K., and Regaia Bent A. They were accused of being, in colonial terminology, “rebels” (ANT, series A, box 208TER). The proceedings followed military crackdowns and an investigation by the French army: “The sector battalion commander proposed that a seizure be made [...]. The census of rebel property revealed that the above-mentioned woman, who had fled to Tripolitania with her husband, owned a certain number of buildings. It seems necessary not to leave her the property.” Let us now seek to follow both the fate of these rebel women and the present memory of their struggles.

For a long time, historians neglected or even denied the agency of women in colonial contexts. Faced with the inertia of both Eurocentric and masculinist readings of history, since the 1990s academic studies devoted to women’s capacity to act, to be conscious and autonomous in society, and to actively influence collective destinies have gradually proliferated. This movement has developed on the basis of both feminist theories and a philosophy of challenging paradigms of domination and dominant paradigms. Put forwards have been alternative narratives, methods, and concepts, ones above all powerfully challenging the very visions of societies of the past as well as preconceptions about them in the constant reshaping of the present. The notion of “agency,” the definition of which sums up all these elements, has been at the heart of such approaches (Haicault 2012). It has sometimes been combined with a desire to pay attention not only to the fate but also to the capacity for action of women from social backgrounds that were not necessarily esteemed ones. These debates have been guided by a critical discussion of the tendency to consider it impossible to capture the historical voices and actions of subaltern women (Spivak 2004). Historiography has thus focused on ways of restoring agency to people who were sometimes paradoxically dispossessed of it by the very attention paid to subaltern forms thereof (Navarro Tejero 2004). It has been argued, accordingly, that subaltern women not only had a voice but also a capacity for action and an activated potential for writing history (Davidson and Roach Pierson 2001).

For those who inscribe the past, this kind of approach raises the question of sources, since the very conditions behind the negation of female agency have meant that traces of it are rare amid the abundance of archival sources showing male domination and thus reinforcing the image of it in different layers of projected futures (Lafi 2020). For a historian, then, the task is twofold: to reflect on, first, possible traces of agency in the past in order to flush out, second, the inertia in futures cast on the basis of women’s alleged absence. In the case of the Arab world (Ghabrial 2016; Moghadam 2010), but also of the Ottoman Empire in general (Faroqhi 2023), the favoured approach has been to shift perspective, revise chronologies, and promote an analytical view that is attentive to women’s historical capacity for action. This has developed in contrast with the colonial and/or Orientalist outlooks often confining women to a twin submission: to the local patriarchal order and to the colonial order, respectively. In this way, it has been possible to reflect on the nature of colonial domination. Scholars have considered the vectors helping these modalities of domination endure in postcolonial settings, defined as the perpetuation of paradigms inherited from earlier times (Prakash 1994; Sadiqi 2008; Sibeud 2004). Contemporary approaches also make it possible to pay attention to the agency of the colonised (Edwards 2017) and thus to reconnect the history of the age of empire with the substance of impacted societies (Cooper 1994).

WRITING FEMINIST HISTORY HELPS DECOLONISE KNOWLEDGE

With this approach in mind, I studied a collection held by the National Archives of Tunisia (ANT, Series A, Boxes 187 to 208). These are the archives of the French military crackdown on resistance to colonisation in the south of this Ottoman province, which was seized by the European country in 1881 after trying for several decades to control it amid competition between the colonial powers over extending their respective domains. As can be seen from the files devoted to the “rebels,” as they were called in the documents consulted, the victims of this violent and intrusive process were overwhelmingly men: fighters, political activists, those leading protest or resistance movements, those cultivating links with the Ottoman Empire, and those refusing the colonial procedures for taking control of the territory and subjugating its governing bodies. Among these victims of repression (killed in combat, imprisoned, executed, or exiled to Tripolitania/Istanbul in particular) were numerous women (20 to 25 per cent) too, ones whose identities and life paths can now be analysed thanks to the perverse precision of the colonial apparatus of repression. These women were prosecuted or persecuted in a number of ways, revealing a variety of agency configurations. Some faced retribution for being the wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters of resistance fighters. Far from confining them to a passive social role, this exposed these women to colonial repression, the actions of the police, and the so-called justice system, leading to their greater engagement as dissidents. This was the first type of agency, both in terms of women’s place in society and their reaction to colonial intrusion. In 1899/1900, Mabruka Bent K. was summoned to appear before the colonial courts in connection with her brother’s insurgency endeavours in the Matmata region (ANT, series A, box 187ter, file 207). The same applied to Mansoura Bent A. and Rima Bent B. in relation to the dissident activities of their sons and brothers.

Others were hunted down for their own actions, revealing women’s significant and active participation in the resistance movement. This illustrates the existence of a second type of agency here. The case of Fatma Bent M. Bent S., from the Ouled Ouezzan tribe, falls into this category, as created by the apparatus of repression (ANT, series A, box 208ter, files 233, 234). Convicted of “rebellion” in 1915 in the Tataouine region, all her properties were seized and auctioned off. Those of her heirs and co-owners were also expropriated, demonstrating how punishment was collective in nature and came with a total disregard for the law, aiming at evicting those affected and their descendants from their own futures. The colonial authorities also explored the possibility of expropriating the endowments (*habous*) associated with the punished rebel. In targeting forms of collective property such as agricultural pastures, shops, and amenities, the colonial apparatus strengthened its hold on the land through the repression it meted out to rebels by means of a distorted justice system. The structures of society were targeted as much as its territoriality. Certain archives clearly express the aims behind this strategy of expropriation. In the words of Major Miquel, head of the Remada Bir Kecira outpost: “The census of rebel property revealed that many women who had fled to Tripolitania also owned property or shares in property of varying sizes. It seems necessary not to let them own the property, however reluctant we may be to prosecute women” (ANT, series A, box 208ter, file 1998).

Underlying these two outlined forms of agency, the archives reveal a further one to exist relating to the position of women in southern Tunisian society at the turn of the twentieth century. If property, shops, and land were confiscated from rebel women by the colonial administration, it had to be because they owned them in the first place. The individual records also sometimes give details of how these properties were maintained by women as farmers, shopkeepers, or managers. The archives thus open up a third type of agency: that of a daily life in which women were not necessarily confined to a passive social role under the circumstance of male domination. An important part of colonial repression – further to attacking the bodily dimension through the deprivation of liberty, torture, forced flight,

and degradation of a person's social image – therefore consisted of undermining the very foundations of women's place in society through expropriation and spoliation.

Among the victims here were Khalifa Ben M. and her sisters Meriem and Aicha in Tataouine in 1915, against whom an expropriation document (*ma'rūḍ*) was issued by the colonial system of "justice." "These lands cover a total area of around 150,000 square metres [with] three undivided palm trees" (ANT, series A, box 208ter, file 2005). The owner, Messaouda Bent M., would be the victim of the same procedures in 1916 (ANT, series A, box 208ter, file 1997). This means of rule went hand in hand with conscious strategies for organising famine, as Major Miquel attested to: "Since we will be closing off Tunisian territory to them, the Ouezzen tribe will be reduced to starvation and, as long as they have weapons, they will try to oppose the implementation of our plans. In order for the sequestration not to be useless, we will have to provide the armed forces necessary for its application" (ANT series A, box files 233 and 234). Expropriation, eviction, expulsion, and military operations were all closely interlinked aspects of the colonial regime.

The fate of these rebel women thus provides decisive elements for the qualification of female agency in resistance to colonisation and its different registers of intervention. Writing the past from this angle not only makes it possible, in line with other efforts to decolonise historical narratives through women's accounts (Anagol 2008), to discuss the chronologies of the colonial takeover by looking at the long history of resistance. The archival files under study here display strong continuities from 1830, in connection with the networks of resistance to French colonisation of the Ottoman province of Algeria, through the First World War's immediate aftermath at least. Following on from seminal studies on the role of women in Tunisian history (Chater 1975; Said Cherni 1987; Larguèche 2000), this also enables us to link this chronology to the traditional one on the birth of the national movement: there was no time period without some form of resistance to colonial rule, and in each phase of it women played a vital role. This also makes it possible to contextualise and discuss the genesis of gender categories – and thus to propose an alternative reading – based on a twin re-evaluation: of the place of women in society and of women in the resistance movement, respectively.

REBEL WOMEN'S RESISTANCE: DIFFERENT REGIMES OF MEMORY

This research is also linked to reflections on contemporary uses of history (Glassberg 1996), as well as on pathways towards memory-building. Examining what the archives have to say on women rebels enabled me to establish a dialogue on other scales, as involving new temporalities and different kinds of interactions with society. The first dimension encompasses the academic world, the definition of gender studies, and discussions on the study of women's roles in the national movement. Bringing these investigations of the agency of women rebels at the turn of the twentieth century into academic debates has indeed raised questions about how to write women's history, the history of gender categories, as well as how to best handle "agency" as a concept. This approach also invites revision of the Tunisian national movement's historical framing. Separating out the chronology of the emergence of political organisations resisting colonial rule from that of the early phases of the latter's consolidation implies the occurrence of an intermediate phase of relative stability. On the basis of the present study, however, I argue that such an era never existed. Studying women's trajectories in this reunited chronology also makes it possible to insist on the fact that female agency was inherent to the colonised society, and not simply the product of the supposedly less patriarchal coloniser's eventual influence. In this way, the presentation and analysis of these archives has contributed to the collective writing of an alternative narrative that is decolonised and open to a renewed conception of gender identity.

The second dimension relates to the memory in Tunisian society of women's resistance. The echoes of this research involved time frames sometimes different from those referred to in the archives consulted. Through the intermediary of the examined files, the anonymous female figures integral to resisting colonial rule again have a name and can thus be actively socially situated. During my interviews with women and men in present-day Tunisia, those spoken with reflected on other phases of the resistance movement – as more directly anchored in family memory. Included here were recollections of the Second World War as well as of the broader period of struggle for independence between the 1930s and 1950s. Such memories also covered the founding moments of an independent Tunisia (1956) through the 1970s (Ben Said Cherni 1987). Revisiting national narratives through the micro-history of families (Jrad 2015) and via the evocation of familiar but often downplayed female trajectories thus enabled me, on the basis of numerous such interviews, to grasp both the vitality but also sometimes the erasure of a memory of female agency. The research had a stimulating effect on the expression of this memory, in return itself benefitting greatly from the strength embodied by the various persons I was able to converse with.

Lastly, this research was an opportunity to reflect on the anthropology of southern Tunisia thanks to immersive fieldwork. The echo could be more directly linked to the files on rebel women, through the family links suggested by certain names found in those archives. Interviews in this context revealed the vitality of a local memory culture maintained both within families and within discussion groups. During the interviews, I showed archival material illustrating facts that were generally already known to contemporary members of local communities. I realised, furthermore, the importance of the local memory of strong women. I also came to see the centrality of civic places of remembrance in local communities, where erudite men and women cultivate narratives of resistance and present them to visitors and the younger generations alike. This approach is not just oral: it also includes writing the history of colonisation (Boulifa 2006) and publishing original sources on its modalities of occupation (Boulifa 2023).

In Tataouine, for example, in one of these places of knowledge and memory, the dialogue around the files relating to rebel women prompted the uncovering of other archives and documents preserved locally, in particular those of family origin. This led to discussion along the lines of a local micro-history of memory and, at the same time, to genuine investigation of the actors perpetrating colonial violence. One of the central tools in this quest for truth was a photograph (probably from the early twentieth century) of young women huddled at the base of a wall, terrorised by the imposing figure of a male colonial authority. The photograph exposes the gendered dimension of domination through the scenography of the depicted bodies. In this way, memory is both a pedagogy of female agency and a living history, linking an investigation into the past with a quest for justice in the future. It can be compared with the practices, in the Algerian context, of women transmitting an alternative memory of resistance, the aim of which is also to educate for the future in the face of the performativity in society of narratives downplaying this dimension.

This form of memory is itself performative, occurring in the context of external influences aiming to reinterpret the intimate and collective history of these societies via a patriarchal lens. In the course of my anthropological research into the reception of archival material on rebel women's activities in southern Tunisia, various interviewees, both male and female, reconnected women's past actions with a contemporary affirmation of gender identity. These different modes of remembering demonstrate the centrality of local transmission in the perception of women's agency, standing in contrast with the ways in which history is used. The study underlines, then, the need to pay attention to the active and living memory of women's role in history (McEwan 1993; Mtenje 2024; Schraut and Paletschek 2008).

MEMORY, PRESENT DISPARITIES, AND JUSTICE

Linking the sphere of the intimate with that of the collective, namely by using archives revealing both the vectors and actors of oppression as well as individual life trajectories, renders a public history of feminine agency possible. This stimulates contact between memory and contemporary assertions of a feminist and anti-colonial stance. Involved here is not only a process of deciphering the tragic inertia and contemporary resurgence of colonialism, but also a focus on women's capacity to act. Evoking memories of anti-colonial resistance in Tunisia, interview partners also moved forwards in time in systematically referring to present-day Palestine, demonstrating therewith their shared awareness of the long history of resistance to oppression via a historicised deciphering of the mechanisms of colonisation. Different registers of memory converge therewith, continuing the former struggle in a transnational demand for justice in the here and now.

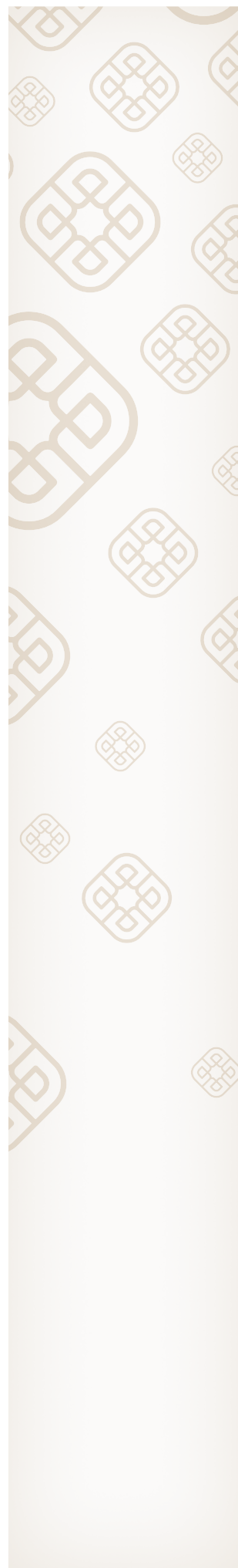
SOURCES

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