

# Tunisian Images: Part I, The Home



*Barbara Siegel Barber recently returned from her second trip to Tunisia. She teaches oriental dance at Philadelphia's Temple University and is a featured performer at the Middle East Restaurant.*

The age-old act of presenting a newly arrived guest with a bowl of orange-flower water symbolizes not only the tradition of welcoming the guest but also formalizes and defines the obligation of the host by bestowing on the traveler the host's most precious commodity. For the traveler's part, it is a privilege to experience the partaking of this basic pleasure, especially when coming in out of the Tunisian mid-day sun. Drinking, one feels a kinship with many other travelers, materially and spiritually. It was thus that we were welcomed to the village of Dar Chabaane by our Tunisian family.

What followed was such an array of food, entertainments and generosity that even now the thought of being a guest in a Tunisian home fills me with a very pleasurable sense of expectancy. One is not asked first if one wants a particular delicacy — things are prepared and offered, one after another. This is not the land of tea or coffee — but the land of tea and coffee.

It is, of course, the Islamic obligation of the host to care for the guest as a member of his own family and he carries this out cheerfully. We found that any problems or needs of a guest are treated like his own. But it is the Tunisian mother who is the conduit of hospitality.

There is no higher praise for the Tunisian mother than the Arabian expression "the roofpole of the tent." She is not only the center of the home but personifies the home itself. In the days that we stayed with the Ben Slama family, mother Jamila cared for us and worried over us as if we were permanent family members. Famous for her cooking, she prepared every Tunisian specialty so that we would not miss anything. Her day began before everyone else's and ended after everyone had gone to bed.

Those critics of traditional family life who believe a woman to be degraded by this type of existence must understand that a woman is seriously respected and cherished for her role of homemaker, and she does have a strong role in deciding family matters within the context of the home. A traditional woman's life is very hard; it is strange to us because it is a life devoted to the care of others. All food and many other materials are made at home. Couscous is made once a year, just as peppers are bought and dried once a year. Each household buys what appears to be a truckload of peppers, the women string them together, and they are set to dry on the roof. Our Tunisian mother also made her own orange flower water from orange blossoms from the family country estate and had time to make clothes for the family, new slip covers for the care and embroider caftans for Cousin Mohammed's tourist business. Other female members of the household have similar obligations and our friend, Hayet, a professor of English literature at the Bourgiba Institute in Tunis, assumes a role like her mother when she is in her mother's house.

The traditional Tunisian father is the religious and temporal head of the house and is the connection to the outside world, just as the mother's domain is the home. Mr. Ben Slama is one of

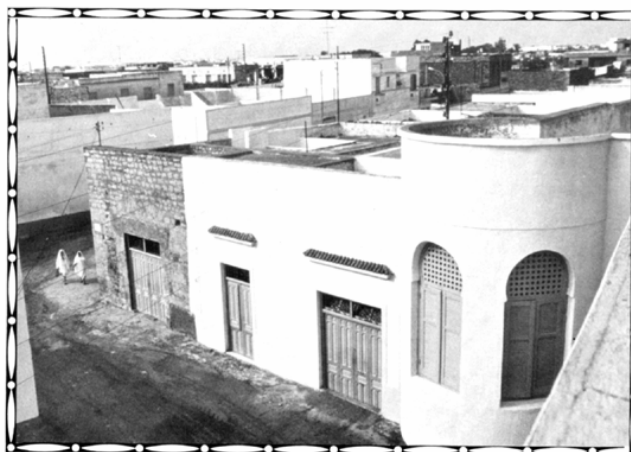
the most respected men in the region, having been a school headmaster for many years and also mayor. In Dar Chabaane the majority of men work at crafts that are famous all over the world. Nabeul tile work, weaving, pottery and stone cutting are the finest in Tunisia. Training for these occupations starts early, with young boys at seven doing simple tasks and moving up gradually to more skilled work.

The test of Nabeul stone and tile work is that the people of Nabeul use it extensively in their own houses, which are, themselves, masterpieces of sensible and efficient design. The axiom "form follows function" really applies. The houses are very private, presenting a uniform and dazzling white and blue to the outside world that reflects sunlight, thereby creating a cool interior. The doors are hung with gaily striped canvas, letting in air and keeping out the glaring mid-day sun.

No one (except, of course, tourists) goes out in the middle of the day because of the intense sunlight and temperature of 115-120° F. This time is used for lunch, the main meal of the day, naps and family visiting. Each house is built around an atrium, or outdoor courtyard, and a good deal of family life takes place there, weather permitting. The roof is used for drying and storing food in urns as well as drying laundry. All houses have systems for collecting rain water in addition to the common water supply. The Tunisian home is truly a haven for the person fortunate enough to be invited in.



*The artisans of Nabeul live their work by keeping photos of their favorite oriental dancers over their looms. (Photo: Ron Barber)*



*A view from the roof, Dar Chabaane. (Photo: Ron Barber)*