

Tunisian Images: Religion

by Barbara Siegel-Barber

There is an amazingly unostentatious quality about Tunisian religious life. Having heard of the rigors of Islamic life I was surprised at how unobtrusive the observances are. Tunisians, although regarded as moderate by Islamic standards, live a life regulated by religion far beyond the American experience. Islam is a pervasive, ethical religion that governs an individual's dealings with his fellow man. Religion is integrated into every facet of life, governing business as well as intimate relationships.

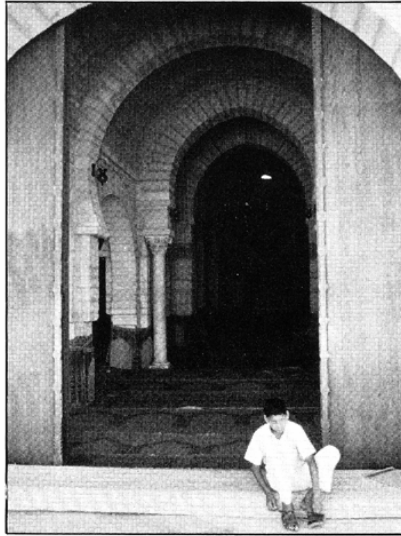
While we stayed with the Ben Slama family, our host never mentioned praying or excused himself for prayer; he just tactfully slipped away. Once in a while we would hear him chanting in another room. Then he would reappear without calling attention to his absence. The only sign of devotion apparent was one that could not be hidden — a callous on the forehead from praying, which revealed a lifetime of strict observance. A great many older men had this mark.

In seeking to understand something of Tunisian religion, we found more enlightenment in the actions of everyday living than in the mosque. Our hosts were in the act of preparing to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. There was a great deal for our hostess, Jamila, to do, because pilgrims must act and dress in a prescribed manner. She modeled for us the outer garment she is obligated to wear. Women must be completely veiled on the pilgrimage no matter what sort of dress is the custom in the pilgrim's country.

In keeping with the exciting mood of the trip and in an effort to further our culinary education, Jamila prepared for us *psisa* — the pilgrims' traditional food. *Psisa* was the usual breakfast of the Prophet, and it was traditional for pilgrims in the days of camel caravans to bring this along. It is a brilliant invention for long trips, a nutritious powder made of ground nuts, seeds and spices that need only be moistened with olive oil to become a breakfast cereal. It is easy to carry, preserves well and needs no water for preparation. What a perfect food for the desert!

It is very common for pilgrims to give a party before or after the trip, but Mr. Ben Slama felt that congratulating himself for doing only what is his religious duty was offensive. He therefore refused to tell people or in any way pride himself on his act of piety. It reminded me of the Sufi saying that one is rewarded either here or in the next world, but not in both.

We attended a family gathering, the first birthday of a little girl. About fifty guests



A youth preparing to enter a mosque in Sfax

celebrated. The parents were elderly and had a grown son but had adopted a little girl because a house with children is considered blessed. A great deal of attention was paid to one of the uncles. It seemed that he had been a very rich man but had systematically given everything away over the course of his life and depended on the generosity of his relatives. He was referred to as a living saint.

The tombs of saints dot the countryside. There is no place too remote or city medina too crowded to incorporate these tombs, called *marabouts*. Every *marabout* is tended faithfully by some person who has dedicated his life to this task, living in abject poverty. People appeal to saints to intercede for them. One *marabout* we visited had many scarves hanging in its niche. A knot is tied by the supplicant to represent a wish; the wish is granted if the knot is untied when the person returns.

Sometimes the *marabouts* are incorporated in a mosque. The mosques are of two types architecturally, the Arabic and the North African. The Arabic style has an octagonal or round tower and the North African has a square tower. The mosque at Dar Chabaane has the tomb of the saint El Fehri incorporated in the complex. We were not permitted in the mosque, but we were allowed in the courtyard and the tomb. The Tomb of El Fehri attracts many people bearing food and gifts as offerings. We saw many Bedouin women who came with their children from the surrounding region to spend the day at the *marabout*. This religious society that grows up around a saint is called a *zaouia*.

Also in the mosque complex was a sacred well that was reputed to have healing powers. A Bedouin woman had come there to bathe her baby who had been very ill.

Some of the mosques in Tunisia are famous throughout the Islamic world for having been great centers of learning in Medieval times. One of these is the great mosque at Sousse which is still a center for religious studies. We were allowed in the courtyard and were able to look into the mosque but not enter. The cool interior comforted one solitary person, a young boy praying, his shoes left on the threshold. The far-away niche in the vast interior was pointed toward Mecca; the entire inside, floors and walls were covered with straw mats. In one corner of the courtyard were some slates and mats which formed the religious school. There were also many stones lying about. The old or infirm who could not wash before praying used these stones and went through the ritual of washing, after which they were considered cleansed.

A discussion of religion is not a separate matter because it governs the conduct, clothing and habits of the majority of the people. This uniformity seems to give a certain security in the social and emotional sense that does not exist in America. Certainly, there are people at the opposite ends of the scale, the Moslem brotherhood, as well as total rejectors of Islam, but one has the sense that the beautiful, pervasive sound of the *muezzin* calling people to prayer still is relevant and addresses the Tunisians.



South. (bottom) A Bedouin woman poses with her child whom she hoped to cure with sacred water from the well in the mosque of Dar Chabaane.