

Men of Tunisia

by Barbara Siegel (Habiba)

Photos by Ron Barber

If I had to characterize the mood in Tunisia on my fourth trip in five years, it is one of an awareness of great changes in the world and in Arab society, coupled with a sense of approaching loss and a wary anticipation of the future. Many are not looking at the effects of modernization as a completely desirable state for their society. Rapid development has produced wide contrasts in people's lives, resulting in seemingly incompatible situations that exist side by side. There are political anxieties, a desire to be understood by the rest of the world, and a resolve to know themselves better before they drift into the uniformity of the jet age culture. I had rare glimpses into two different worlds in which the conflicts of the Tunisian man, in particular, were clearly underscored.

In August we were the guests of Aly Ben Salem and his wife Kristin at his home in Hammamet, a coast town about 1½ hours from Tunis. Aly is Tunisia's greatest artist and has shown his paintings all over the world, most recently in Philadelphia. He is a personal friend of President Bourguiba, and was a leading figure in Tunisia's Independence movement. His paintings present a selectively idealistic view of traditional life, elevating the trappings of daily activities to serve as icons in a mythic world. Dancers figure very prominently in his paintings. He also has brought together over a lifetime a magnificent collection of antique jewelry and traditional costumes, which he also sends around the world. He was one of the first people to realize the value of the Tunisian heritage.

Nothing could have prepared us for his house in Hammamet, not even the knowledge that his grandfather was a pasha, and his wife a famous artist and maker of tapestries. A typical, if larger than average, door faced the street. As it opened, we, like Alice passing into Wonderland, entered a marble entry hall from which stretched a wide marble path through perfumed gardens. We went from dazzling mid-afternoon sun into the cool shade of a different world in the blink of an eye. Down the path we saw a small traditional white house. This was the guest house. It had white marble floors, and was furnished with antiques and artwork. Aly told us to freshen up, relax and come to the main house when ready. We couldn't even see the main house from there.

When we were fit for socializing we set out on the path and quickly realized that some strong artistic hand went into creating this random-seeming paradise. There is a great variety of flowering trees which hung overhead. There are pools with lily pads on

which frogs lay about. Aly has imported the frogs because he likes their song. Roman and Carthaginian columns, statues and sarcophagi and hanging cages of Turkish doves line our path. Midway to the main house is a great cupola with marble benches inviting calm reflection on a hot day. Fifteen peacocks share a pen with other varieties of birds. The house itself, in the heart of the gardens, is the crowning glory, a magnificent structure completely hidden from public view in the Arabic manner. It was designed for outdoor living and has a white marble terrace where most of the family life takes place in the summer months. All meals are served outside on the table. Some architectural elements of the house were recovered from old buildings that were being demolished. The capitals on the colonnaded terrace were copied from a single ancient capital containing the symbol of the eye and crescent moon of Tanit, the mother goddess of ancient Carthage. The subtle presence of Tanit can still be felt and, I think, still has significance for the people. The house is a series of arched domes, a very traditional design but only five years old, completely designed by Aly. The builders used only their eyes and a piece of string for construction. Furnishings inside include Roman and Punic antiquities, silk Persian rugs, and Venetian chandeliers. An-

other path leads away from the house to another gate that opens onto the beach, the Mediterranean sea. The whole effect created is that of a magnificent retreat, a world within a world, all the more glorious for its unostentatious exterior.

What sort of life does one lead in a surrounding like this, I wondered. This certainly was unlike any other experience I'd had in Tunisia. Obviously a staff of servants was necessary to maintain the estate. Life had a typical rhythm for the length of our visit. We slept late, had coffee on the terrace, went to the beach, were served lunch, took a siesta, got dressed for cocktails, and went to or had a dinner party, which, as a rule, ended very late. Here was the first social life I'd experienced in Tunisia that was not on the family or village level. Actually, the society world of Hammamet is very well-known in Europe. The rich and famous of the continent, particularly of France, have been coming to Hammamet for 30 years, as society people go to Newport or Palm Beach here in the U. S. This is a very separate world from the mass of German and French tourists who fill the big hotels nearby. These people all have houses like Aly's and during the social season the cream of Tunisian society mingles with heads of government, diplomats, couturiers, gallery owners, and little old ladies who



The men of Isawiya seeking to achieve the trance state by repetition of the zar movement.



Habiba dances Egyptian style at one of Aly Ben Salem's sumptuous dinners given in Hammamet for 100 of his closest friends.

are just rich. All of a sudden I had access to a world one only reads about. On our first night we had dinner with a close friend of Aly's, the former head of the Jean Patou perfume house. One night we were told that we were going to a little old Hungarian lady's house for dinner. It turned out to be a mansion where we had a European-style dinner for 20 people on a terrace on top of a tower. We saw a lot of the Tunisian designer Fela, whose dresses are being shown at Bergdorf's. One memorable dinner party was in the most beautiful house of all, the fabulous traditional house of a Tunisian former ambassador to Sweden. This house was hundreds of years old with all the original tilework intact. It had a traditional tiled audience room with high ceilings that led out to a terrace overlooking the gardens which were the setting for the party. I was reminded of the days of the Pasha.

Aly's hospitality reached its peak with the dinner party he gave for us. There were one hundred people on the terrace for dinner. Two lambs were roasted outdoors, a real *mechoui*, while a Tunisian band played. The purpose of the party was to provide cultural exchange contacts for my husband, a museum director, and to introduce me as a dancer to Tunisian society. It was an impressive crowd headed by Mme Mitterrand and Mme Craxi representing the governments of France and Italy. I did two shows, oriental and *beledi*, and in between the guests danced to Tunisian music. Although I was gratified by their appreciation I was more flattered at the fact that all the servants hugged and kissed me and wanted

photos with me after I danced. All in all this experience was like that of dancing in a French salon.

The next day, at Aly's request, two men came from the government art journal to interview Ron and me, my husband because he was the first museum director in the United States ever to show a Tunisian artist, and me, because I've studied Tunisian dance and was also going to be dancing at the Hilton the following week. We had a very lively and lengthy exchange of views. We discussed such things as: cultural exchange as a medium of international understanding, Americans' reaction to the work of Aly Ben Salem, Americans' knowledge of Tunisia, feminism, and the qualities of Tunisian dance within the context of other Arabic styles. What came across from them was a feeling that Americans weren't sensitive to the Arabic character and traditions and were not interested in or appreciative of their art forms. They wanted to know how they were perceived by people in the United States.

All this intense intellectual climate born of self-examination was a far cry from events happening very close by. Just a few minutes away from this international social center is the Nabeul-Dar Chabaane area, where tradition flourishes. As a matter of fact, the very same family that had the dinner party in honor of their son's wedding invited us to a prayer performance called *al-Sullamiyah*. On the night of the seven-day-long wedding which is devoted to the groom, it is customary to hire a religious society to perform a musical ceremony.

There are various groups to choose from, each followers of a particular Moslem saint and who demonstrate their devotion in song or trance dancing. It is a surprise to many Westerners that familiar Old and New Testament figures like Solomon, Moses, Jesus and Mary are greatly honored. The name *Sullamiyah* is the Arabic for Solomon. They show their devotion by singing their joy in religion. At an event such as a wedding their purpose is also to instruct the groom in being a good Moslem and a good husband. In *al-Sullamiyah* the singers take popular melodies and change the words from romantic to religious subject matter. The guests look for spontaneity and improvisation in this kind of musical evening. The skill, wit, and musical ability are the criteria for judging a group like this. There were ten musicians and five singers who vied with each other in singing verses. This group was the most famous of its kind in the country and cost about \$3,000 to hire.

Interestingly enough it was presented in ultra-traditional style; in other words, not a woman was in the room. It was given in a central audience room of a large house. All around the room were grilles through which the women, including myself, were looking. The music could be heard very well but there was definitely a feeling of being excluded. There is food for romantic thought here. I couldn't help thinking that in the past, when men and women were always segregated, that men, at such a ceremony, must have fallen madly in love with the flash of an eye or a glimpse of an outline appearing through the grille from a darkened room.

The groom's duty at these performances is to circulate and serve mint tea and pastries to the guests. The groom's mother and aunts do the same among the women. The music was very upbeat and joyous. People clapped and cheered when songs like *Leila, Leila* were played, but the religious nature was underscored when a man got up and started dancing and the crowd angrily shouted at him to be seated.

When I visited my Tunisian family, the Ben Slamas, in Dar Chabaane, I was invited to another wedding to which I had more personal ties. My friend Hayet's cousin Mohammed was getting married. We arrived at Hayet's family's house for the mid-day meal and also to be there for the celebration that accompanies taking the furniture to the new home of the bride and groom. The groom's mother's house served as temporary home. All the men pile the furniture onto trucks while the women stand in front of the houses along the way and *zaghareet*.

Mohammed invited us to his groom's night ceremony for which he chose a religious society called *al-Isawiyah*. This turned out to be one of the greatest opportunities of the trip. *Al-Isawiyah* is a very rarely seen example of religious trance dancing. Our host, Aly, had not seen one in thirty years. It cost \$6,000 to hire the group.

The name *Isawiyah* is Arabic for Jesus. This Sufi society regards Jesus as a saint and



The young boy's ears are pierced with pins: an adult worshipper is being pierced through the neck with a stiletto.

prophet and is devoted to emulating him by overcoming pain to prove their religious faith.

The event was held in the big open courtyard of the largest house in Dar Chabaane. The owner, a man around 80 years old, allows people to have their celebrations there. He watched the proceedings from behind a grille from his bedroom. He later allowed us to take a look at the ornate handcarved and painted bedroom furniture that was made for his wedding right in the same village and was in mint condition after all these years. When we arrived it was already packed to overflowing. Probably because it was a small village event, men, women and children mingled more freely. The more conservative women peered down from the adjoining roof, the floodlights giving their white veils a ghostly appearance. Ron and I were a very familiar sight by now and I think people were very comfortable with our presence. I knew many of the women from other weddings and surprised to see how all the children had grown over the year. As usual, courtesy demanded that we be seated in front and ended up almost in the laps of the performers.

There were ten musicians with *bendir*s, *doumbeks* and one electric clarinet. Seated on the floor, they played for about 15 minutes, when eight men shuffled in rhythmically each with hands on the shoulders of the man in front. They formed a line with their backs to the people, facing the musicians. They held hands with straight arms and began a side-to-side step in unison. They were wearing very coarse *jellabas*, shorter than usual, and they looked particularly coarse and scratchy. One man, with a brown *abba*, was last in the line of dancers, but he performed the function of preventing the others, while they were in a trance state, from hurting themselves or any

of the spectators. He also assisted in helping them out of the trance. When the dancers entered, the rhythm changed to *Ayyub*. Their side-to-side step soon involved the head in a *zar* movement. As they went deeper into the trance you could see their eyes roll back into their head. The *zar* movement remained small and contained throughout with very subtle movement in the upper body. The step then changed to a forward-and-back movement, like a rocking step, while they chanted the name of Allah. Every other man moved in and out so an alternating pattern developed. It was very beautiful to see such smooth, flowing movement. There was complete relaxation of the body, no holding back or stiffness. The whole effect was trance-inducing for the viewer. It took about 45 minutes to move into the trance state. You could see their eyes roll back into their heads. At one point two young boys about ten years old joined them and they, too, formed their own line in front of the others. The desired state was one in which the body is impervious to pain. When the state was reached the leader in the brown *abba* produced what looked like very long hatpins. Several of the men stepped forward, and he helped them insert the long pins straight through their cheeks, including the in tongues, after which they continued the *zar* movements. Next he helped put the pins through the ears of the little boys who also kept up the head movements. All of a sudden we noticed while the leader watched intently over the boys, one of the group members slipped a knife through the skin and cords of the neck of another fellow. These things caused great excitement in the crowd and there

were lots of cries of a religious nature praising Allah, and *zaghareets* from the women. At one point the mother of the groom broke into an ecstatic stream of language expressing her joy, shrieking and praising God. The amazing thing about this experience was that after an hour of preparation and trance music this seemed perfectly natural. It was hard to believe, though, that they could maintain their trance in such chaos. It was not like being in church, but more like a carnival atmosphere. People were pushing through the group as they crossed the room. All this time the groom and his uncles served tea and collected the empty glasses. Men from the group would help each other. While one was still in a trance others would gently remove his pin. If there was a little blood they would wipe it away as he collapsed and was helped to the side. Later, when you looked at their faces, it was impossible to detect a mark where the pins had been. At this point they all took a break, and it was amazing to see these men relaxing normally, especially the little boys.

After a while they brought in huge pieces of prickly pear cactus. This variety is used there to surround property because its sharp spikes prevent anyone from getting through. They made a large pile on the floor. The music started all over again and one man, the man that had the knife through his neck, started going into a trance. He was almost in the desired state, but all of a sudden he felt the hot glare of a floodlight from a videotape camera that was being used to record the event for the groom. He became enraged, and tried to storm the ladder and break the light. The leader and other men had to restrain him



A view from the terrace; Aly Ben Salem's estate.

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and calm him down. It is not uncommon for Tunisians themselves to try to capture on film these vanishing traditions. They are very much aware that they need to preserve their heritage, but in a situation like this it is bound to cause conflict. The man tried again, and when he went into the trance, he jumped in the pile of cactus and rolled in it. Then he got up and fiercely, with wild eyes, took a big piece about three feet long and bit into it, chewed the bite and swallowed it. As he chewed the spikes stuck out through his cheeks. After this he came out of the trance and collapsed. This was the highlight of the evening. They took another break. It was amusing seeing this fellow only minutes later sitting placidly with a Coke and toothpick, presumably picking the cactus out of his teeth.

The band started up again and one of the dancers took a microphone and, as the music played, various people would come up with money for the group. The man would announce each name and say the amount given in the name of Allah for the preservation of the faith. People would respond with loud cries of appreciation and *zaghareets*. This went on for another half hour, and then it was over.

In contrast to the two families who were each videotaping these events, we were using a special 1,000-speed film which required no flash, in order to be unobtrusive. Here was technology being used to preserve a traditional event. And here, also, were people with vastly different ways of life like the groom, who lives in Germany, coming back to his village to experience the sustaining quality of traditional values. As modern life encroaches, Tunisians are afraid of exchanging something for nothing. □