

## Great home-spectations

“Houses-to-be”, marginality, and social expectations in Southern Tunisia

**Stefano PONTIGGIA**

Politecnico di Milano

---

**ABSTRACT:** In the mining town of Redeyef (south-western Tunisia), “modern” homes and building techniques bear the signs of a history of marginalization, inequality, and lack of resources. Here, power produced specific mode of living and territorial organization. The article will describe three different homes: the little studio I lived in between 2014 and 2015 during my fieldwork research, the “mansion” that a young man living in Redeyef had been erecting for himself, and the house a man erected for his son. These examples will help to shed light on the extent to which the colonial past, the political economy of independent Tunisia, and the current lack of any urban planning interweave to create the conditions of a disadvantaged and precarious life, especially for the young men, who build their houses to accomplish social expectations about adulthood. Despite the lack of resources, the people of Redeyef try to make their dwellings the symbol of a (hoped, even though almost impossible) social acceptance.

**KEYWORDS:** HOUSES; MARGINALITY; ADULTHOOD; MASCULINITY; TUNISIA.

---

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © Stefano Pontiggia

*Great home-spectations: “Houses-to-be”, marginality, and social expectations in Southern Tunisia*

2021 | ANUAC. VOL. 10, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2021: 177-195.

ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-4548



### *Introduction: Houses-to-be as ethnographic objects*

This article<sup>1</sup> stems from the notes collected during a field research conducted between 2014 and 2015 in Redeyef, a mining town in the Gafsa governorate (southwestern Tunisia)<sup>2</sup>, and will illustrate two houses I visited, and one in which I lived, in order to trace the links among individual experience, the meaning locally assigned to households, and wider historical and political dimensions<sup>3</sup>. More specifically, I will describe what I call home-spectations, that is, the expectations of success and social integration that locals, especially young men, place on home ownership. As Arjun Appadurai (2000) rightly states, houses are both universal aspects of every society and intimate *loci* of societal and cultural organizations. In the case I present here, the expectations stemming from homes revolve around local ideas of masculinity and adulthood; however, as the article will show, these are heavily influenced by the historical, economic, and political conditions that shaped the mining basin in which Redeyef is located.

Houses, says Catherine Allerton (2013), take their meaning from the liveliness that characterizes them, which in turn depends on the people who fill them with those sounds, gestures and objects that make homes what they are. I always remember with pleasure my visits to the dwellings of people with whom I had an ethnographic relationship. One, in particular, often comes to my mind when I think back to Redeyef. It is the house where Tarek<sup>4</sup>, a man of about thirty-five years, invited me one evening of the month of Ramadan to celebrate Iftar, the ritual breaking of fasting<sup>5</sup>. Behind the gate opened a large courtyard of at least fifty feet by twenty-five, closed by a house on the left and other buildings on the other side. A man was lying on a mattress; in front of him, on a carpet, a coffee table and a bottle of water waiting to be drunk. He was Tarek's father, a roundish man in his sixties with white moustache and a thin layer of beard. He was lying on his right side and asked his son to let me sit on the carpet to have a talk with me.

---

1. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their precious comments and insights.

2. The city is located 45 miles south of the governorate capital city, Gafsa. Its population of about thirty thousand people has a peculiar demographic, since, at the time of my research, most part of the cohort of those between 28- and 35-year-old had left the city looking for employment on the coast or in Europe.

3. The research was conducted during the PhD program in Humanities and Social Studies at the University of Ferrara.

4. All personal names in the article are fictional.

5. Field notes, Redeyef, June 2, 2014.

Tarek let me enter the room dedicated to the guests, furnished with two white sofas, a rug, a low table and some shelves hanging on the wall. We ate as soon as the mosques began to sing, beginning with dates accompanied by fermented milk. There were also *brik*, two salads, a spicy soup, a *marqa* of peas, fruit, homemade bread, and a chocolate mousse to top it all off. I remember looking through the open door; on the wall of the small square building in front of me, the light was becoming more and more pink, purple, and finally orange due to the public lighting. The hum of the television was only interrupted by the moans of the three sheep living in the courtyard.

These memories are very different from those I have when I think back to the flat I used to live: in those empty rooms, to keep me company were only the echoing barking of stray dogs and the mechanical noise of the phosphate washing center not far away. The same metallic noise of the gates gave me different sensations: while those of the houses where I was invited made me feel the warmth of the extended family, the one that locked me inside my apartment only reminded me of my loneliness.

Experiencing homes helps to grasp certain aspects of how people structure their lives according to gender relations (Bourdieu 1970), family ties, or religious beliefs. However, there are other constructions that can tell us more about local history and the links between people, territories, and political economy. These are what I call “houses-to-be”: unfinished, bare, or empty buildings (like the apartment where I lived for months) that punctuate the urban spaces of many cities in the Global South. These structures, which I will describe in the article, are able to shed light not only on the links between individual trajectories, kinship, and the state (Carsten 2018), but also on wider social and political configurations that heavily influence the present condition and the expectations of people.

“Houses-to-be” are narrative objects because they can tell the story of the people involved in building and furnishing them, on the one the hand, and because they can allow historically deeper and geographically broader analyses of the cities or villages where these individuals live. In the case of Redeyef, they tell the story of how the city was founded and developed during and after the colonial phase, and how its structural fragility depends on state policies and transnational processes. Moreover, these incomplete houses tell of the obstacles that, in the present, are placed before the young males of the city in their attempt to acquire a public identity as adults. They are able, ultimately, to unravel the issue of marginality (in a social and material sense) that characterizes Redeyef and the entire region of the Gafsa mining basin.

In the course of the article, I will alternate the description of the houses with historical and ethnographic analyses of the dynamics that these houses allow me to address. I will then conclude with some considerations on the potentialities of “houses-to-be” as ethnographic objects while trying to grasp the links between individual trajectories and structural dimensions. Throughout my analysis, I will rely on field diaries, interviews conducted during the research, and a specific literature that will allow me to expand beyond the simple descriptive level.

### *A house near a canal*

Before descending to Redeyef for my research (Pontiggia 2021)<sup>6</sup>, I rented an apartment there thanks to some intermediaries I had met in the governorate capital, Gafsa. The lessor was Hajj Raouf, a man in his seventies and former employee at the local Gafsa Phosphates Company (GPC). At the time of my fieldwork, he had retired from his position and had been running a *taxiphone*<sup>7</sup> for a while. The small apartment was almost completely without furniture: it contained just a bed with metal frame, a carpet, a plastic chair, a table, and a coat hanger. The pillow was made of foam rubber. There was no cooking area in the kitchen, which would have forced me to eat outside for the duration of my stay.

The apartment was suffocantly hot during the summer and freezing during the winter at the point that I had decided to buy an electric heater at the local *souq*, the open-air market. The rooms were inhabited by flies, mosquitoes, and roaches. I still remember the expression on the face of Imed and Jahwer, two friends of mine, when I invited them to take a tour of the house. Accustomed to the large and well-stocked residences of their extended families, they were astonished at the sight of the poverty of the spaces in which I lived.

My apartment had been completed on the day that I settled in the city in March 2014; when I reached the place, the workers were making a few tweaks to the bathroom and the shower compartment. The apartment, located a few feet from a *oued*, a dry canal formerly used to bring water to the city, had been erected in a way that resembled the structure of a traditional Arab house; nevertheless, it had somehow been reshaped. A thirty-foot corridor ran beyond the iron door colored with a light blue painting; without a roof for half its length, the corridor seemed to serve the

---

6. The fieldwork started in February 2014 to conclude in December of the same year. I then had a further trip in June 2015.

7. A *Taxiphone* is a shop that hosts telephone booths.

function customarily attributed to the central courtyard. The bathroom, the kitchen, and two empty rooms opened to the right side of the corridor, while my bedroom was at the end. The left side was ten feet high and obscured me from the view of my neighbors. The floor was grit, and the tiles in the bathroom and the kitchen evoked Arab-Muslim decorative motifs. No windows looked outwards onto the street.

One day, I talked to Ali, one of Haj Raouf's sons, about the origin of the materials used to build houses in Redeyef. I discovered that almost everything was produced elsewhere. The azure paint used to decorate the walls came from Sfax, a city located on the coast. The empty bricks used to build the structure came from Tunis; the cement was from the *sahel*, the eastern littoral. The electric meters were Chinese. Only the sand and the tiles were made on site. Redeyef's growth depended on import of materials from the most industrialized regions of the country. the only economic activity in the city and the mining basin was linked to the phosphates extraction, which was not capable of employing all the men and women of working age.

My apartment was not there until five years before my arrival. It was part of a building erected on the foundations of a traditional house that was destroyed one night in late September 2009. In three hours, a heavy rain buried the city center with mud and caused the deaths of twenty-one people. The canals, full of rubbish and the soil moved upstream by the exploitation centers of the GPC<sup>8</sup>, brought the water to accumulate until it did flood downstream.

The memory of the disaster, immortalized in a video available on the YouTube platform<sup>9</sup>, is still fresh in the minds of the inhabitants. One morning, a few days after my arrival, I woke up early because I needed Ali, the son of Haj Raouf, and Adil, a man working on a building in front of my apartment, to help me in some work. As I left the covered area of the house, I was surprised to realize that the floor was wet. I reached Ali on the street wondering why there was silence instead of the usual noise produced by the workers. I asked him about Adil. "I believe he will not come today. He is afraid of rain", he told me. I looked around. Numerous dwellings were built behind the canal. On the opposite side, a ridge of land supported some homes which, in an area prone to frequent rains, would have fallen down at high speed.

---

8. After closing the subterranean mining tunnels, the Gafsa Phosphates Company started extracting phosphates in open-air caves called *Sièges*. The material is moved from the caves to the mining cities, where it is purified, washed, and stocked before being sent to the chemical industries on the coast.

9. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=za67I6X6yW8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za67I6X6yW8). Accessed on 24/11/2020.

That day I discussed the matter with Imed, a young man of about thirty years who worked at the Gafsa Phosphates Company. I told him that I heard about the flood and he confirmed that. It rained massively and, in the city center area, including the one where I live, the canal was filled with water, devastating all the second floors of the houses, and causing many victims. Returning home, I met two neighbors and received confirmation of the event. “Yes”, said one of them. “It was September 25, 2009, at five in the morning. People were sleeping, water came down and they died. Houses collapsed”. I thought that, given the structural fragility of most parts of the city, the rain could indeed be a frightening natural event. Furthermore, the disaster of 2009 was not the first occurring in the city. Another series of floods had already struck in the Fall of 1969 hitting the city and the country as well. The French geographer Jean Poncet argued that the cause should have been traced in a set of factors, including the desertification of the territory and the impact of the industrial development plans (Poncet 1970).

### *Structural fragility and dependance*

The apartment I rented, its position, and the material of which it was made are closely linked to local history and the relationships occurring among different regions of the country. An overview will help to shed light on the dynamics that shaped the city and the entire mining basin<sup>10</sup>.

There is a shared narrative about the birth and expansion of the mining cities, and Redeyef is no exception. It is a well-known story, based on some definite and constantly repeated narrative themes: the discovery of phosphates at the end of nineteenth century; the construction of the first mines and the arrival of French cadres; the participation of Algerian, Moroccan, and Libyan workers into the colonial enterprise; and the slow sedentarization and proletarianization of the local, seminomadic populations. The Gafsa Phosphates Company, a private enterprise born from the meeting of the French industrial bourgeoisie and the financial sector, was charged with the exploitation of the deposits.

The dual structure (King 2009) of the cities revolved around the exploitation center and the village that the GPC built for the European workers, on the one hand, and the few shacks destined to the North African workers, on the other hand; more often, the latter were created by the workers themselves. Much of the urban landscape was completely informal and without infrastructures; the effects of its confused and disorderly growth

---

10. The mining cities are four: Redeyef, Om Layares (also called Moularès), Metlaoui, and Mdhilla.

are still visible today in labyrinthine neighborhoods where houses cluster one on top of the other in narrow streets where getting lost is easy. The cities grew according to the rhythm of the mining industry and its labor needs, but also following a principle of hierarchy (Bahloul 1996; Waterson 1995) and segregation (Escallier 2006) aiming to secure what Partha Chatterjee called “the government of colonial difference” (Chatterjee 1993).

Nowadays, Redeyef still bears the sign of the past presence of different national groups within the city and their different building techniques. In 1975, the researcher Christian Zarka published a study on the city aiming to analyze the links between national groups and dwellings (Zarka 1975). He identified three types of homes and neighborhoods. Those types differed based on the shape of the housing, the materials used to build them, their disposition, and their link with processes of social reproduction.

The first example that he considered was that of the Libyan neighborhood, called *Trabelsiya* from the Arabic name of Tripoli. The “Tripolitan village” developed by reproducing the bonds of the patriarchal family in space and was therefore a cluster of “mother-houses” and their satellites.

The second type of housing was the so-called *soufi*, inhabited by the Algerian workers. Houses were generally built with stone and surmounted by domes and vaults that appeared from the street like semi-circles placed on the roofs. Stone helped the houses to remain fresh during summer and warm in the cold season.

Zarka then focused on the buildings created by what he called “the Bedouins,” the local populations. He described a movement that led from the first temporary dwellings (generally, tents) to houses made of poor elements such as sun-baked bricks. A central courtyard was the meeting place for the extended family. The local populations did not have traditions of construction, the reason why the techniques and materials did not meet any traditional imperative. As time passed, and the North African workers went back to their homeland now freed from the colonial rule, the intergenerational transmission of construction techniques arrested, forcing the inhabitants to find new expedients and different materials.

This process had started well before Zarka’s study and has been described by the French sociologist Roger Brunet (1958). He was particularly struck by the Arab neighborhoods. Those were located far from the production centers, weak in construction, and lacking in essential services. The homes of the natives were “infamous heaps of dried mud made up of one or two rooms and particularly poor furniture... Water is lacking” (Brunet 1958: 444, my translation).

However, the history of urban development alone cannot explain the state of degradation many of the houses experienced. To get a more precise idea of this process, we need to look at how, throughout their history, Redeyef and the mining cities have been integrated into a drainage economy that, since before the advent of the colonial domination (Mahjoub 1987), has made this area dependent on other regions of the country and the world.

Nevertheless, the Tunisian landscape, with its broad division between an industrialized coast open to trade and the inland areas oriented to agriculture or extractive activities, can be better understood if we look at the French domination and the postcolonial phase. As the researcher Nouredine Dogui (1995) states, the French capitalist penetration subjugated the region to the logic of colonial exploitation, which resulted in the specialization of the Tunisian Southwest in “primary” activities whose success depended on the needs of the metropolis. The colonial system engaged the mining basin in a relation of dependence, whose most evident manifestation was the submission of its economy to the pace of metropolitan capitalism. This relationship shaped the internal economic activity in function of an outward opening and disrupted a long-standing territorial organization based on a north/south axis (Belhedi 1994).

After independence, local economy remained oriented to the production of raw primary goods (especially phosphates) without any economic differentiation nor a real policy aiming to ameliorate the infrastructures of the basin. Tunisia’s peripheral role in the Mediterranean economic area (Ben Romdhane 1997) accentuated a national division of labor between an industrial and commercial coast and a south conceived as pure supplier of raw materials. This spatial polarization has certainly heightened during the last twenty years. The integration of the country into a neoliberal economy caused the exacerbation of these processes of regionalization and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005) which are the premises of any geography of unequal development. Such an economic form works not by favoring the “dual” territories on a principle of integration within the capitalist market, but by creating leopard-patch spaces of exclusion, where masses of workers are expelled from the capitalist economic circuits (Sanyal 2007).

Redeyef and the mining basin are an effective representation of this organization. Between 1962 and 2006, the share of public investment reserved for the coastal regions (Tunis, central-east, southeast) constantly fluctuated between 59% and 75% of the total. In most cases, the district of



Tunis<sup>11</sup> and the governorates of the central-east have alone received between 40% and 50% of the entire state budget dedicated to development. The Governorate of Gafsa received a significant share, around 10% of the total, only during the Fourth and Fifth Development Plans<sup>12</sup> in the years 1972-1982, when the most substantial investment occurred in the mining sector. In the preceding and following Plans, the quota of public funds destined to Gafsa remained stationary, vacillating between 3 and 5 percent (Bousnina 2012, 135-139).

The subdivision of the national territory into three areas with different investment priorities, carried out in the second half of the 1970s, had granted the Gafsa Governorate the status of priority regional development zone. Nevertheless, the distribution of the funds to public and private companies dramatically favored the coastal regions. According to the Tunisian geographer Hamadi Tizaoui, between 1994 and 2009, the Governorate of Gafsa received only 0.8% of the total industrial investment (Tizaoui 2013: 246).

This polarizing dynamic did not stop after the revolution. Since the revolution, the emerging ruling class has imagined a new form of territorial organization aiming to reorganize the national space in macro-regions that connect inland areas and the coast. Regional autonomy is now a principle expressly articulated in the new Constitution. However, investments in the less-favored regions have diminished rather than increasing, and this because of a series of factors, including political crises, the inexperience of the new governors, and the strict adherence to the rules established as an instrument to prevent corruption. Other causes have acted at the local level, primarily the weakness or absence of administration (Hibou 2015: 142-146).

The role of the state in Tunisian economy is therefore immediately evident. According to many Tunisian sociologists, geographers, and economists (see for example Belhedi 2012, Ben Romdhane 2011, and Gherib 2017), a chain of political choices has explicitly favored some regions to the detriment of others and attributed different roles to the coast and the inland. “Underdevelopment”, therefore, would be the result of shifting attention on the part of the state. Inland regions were involved mostly in agricultural

---

11. Although it is still mentioned in the sociological texts that I have studied, and despite the term being currently used to identify the urban area of the city capital, the district of Tunis no longer exists as an administrative unit. Created in 1974 as an entity regulating urban investment for transport, urban sanitation, and planning, it was dissolved in 1994.

12. Since the early 1960, Tunisian governments realized and implemented development plans for economic planning. Based on a three-year and then five-year period, this form of programming remained the same even after the riots of 2011.

development plans or internal migration logics, which benefited the coastal cities (Hermassi 2013). Southern and western territories were placed on the margins of any “modernizing” dynamic and attributed the role of supplying the internal labor market with under-specialized workforce.

A monoculture generally accompanied this underdevelopment; agriculture and the mining industry are still the only two productive activities of any importance. The long-standing submission of Redeyef and the mining basin to the logic of capitalist extraction has, thus, nourished an ongoing economic crisis that impeded any economic differentiation and blocked any project of amelioration of public services such as waste collection, canals maintenance, and environmental safety. Houses, and the flat I rented is no exception to it, are therefore affected by this long history of dispossession (Rousselin 2018), exploitation, and the shifting attention the state dedicated to the region.

### *A mansion on the hill and a rooster in the living room*

“I want to show you the house I’m building”, Imed told me one day in spring 2014<sup>13</sup>. We were sitting at a cafe near my apartment with nothing to do. I said yes, and we walked. We crossed the city westward until we reached the foot of a hill that was the highest point in the city. “I chose this place because, from up there, you can see the whole city”, he said, “you’ll see”. We ascended a ridge of dry soil under the sun until we reached the body of a building. Still without paint, the house appeared with the typical red of the bricks.

A short escalate terminated between two columns resembling classic architecture, as the mansion were the modern version of a Greek or Roman temple. After the entrance, from the left to the right, opened the bathroom and the kitchen, two bedrooms, and the living room. More precisely, I just could imagine the chambers. The house was unfinished, only the walls were there. Since the construction had started the previous year and had proceeded in hiccups, the fragile, empty bricks were already damaged, and some holes let the sunlight enter the house. I could see cockroaches and ants running on the wall and the “pavement”.

Imed told me he was saving money to go on working on the house. Despite his salary as a worker for the Gafsa Phosphate Company, which, with its five-to-six hundred *dinar* each month, is close to the national average salary, he did not have the possibility to build his house in a given time. When he had some money saved, he invested it advancing the work. When I

13. Field notes, Redeyef, April 11, 2014.

left Tunisia, ten months later, the mansion was in the same state as I visited it. I would have soon discovered that, in Redeyef as well as much of the Tunisian south, building a house can take years. A few days later, I would have visited a building in the same conditions thanks to a man very well known in the city.

They called him Lion; he was a fifty-eight-year-old man with long grayish hair on his shoulders and a white beard he often smoothed with his left hand while talking. He had an athletic body, having practiced many sports in his youth, and still had a great passion for the mountainous region near the city, the environment in which he felt most at home. He had a wife and six children. He had worked as a nurse for about thirty-eight years before retiring but was famous the most for his engagement during the clashes and the social movement occurred in 2008 (Allal 2010; Allal and Bennafla 2011; Mullin 2018).

One day in early June 2014, I went to his home in the district of Nezla al-Souafa to interview him about his experience as an activist<sup>14</sup>. He welcomed me into the house he was building for his son Jihed. The two buildings were next to each other, but the structure differed greatly. Lion's was a classic house with a central courtyard and numerous rooms, including the "public" one used to receive guests. The apartment he was building for Jihed, on the other hand, had a more modern appearance. When I entered, it was still a building site, the floor was not ready, and the sanitary facilities were still to be installed. Beyond the yellow-green iron gate, a small open space led to the building and perhaps, in the future, could have accommodated a few plants. Along a corridor of about three feet opened a room on the right, and the kitchen (still to be installed) on the left. Walking on, I entered the large hall, which, on one side, opened to a second room. In the hall, two dusty carpets, a bag with beer cans, a tray housing an aluminum teapot and two small glasses, a white plastic chair, a bench for body building exercises, a bottomless sheet metal bin and another topped by three large bricks, and a black rooster streaked with brown, which I found disturbing and seemed to stare at me all the time I spent there.

The Lion was helping his son build the house because, for someone in his thirties or so, work in Redeyef is very hard to find. After an industrial crisis in the 1980s, the GPC had laid off two-thirds of the workers and mechanized the phosphate extraction. As a result, the city's main source of labor had been greatly reduced. Yet, owning a house was highly important for a male who wanted to be recognized as adult man.

---

14. Field notes, Redeyef, June 10, 2014.

### *Houses, masculine adulthood, and social expectations*

The material aspect of homes helps us to understand not only the power relations existing between different regions of the country and the disadvantaged condition of Redeyef and the mining towns. It will also lead us to grasp the lives of the people who are building them as both individuals and members of a specific age group. The long work of building a house, as this section will show, is linked to local expectations about adulthood and masculinity. In Tunisia, and especially in the inner regions, the cultural meaning of adulthood is defined by marriage (Singerman 2007), which brings with it the burden of the property of a house. As Rafik, a young man in his thirties, told me in June 2015, “You must have your own slot. In Redeyef [living in rented accommodation with a wife] is still disapproved; it’s shameful, and family members will stress you until you start building your house”<sup>15</sup>. In a situation of prolonged crisis that not even the revolution has been capable to resolve, houses and dwelling practices have something to do not only with aspirations and loss (Pitzalis, Pozzi and Rimoldi 2017) but also with the possibility of failure to achieve a socially meaningful trajectory. Houses are those the epitome of youth’s most intimate desires and fears.

Youth can be interpreted as a relational concept: as maintained by French anthropologists Isabelle Rivoal and Anne-Marie Peatrik (2015), a person attains its adult status only within a framework of power relations with other individuals. Success is measured by the number of people a man can dominate and on which he can exercise authority or influence. Men must be able to build relationships that will be taken seriously, for example, a fruitful family; this also fits with the public discourse in Tunisia, according to which, it is necessary to establish a family within the boundaries of the law to earn a social existence as an adult (Paciello, Pepicielli and Pioppi 2016: 9). For a man, however, access to marriage depends on his ability to obtain the material conditions for the future, that is, a means of livelihood. The pressure of elderly and parents, especially mothers, is firm in the direction of finding an occupation and building or buying a home before dealing with other issues that make a young man an adult.

Youth in Redeyef look at marriages and all the necessary steps to it with desire and anxiety. One day in November 2014, I met Ghadi, a young man who had opened a boutique of branded clothes in Redeyef city center. He was among those who expressed mixed feelings about marriage and enlisted the difficulties faced by young men women who wish to marry. “It takes much, much money to get married,” he told me. “It’s the man who pays everything ... even when you go to meet the parents, this is the first thing

---

15. Rafik, Tunis, June 3, 2015.

they ask you: where is your house? It is bought or for rent? How much you earn from your work?”. He told me that having a job close to home was important in the city, and that young men needed enough salary to afford a house and a car<sup>16</sup>.

There are various elements related to the obstacles that young people face in their transition to adulthood. The first has to do with the side effects of the demographic transition. In North Africa and the Middle East, many countries achieved it in the 1980s and 1990s; however, the population is still very young (Bonnefois and Catusse 2013). The marriage age has risen: while in the 1960s it ranged from eighteen to twenty years in most of those countries, it stands today at twenty-seven-year-old, except for Yemen. The Tunisian case confirms those data, as the average marriage age passed from 19.5 percent for women and 26.3 percent for men in 1966 to 27.1 and 32.4 in 2007 (ONFP 2010). However, those shift in the marriage age does not coincide with a time dedicated to working activities; thus, if “youth” is a transitional phase (Van Gennep 1909), it becomes more uncertain as the age of marriage shifts, the length of studies increases, and unemployment and waiting are the norm.

In these countries, the average unemployment rate for those under thirty-five is around 25 percent, which also has repercussions for the reproduction of families. The spread of celibacy testifies to a crisis of the marriage model that derives more from the material and economic difficulties encountered by young couples than the disaffection towards this institute.

Even in Tunisia, including the city of Redeyef, the main reason why many young people marry late is their economic condition. The groom or his family often cover the high expenses related to engagement and marriage: earrings, engagement ring and necklace; a new *parure* for marriage; the ceremonial dress; the band, food and drink for at least two nights; one or more sheep for dinner; the deeds to a house. The total cost can thus reach eight or ten thousand *dinar*, a vast amount of capital for those who earn three or four hundred a month, and almost unattainable for those who are unemployed or underemployed. The family exerts pressure on the male for him to respect the duties generally associated with the status of an adult male, i.e., building a house, founding a family, and having kids. However, those goals become more and more out of sight as unemployment rates raise: if, between 1966 and 2010, the unemployment rates in the Gafsa governorate had risen from 12 percent to 28.3 percent (Bakari 2015: 24), in Redeyef, in 2014, it was 30.8 percent against an overall 19.2 percent in the Gafsa governorate (ODS 2018: 33).

---

16. Field notes, Redeyef, November 28, 2014

In North African contexts, and Redeyef is no exception, the liminal period between childhood and adulthood expands, making it impossible for part of the population to assume an adult role. Consequently, the present and the future perspectives of a growing number of people of working age increasingly overlap and raise the daily problem of managing time that consists only of waiting (Honwana 2012). Even if this phenomenon, often identified by the word “waithood,” unites the younger generations who also live in the Global North (Honwana 2014), in Africa it is the result of structural adjustment policies, begun in the 1980s, which reduced the space of state autonomy in economic planning and job creation<sup>17</sup>.

Macroeconomic dimensions, effects of demographic transition, and local visions on adulthood therefore play a role in defining the future trajectories of the younger generations in Redeyef. It is no coincidence, for example, that, throughout the entire duration of my research, I did not meet anyone in his twenties or thirties who lived alone, outside the home of the parents. In the city, the general rule is that one leaves the family home only to emigrate (to the coast or abroad) or to get married. Consequently, accumulating the money needed to buy or build a house has much to do not only with being recognized as an adult, but also with achieving independence that cannot be acquired in the household.

### *Conclusion*

In anthropology, it is possible to trace a literature that looks at things and material culture as biographical objects (Hoskins 1998) capable of opening up glimpses into the lives of the people where research is conducted. These objects have the potential to create real cosmological orders (Miller 2008), universes of meaning always changing but able to generate a sense of comfort and the experience of “feeling at home”. It is obviously no coincidence that this literature focuses primarily on domestic objects. In this sense, Janet Carsten arguably claims the possibility to treat houses as biographical objects, as studying them in these terms helps to illuminate “the multiple entanglements that houses illuminate between the lives and relations that are enacted within them and the historically-inflected social and political contexts in which they are situated” (Carsten 2018: 114).

But what can we see if, instead of those objects, we consider “houses-to-

---

17. Alcinda Honwana, Youth, Waithood, and Protest Movements in Africa, Lugard Lecture at the Fifth European Conference on African Studies, Lisbon, 28 June 28, 2013, *African Arguments*, 12 August 2013, <http://africanarguments.org/2013/08/12/youth-waithood-and-protest-movements-in-africa-by-alcinda-honwana/>, accessed on 01/12/2021.

be” as ethnographic objects? What do these artifacts show us that others are unable to address? What I see in them is what I would call the discomfort of things. On the one hand, this discomfort is expressed in the poverty of the materials used in the construction of houses and the intrinsic fragility of the urban context in which they are embedded. As seen in one of the sections of the article, the colonial and post-colonial experience has resulted in the loss of traditional knowledge and has not brought about any economic diversification at the local level. The inhabitants of Redeyef and the mining basin, therefore, depend on other regions of the country and the world in collecting the materials needed to build their habitations. Moreover, state policies and the partial inattention of the state have meant that the same houses are potentially threatened by external agents (climate, weather phenomena) that make them unhealthy and insecure, thereby affecting the lives of those who occupy them. Nevertheless, houses represent an anchorage for people engaged in creating their world in a situation characterized by insecurity, marginalization, and precariousness (Pozzi 2020).

On the other hand, and this applies especially to young men, houses incorporate local concepts of adulthood and “good life”, as well as moral prescriptions about future prospects. This is how I use the term “home-spectations”: the expectations about a successful “carrier”, in Redeyef, pass through the ownership of a house capable of making a young man an adult. If we take for granted that future is a cultural fact (Appadurai 2013), that is, is imbricated in local concepts of life and society and serves as adaptation and survival strategy in an uncertain world, then we can grasp all the potential and ambiguity that houses embody in Redeyef. Housing is necessary to start a family, and the family is critical in the process of affirming one’s public and personal identity; in this sense, they are essential to the very processes of social reproduction. Nevertheless, house and “houses-to-be” are something more. They are silent witnesses of the difficulties and obstacles that the young men of Redeyef (but, in a broader sense, we could speak of large areas of southern Tunisia) must face to free themselves from the burden imposed by the family of origin while, at the same time, trying to follow its precepts. The red color of the empty bricks and the long time it takes to build a house almost suggest that these young men literally must build their future with their own hands.

## REFERENCES

- Allal, Amin, 2010, Reformes néolibérales, clientélisme et protestations en situation autoritaire. Les mouvements contestataires dans le bassin minier de Gafsa en Tunisie (2008), *Politique africaine*, 117: 107-125.
- Allal, Amin, Bennafla, Karine, 2011, Les mouvements protestataires de Gafsa (Tunisie) et Sidi Ifni (Maroc) entre 2005 et 2009. Des mobilisations en faveur du ré-engagement de l'État ou contre l'ordre politique?, *Revue Tiers Monde*, 5: 27-45.
- Allerton, Catherine, 2013, *Potent Landscapes: Place and Mobility in Eastern Indonesia*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun, 2000, Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai, *Public Culture*, 12: 627-651.
- Appadurai, Arjun, 2013, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*, Brooklyn NY, Verso Books.
- Bahloul, Joëlle, 1996, *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria, 1937-1962*, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press.
- Bakari, Sayef, 2015, *The Issue of Unemployment of Young Graduates in Tunisia: Evolution, Characteristics, Limits and Prospects (1990 - 2014)*, MPRA Paper No. 84243.
- Belhedi, Amor, 1994, La littoralisation ou l'ordre spatial de l'extraversion, *Geographie & Développement*, 12/13: 50-79.
- Belhedi, Amor, 2012, *La fracture territoriale. Dimension spatiale de la révolution tunisienne*, Tunis, Wassiti Editions.
- Ben Romdhane, Mahmoud, 1997, L'accord de libre-échange entre la Tunisie et l'Union Européenne. Un impératif, des espoirs, des inquiétudes, *Confluences Méditerranée*, 43-60.
- Ben Romdhane, Mahmoud, 2011, *Tunisie : État, économie et société*, Mimizan, Publi-sud.
- Bonnefoy, Laurent, Myriam Catusse, 2013, Introduction. Déconstruire les stéréotypes: portraits croisés des jeunes arabes, in *Jeunesses arabes. Du Maroc au Yemen: loisirs, cultures et politiques*, Laurent Bonnefoy, Myriam Catusse, eds, Paris, La Découverte.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1970, The Berber house or the world reversed, *Information (International Social Science Council)*, 9, 2, 151-170.
- Bousnina, Adel, 2012, *Le littoral et le désert tunisiens. Développement humain et disparités régionales en Tunisie*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Brunet, Roger, 1958, Un centre minier de Tunisie: Redeyef, *Annales de Géographie*, 363: 430-444.
- Carsten, Janet, 2018, *House-lives as Ethnography/Biography*, *Social Anthropology*, 26, 1, 103-116.
- Chatterjee, Partha, 1993, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press.



- Dougui, Nouredine, 1995, *Histoire d'une grande entreprise coloniale : la Compagnie des phosphates et du chemin de fer de Gafsa, 1897-1930*, Tunis, Faculté des lettres de la Manouba.
- Escallier, Robert, 2006, Les frontières dans la ville, entre pratiques et représentations, *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 73: 79-105.
- Gherib, Baccar, 2017, *Penser la transition avec Gramsci. Tunisie (2011-2014)*, Tunis, Editions Diwen.
- Harvey, David, 2005, *Spaces of Neoliberalization: Toward a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Hermassi, Héla, 2013, Tunisian Revolution and Regional Imbalance, *Global Advanced Research of Management and Business Studies*, 2, 2: 80-84.
- Hibou, Béatrice, 2015, Le bassin minier de Gafsa en déshérence. Gouverner le mécontentement social en Tunisie, in *L'État d'injustice au Maghreb: Maroc et Tunisie*, Irene Bono, Béatrice Hibou, Hamza Meddeb, Mohamed Tozy, Paris, Karthala.
- Honwana, Alcinda, 2012, *The Time of Youth. Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*, Boulder & London, Kumarian Press.
- Honwana, Alcinda, 2014, Waithood. Youth Transitions and Social Change, in *Development and Equity. An Interdisciplinary Exploration by Ten Scholars from Africa, Asia and Latin America*, Dick Foeken, Ton Dietz, Leo de Haan, Linda Johnson, eds., Leida, Brill.
- Hoskins, Janet, ed., 1998, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*, London UK, Psychology Press.
- King, Anthony D., 2009, *Postcolonial Cities*, New York NY, State University of New York Binghamton.
- Mahjoub, Azzam, 1987, Économie et société: la formation du «sous-développement». L'évolution socio-économique de la Tunisie précoloniale et coloniale, in *Tunisie au présent : une modernité au-dessus de tout soupçon?*, Michel Causmaus, ed., Paris, Editions du CNRS.
- Miller, Daniel, 2008, *The Comfort of Things*, Cambridge UK, Polity Press.
- Mullin, Corinna, 2018, State Violence and Labor Resistance: The 2008 Gafsa Mining Basin Uprising and its Afterlives, *The Center for Humanities*.
- ODS: Office du Développement du Sud, 2018, *Gouvernorat de Gafsa en Chifres*, Ministère du Développement, de l'Investissement et de la Coopération Internationale – Office de Développement du Sud, [www.ods.nat.tn/upload/-\\_CHIFGAFSA.pdf](http://www.ods.nat.tn/upload/-_CHIFGAFSA.pdf), accessed on 01/12/2021.
- ONFP: Office National de la Famille et de la Population, 2010, *Le Célibat chez les jeunes : choisi ou subi?*, Tunis.
- Paciello, Maria Cristina, P Renata epicelli, Daniela Pioppi, 2016, *Youth in Tunisia: Trapped Between Public Control and the Neo-Liberal Economy*, Power to Youth Working Paper No. 6.
- Pitzalis, Silvia, Giacomo Pozzi, Luca Rimoldi, 2017, Etnografie dell'abitare contemporaneo: un'introduzione, *Antropologia*, 4, 3, 7-18.

- Poncet, Jean, 1970, La «catastrophe» climatique de l'automne 1969 en Tunisie, *Annales de Géographie*, 79, 435: 581-595.
- Pontiggia, Stefano, 2021, *Revolutionary Tunisia: Inequality, Marginality, and Power*, New York, Lexington Books.
- Pozzi, Giacomo, 2020, If buildings Could talk: Makeshift urbanity on the outskirts of Lisbon, In *Politics of Recuperation: Repair and Recovery in Post-crisis Portugal*, Francisco Martinez, ed., London/New York, Bloomsbury Academic.
- Rivoal Isabelle, Anne-Marie Peatrik, 2015, Les "jeunes", dans le sud de la Méditerranée, *Ateliers d'anthropologie*, 42.
- Rousselin Mathieu, 2018, A Study in Dispossession: The Political Ecology of Phosphate in Tunisia, *Journal of Political Ecology*, 25, 1, 2018: 20-39.
- Sanyal, Kalyan, 2007, *Rethinking Capitalist Development. Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism*, London/New Delhi, Routledge.
- Singerman, Diane, 2007, *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities among Youth in the Middle East*, The Middle East Initiative Working Paper No. 6.
- Tizaoui, Hamadi, 2013, *Le décrochage industriel des régions intérieures en Tunisie*, Tunis, Arabesque.
- Van Gennep, Arnold, 1909, *Les rites de passage*, Paris, Ed. Nourry.
- Waterson, Roxana, 1995, Houses and hierarchies in island Southeast Asia, In *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, Janet Carsten, and Stephen Hugh-Jones, eds., Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press.
- Zarka, Christian, 1975, Maison et société dans le monde arabe, *L'Homme*, 15, 2, 87-102.

**Stefano PONTIGGIA** is a social anthropologist (PhD in Human Sciences with specialization in Social Anthropology, University of Ferrara 2016) and is postdoc fellow at the Politecnico di Milano, Italy. He carried out ethnographic research in Italy and Tunisia working both within the academy and for NGOs, associations, and social cooperatives. He is the author of *Revolutionary Tunisia: Inequality, Marginality, and Power* (Lexington Books, 2021). His interests concern the state and its daily formation, social and territorial marginality, power, and asylum migration. He is also interested in the way power relations unfold in space and contribute to its production.

[stefano.pontiggia@gmail.com](mailto:stefano.pontiggia@gmail.com)

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © Stefano Pontiggia

*Great home-spectations: “Houses-to-be”, marginality, and social expectations in Southern Tunisia*

2021 | ANUAC. VOL. 10, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2021: 177-195

ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-4548

