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The Mzab*

E. A. ALPORT

ABOUT 560 KILOMETRES SOUTH OF ALGIERS, and extending for about 250 kilometres further south, there lies a region of limestone in the Sahara which is known as the Shebka. The word signifies a net in Arabic, and the reason for this is that the ground of bare stone has been eroded into a criss-cross network or maze of short ravines and clefts. Roughly in the centre of this barren wilderness, the bed of the river Mzab forms a valley between low, yellowish hills, and in the lower part of this valley lie five cities, perched on the slopes, or on higher ground in the river-bed. They are built fairly close together so that from each it is easy to see one or two of the others. They were all founded in the 11th century A.D., they are all surrounded by stout walls, and each is crowned by the minaret of its mosque, shaped like an obelisk and lacking any kind of decoration.

Their total population is about 30,000, of whom Ghardaya, the capital, contains half. Next in importance comes the city of Beni Isguen, with 5000 inhabitants, while the smaller cities of Melika, Bou Noura, and El Ateuf share about 10,000 between them. Ghardaya is also the centre of one of the four large military and administrative territories into which southern Algeria is divided, and the only one of the five cities that has admitted Europeans, Arabs, Jews, and other foreign elements – not within its walls, but within its precincts;¹ the others remain completely homogeneous and, with one small exception at Melika, untouched by alien habitations.

The river Mzab, from which the district takes its name, flows very rarely, rising only about once in twelve or thirteen years. Rainfalls or showers are not quite so rare, but there are years without any precipitation from the atmosphere, and one or two heavy showers in a year are regarded as a blessing. Water is found at depths varying between 8 and 55 metres and has to be drawn from wells. One is therefore almost astonished to find palm-gardens at a short distance from each city, maintained by constant labour, and to discover whole towns of summer-houses among the date-palms and fruit trees, not lightly built as bungalows, but constructed with stone in the same way as the town-houses (Brunhes 1952, p.181).

Besides the five cities in the valley, the confederation of the Mzab, as it is sometimes called, comprises three other places: the oasis of Berriane, 47 kilometres to the north; the city of Guerrara, 99 kilometres to the north-east; and, nearer to the Mzab valley, the oasis of Metlili, partly owned by Mozabites, but inhabited by sedentary Sha'amba from the large Arab nomad tribe of that name.

The Mozabites are peculiar in several respects. They represent a small Berber island in a vast Arab sea; they are the only city-dwellers in the Sahara; they practise a fierce and exclusive form of Islamic puritanism, not unlike that of the Wahabi of Arabia, but in an *urban* and not a *tribal* frame of society; and they have kept their institutions intact, only giving up their political status as independent republics and becoming part of the territory of Algerian France.

Why do they live in such a remote and barren place? How can they afford to keep

*A paper read at a meeting of the Institute on 5 February 1953. It had previously formed the substance of a lecture, illustrated by slides, to the Oxford University Anthropological Society on 19 November 1952.

¹The foreign elements number about 10,000; the original population is Berber by descent and language (Doutté & Gautier 1913, p.139).

gardens and summer-houses at great expense? How were they able to withstand, for a thousand years, the vicissitudes of sedentary life in the Sahara, and, even more surprisingly, the impact of 20th-century competitive civilization?

To find the answer to these questions one must begin by tracing the history of the Beni Mzab back to the period of the Arab conquest of North Africa in the 7th and 8th centuries, as it is recorded, for example, by Ibn Khaldūn (de Slane tr. 1852) and others (Masqueray tr. 1879; Lewis 1950; Julien 1952). At that time bitter quarrels and feuds were being fought out in Arabia among the Prophet Muhammad's successors, and a sect of nonconformists, the Kharijites, gained considerable influence for a short period. Their political and religious teaching was republican, democratic, puritan, and fundamentalist, and in all these respects they were radically opposed to the orthodox and absolutist Caliphate at whose hands they suffered a series of defeats which led to their practical disappearance in Arabia by the beginning of the 8th century.

The Kharijites disappeared, but they were not extinguished. 'Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, crushed their first revolt under 'Abd el-Wahb, but they found another leader in 'Abdalla ibn 'Ibād, who gave their passionately held beliefs the form of doctrine and the rules of conduct.

The original and immediate cause for their disaffection was that 'Ali had been prepared to accept arbitration between himself and the other pretender to the succession, Mu'āwiya. To the fundamentalists among his followers, compromise or arbitration in this case was inadmissible. There was one law and one law only: the Koran. According to a fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran, arbitration is applicable in two cases only: in the case of conflict between husband and wife (Koran iv. 39) and in the case of killing of game while on pilgrimage, when certain compensation becomes due (Koran v. 96). No other differences can be resolved by arbitration. Any action is either right or wrong. If wrong, it must be resisted, 'with the hand, with the tongue, or with the heart' (a rule based on Koran iii. 106).

Secondly, and of like importance, was the fundamentalist belief that all Muslims were equal, and that the office of Shaikh el-Islām, or Caliph, or Imam should be an elected and not an hereditary one.

Based upon these two propositions, that all Muslims are equal, and that any action is either right or wrong, the principle tenets of 'Ibādi doctrine are (Masqueray 1879, preface):

(1) That the law is laid down once and for all time in the Koran, that therefore it is essential not only to know the Koran, but to understand it; also that prayers must not merely be repeated but understood.

(2) That there is only one way of being righteous, any other ways being sinful and leading to certain damnation.

(3) That sin can never be expiated or forgiven; and that punishment by the law can only have secular and not spiritual or redeeming effect.

(4) That Works are as important as Faith; that sinners are damned whether they are true believers or not; and that a man's conduct in this world determines precisely his position in the next.

(5) And, finally, that since all Muslims are equal, luxurious living and ostentation by some is sinful; that no man can command who is not expressly elected to do so; that a man should live soberly and modestly, shunning all stimulants and intoxicants including music and dancing; and that he should practise charity and strict honesty in his personal and business dealings.

'Abdalla ibn 'Ibād, during whose lifetime the Kharijites or Dissenters were persecuted, cut down in battle, oppressed, and killed, taught that there were four states or ways in which true believers could achieve Grace: (i) the State of Defence in protecting their faith; (ii) the

State of Devotion in its practice; (iii) the State of Glory in its victory; and (iv) the State of Secrecy when its concealment became a duty.

A story or two may illustrate the stoic faith of these Puritans: Rahan, one of those who revolted against 'Ali, was captured, his hands and feet were cut off and his enemy, Ibn Ziyād, asked him 'What do you think now?' 'I think,' he replied, 'that you have spoiled my life in this world, and that I have spoiled yours in the next.' Another, Arūa, when asked by the same Ibn Ziyād to choose his own torture, replied 'Choose the form of your eternal damnation yourself!'

The State of Secrecy had been reached. The dissenters could meet only in small conventicles, where they comforted and helped one another and made converts when possible. One such conventicle, or *ḥalqa*, from Bosra, decided to emigrate in order to escape persecution, to preach the pure doctrine, and to seek the State of Glory in North Africa.

There, the 'Ibādi doctrine fell on fertile ground. The Arab conquest of the Maghreb (the West) had been slow and difficult. After fifty years of campaigns and of expeditions organized from Egypt and Damascus, Byzantine power was at last broken, and by A.D. 698 all the Greek fortresses of the coastal belt from Carthage to Ceuta as well as those of the interior were in the hands of Arab governors. But the Berber population of the plains, the high plateaux and the mountains, from Tripolitania and the Jebel Nefūs in the east to the Sūs and the Anti-Atlas in the west, remained largely unsubdued. Great tales and legends are told of heroic Berber resistance under chieftains like Kossila and the Kahina, the Jewish queen of the Aures mountains. However, from their firm bases on the coast, the Arab governors, who frequently took advantage of inter-tribal feuds between Berber leaders, succeeded in obtaining the submission and also the conversion of ever-increasing numbers of Berber tribes.

In matters of religion the Berbers had never been too difficult. The tribes in the interior remained largely pagan and idolatrous, but many in the mountains had adopted Judaism, and in the coastal plains Christianity had found entry under the Romans. But already under Roman and later under Byzantine rule, the christianized Berbers were given to sectarianism. Byzantine governors in particular had great trouble with the Donatists and the Circoncillions, sects that professed an equalitarian and primitive creed, revolted against their bishops, and refused to pay taxes.

In their efforts at converting the Berber tribes to Islam, the Arabs were aided, on the one hand, by the successful invasion of Spain (A.D. 709), which almost immediately brought to their side large numbers of Berbers eager to take part in battle, conquest, and loot – this, of course, they could do only as soldiers of the Prophet – and, on the other hand, by the rule, based on Koranic law, that Muslims were exempted from certain land and poll taxes that non-Muslims had to pay. Conversions under those circumstances were largely a matter of form and were mostly regarded as such by Arab governors, who continued or resumed the exaction of these taxes from their fresh co-religionists. Revolts and apostasies naturally followed, and so did repressions. The situation was complicated by quarrels and fights between the Arab governors themselves, who had not failed to import their old tribal feuds and hostilities from Arabia, and repeatedly called to their aid native forces in order to gain a local advantage.

It was in the midst of this state of affairs that the 'Ibādi *ḥalqa* from Bosra arrived, led by a young Persian nobleman, Ibn Rustem. They quickly collected a following of Berbers who at last found in these Arabs other Muslims by whom they were treated and regarded as equals. The Berbers, who had been Christian sectarians and rebels under Byzantine rule, became Muslim sectarians and rebels under the Caliphs. As Bernard (1932, p.89) put it, Islamic Calvinism found in North Africa its Scotland.

Soon Ibn Rustem was strong enough to be considered worth an alliance, and he was called in to put down a palace revolution that had upset the city of Kairouan. He proceeded to occupy Kairouan himself and held it for four years until an army sent from Egypt obliged him and his followers to give way. They left Kairouan and trekked for 700 miles, going west all the time, until they reached a place in the mountains of western Algeria, situated at 3000 feet, by a pass leading from the highlands of the Tell Atlas down to the fertile coastal plain. There was an ancient Berber settlement in this place, based upon a Roman camp, and near it in A.D. 761 Ibn Rustem founded the city of Tahert, or Tiaret, which became the capital of the so-called kingdom of Tiaret, comprising a good deal of present-day Algeria, and which, according to Ibn Khaldūn (de Slane tr. 1852, pp.242-3), lasted for a century and a half.

It was a kingdom without a king – it was a theocracy. Ibn Rustem and his successors took the title of Imam, leader of prayer; and the people, unlike the Children of Israel, did not demand a king. No ass was lost, no Saul anointed! Merchants and artisans of different persuasions brought wealth and affluence, and they and their trade were protected; but the Imam and his band of elect continued to live an austere and simple life, devoted to the study of the law and the sciences, especially astronomy. No family or tribe arrogated to itself the spoils of power or office, which was the rule practically everywhere else in the Muslim world. All Muslims were equal. The Imam was surrounded by his theologians, and his acts of government were performed with their advice and moral support (Motylinski 1908). It is not possible here to study this theocracy beyond mentioning these few of its principal features. In A.D. 909 Tiaret, and with it the State of Glory, was suddenly destroyed by an army of orthodox Muslim fanatics, believers in the hereditary succession of the Prophet, who later were to lift the Fatimid dynasty on to the throne of Egypt.

The 'Ibādites of Tiaret that were not killed or dispersed began under their Imam another long trek, this time south-east, into the Sahara. They crossed 400 miles of steppe and desert and finally reached Ouargla, a large oasis south of Touggourt, where an 'Ibādi community had settled earlier and where the refugees from Tiaret started to build the new city of Sedrata (van Berchem 1953). The Imam who had led them renounced his leadership and returned to private life; and from that moment the religious as well as the secular authority of this 'Ibādi community rested in the hands of its clergy. As his final act the last Imam proclaimed the State of Secrecy by which the 'Ibādites separated themselves from the heterodox world and decided to live entirely on their own, instead of in mixed communities.

Sedrata was not a very safe place. It lay in the open desert, only a few days' march away from other centres of population, and it was within striking distance of powerful Negro kingdoms in the south. It grew and prospered, thanks to the industry and application of its citizens and its position on a main caravan route from the south-west to the north-east; it also attracted 'Ibādi communities from other parts of North Africa; but the sectarians looked for a safer place and soon found it, only some 120 miles to the north-west, in the region of the Shebka that was avoided, even by nomads, because it was lifeless and afforded no grazing (Bernard 1939, p.338). In the year A.D. 1011 men from Sedrata founded El Ateuf, the first city of the Mzab; thirty years later Bou Noura and Melika were built, then Beni Isguen further up the valley; and finally Ghardaya in A.D. 1053. The precaution proved to be wise, for in A.D. 1075 Sedrata was destroyed by a hostile Berber tribe.

These, then, are the five cities of the Mzab valley. It can now be understood how they came to be founded in this particular location. But it will be necessary to examine whether they really are cities in the accepted sense, and not just fortified places. After all, there are numberless fortified places, or *ksour*, all over North Africa.¹ In what way do those of the

¹It should be noted that *ksar*, plural *ksour*, is the French transcription of the word as it is spoken in the Maghreb instead of the correct *qasr* (plural *qusur*).

Mzab differ from the others? Nearly all the Berber *ksour* have two features in common: every *ksar* is inhabited by people standing in some kind of blood-relationship to one another as members of the same tribe, or clan, or family – always excepting Jews or slaves attached to many of the *ksour*; and they are nearly all dependent upon a higher authority, be it a local chieftain, a territorial ruler, or a nomad tribe. There are indeed some places in Kabylia and the Aures where Berber families or clans not necessarily related have moved together constituting townships with a form of local self-government; the cities of the Mzab, however, were each founded not by several families, but by several *groups* of families who continue to this day their separate identities but who gave up their juridical and executive tribal powers to the higher political entity of the city. These family-groups, or *qabā'il*, correspond closely to the ancient Roman *curiae* which were each composed of several *gentes*; and the city, called 'arsh, corresponds to the Roman *urbs* in its political sense, or to the Greek *polis* (Masqueray 1886, p.221).

Not all the families or clans that founded the cities have survived; but the *qabā'il* or family-groups have.¹ For instance, the 'arsh of Ghardaya is based upon two *qabā'il*, the Ouled Ammi Aïssa and the Ouled Ba Sliman, each occupying a ward in the city. The Ouled Ammi Aïssa are composed of three *hashā'ir* or clans, two of which came from the west and one from Sedrata. The two from the west have their own burial ground near the tomb of a western marabout, or saint. The other *qabila*, the Ouled Ba Sliman, consists of two clans, each of a different origin. Beni Isguen has three *qabā'il*, one of which is from Sedrata, the second composed of *hashā'ir* from the Atlas, and the third of later migrants grouped in five *hashā'ir* of different origins and integrated into the city under the name of Ouled Anan. Bou Noura has two *qabā'il*, but one of them consists now of a single *hashira*, which occupies half the city, while the other is composed of seven *hashā'ir*. A comparatively recent document, the chronicle of a new city, dating from A.D. 1613, when, for reasons of overpopulation and civil strife, a number of families left Ghardaya and went to found Guerrara, opens with the declaration: 'The Ouled Betamer composed of six *hashā'ir*, and the Ouled Ben Brahim and the Ouled Debbat, each consisting of one *hashira*, found this city and make certain laws.'²

The social structure of the Mzab city has been compared with the Roman *urbs* or the Greek *polis* in their early stages. Another comparison can be made with Italian city-states of the Renaissance. The *qabā'il* not only jealously guard their separate identities, they frequently used to assert them by force of arms, and the *sofs*³ or bloody quarrels between the wards or between leading families in different *qabā'il* or factions in different cities were as notorious in the Mzab as were the fights between the Pazzi and the Medici in Florence, or between the *contrade* of Siena.

Although the *qabā'il* are strong vestiges of tribal organization, they retain no political or administrative rights within the city.⁴ Each *qabila* elects a magistrate, or *kebir*, and one or two sheriffs, or *muqaddemin*. The magistrates collectively pass sentences and impose fines, and the sheriffs execute judgements, keep the city's accounts, and receive strangers. Each individual, no matter from which ward, enjoys the protection of, and is subject to, city law, and the authorities are responsible for the peace of the city as a whole. Besides the officers of the law, every *qabila* elects a number of elders, each from a different *hashira* who, together with the magistrates and the sheriffs, form the *jum'a*, or assembly. This assembly is summoned by the

¹Le mot *qabila* signifie au Mzab toujours un groupe politique dépendant d'un autre plus considérable, une fraction en un mot' (Masqueray 1886, p.175).

²The Chronicle of Shaikh Sliman ibn 'Abdalla (Masqueray 1886, p.176). Motylinski (1885a) gives a translation of another and later chronicle. Here the names differ from those quoted above, but the account of the city's foundation is very similar.

³The word means 'party' and, by extension, 'party quarrels' (Huguet 1903, p.94). See also Bernard (1932, p.219).

⁴Nevertheless, their local cohesion is strictly safeguarded. Property may be sold only to members of the same *sof* which, in this context, means the *qabila* and its assimilated families inhabiting the same ward (Capot-Rey 1953, p.244).

magistrates only in exceptional circumstances or for special reasons like important litigation, public security or the making or revision of laws. It is a legislating body and a high court at the same time, and an immemorial institution among all Berber tribes. However, in the Mzab it is powerless by itself; it may meet only in the mosque and in the presence of the *halqa* or conventicle of the learned clerks whose chief, the shaikh of the mosque, presides. Of the lay members, only the magistrates have the right to speak. The elders' part is to listen and to give assent. The mosque is, in fact, the government of the city; the authority of the clergy is supreme. The higher clergy, or clerks of the first degree, setting an example of the State of Secrecy, hold themselves aloof from the day-to-day management of affairs; but nothing of any importance can take place without their consent. The laity are associated with acts of government through their elected representatives in the assembly which must be consulted; but in a conflict of opinion it is always the clergy who have the last word, for they have at their disposal two powerful weapons – excommunication against the individual, and, against the community, the sit-down strike: in grave cases the clerks lock themselves up in their mosque; there are no prayers, no funerals can be held, no benedictions, purifications, circumcisions, marriages, no teaching – in fact, the whole life of the community comes to a standstill.

So the theocracy of Tiaret and Sedrata continues in the Mzab, and through it the Puritan doctrine of the sect is upheld in all its severity. The *qawānīn*, or laws of the cities, abound in proscriptions of vanity, ostentation, levity, and pleasure.¹ Here, for example, is the *qānūn* of the city of Melika regulating the expenses for a wedding (Masqueray 1886, pp.62–3):

For the preparation of a wedding-feast no more than two slaves in the house of the bridegroom and two slaves in the house of the bride shall be employed. In neither of the two houses shall musical instruments be played. The Negress who is sent with the dish of *ghedara* shall have one measure of corn: the *ghedara* must not contain eggs, neither must it contain saffron, and it must not be made with *ajid*-flour. All these things are forbidden. Also forbidden is the use of a mule or a horse for conveying the bride: she shall walk on foot. No flute-player shall enter the house of the bridegroom and no one shall smoke in his house, for tobacco is hateful. The Negress who carries the bread to the house of the bride shall be given two small measures of corn. The bread of the seventh day must not exceed one small measure of corn: the bridegroom shall give in exchange half a real, no more.² The servant who fetches the dish of *refis* [a sweet made of dates and semolina] shall receive from the hand of her mistress one mouthful of it, no more. The woman who remains with the bride shall be given one-eighth of a real. Flute-players and slaves shall not make music in the city, and within the city-walls it is forbidden to let off firearms. After the bride has entered the house of the bridegroom, it is forbidden to send her food, be it dates, or corn, or any other victuals, and the *ghedara* made by the mother-in-law on the first day must not exceed the measure of eight dishes. The mother-in-law shall not offer any food to the friends of her son-in-law, nor shall she make nor send him any *refis* on the day she receives his presents.

Whosoever does any of these things shall be subjected to the censure of the Faithful.

Given by the Assembly of the people of Melika, clerics and laymen, the first day of *rejev* of the year 1108 after the *Hijra* of the Prophet [A.D. 1697].

It has been mentioned that the cities of the Mzab form what is sometimes called a confederation. This must not be understood in the sense of a political union. There are no federal organs of government, no constitution, and no federal council. The union of the cities is founded in their common history and their common dangers, and both these are the consequences of their common faith. This sectarian faith, the state of secrecy in which it is practised and the self-denial which its puritan doctrine demands, produce an inordinate pride in its adepts. They call themselves 'God's Family', in other words the Chosen People. Nothing

¹A *qānūn* of Beni Isguen punishes him who boasts of his descent from an ancient family (Morand 1910, p.440).

²A Spanish real was worth approximately one florin. See Morand (1910, pp.427–8) on the real, its history in North Africa, its various coinages, its value, etc.

will normally induce a Mozabite to part from his community and mix with others whom he deems so much beneath himself – not the hard and barren ground where his ancestors took refuge, not the fact that he has to spend half his life away from home to earn his living (as will presently be explained), not his neighbour's jealousy and hatred, nor even the banishment he may suffer for a murder he may have committed in pursuit of a *sof*. There may be disunity among the cities through their autonomy and conflicting interests; there may be violence and hostility among citizens; but stronger than all dissociating influences are the unity created by the pressure of the control the community exercises over all its members for the sake of the doctrine, and the social cohesion produced by the energy, one might say the high temperature, of this religious sect. Indeed, any lowering of the temperature, any concession or relaxation of the religious and moral doctrine, must, in this artificially created society – existing in an artificially created living space – entail gradual disintegration and loss of identity. This, in fact, is happening in the island of Jerba where the old and important Mozabite community, under the influence of easy living conditions and the relaxation of rules, is slowly dwindling (Mercier 1927, p.11). In other words, if doctrine no longer separated the Mozabite from other people, there would be no particular reason why he should go on living in the Mzab rather than elsewhere – on the coast, for instance, or in some other practical and less costly surroundings.¹

Since the soil of the Oued Mzab had to be created, because there was practically none to begin with, it was clear from the start that the only salvation of the Mozabite communities lay in trade. Of this they had centuries of experience, first in Tiaret where they were placed between the stock-breeding plateaux and the agricultural plains of the coastal Tell; and then in Sedrata which lay on the route connecting the western Sudan and the Niger valley with the Mediterranean, through the oases of the Rhir and the Jerid. The Mzab was less favourably placed, in fact that is why it was chosen as a retreat; so – although a north-south route through their valley was gradually established by the Beni Mzab – it became necessary to trade elsewhere and send the proceeds home. Puritans make good business men: a high standard of literacy, necessary in order to study the holy scriptures; a high standard of honesty as part of the doctrine; a disciplined will, which is the essence of Puritanism, and the avoidance of dissipation make successful trading almost inevitable (Weber 1922, p.352; Tawney 1926, p.201). From the earliest times of their settlement in the valley, Mozabites went to the north trading in slaves, hides, wool, and livestock from the Sahara, and in produce, commodities, and imported groceries from the coast and the ports. Nowadays, they dominate the trade in textiles and groceries in Algeria and Tunisia and they are very large property owners in the cities and the countryside of the Tell as well as in the oases of southern Algeria (Vigourus 1945).

In the normal course of events, a small boy would be sent or taken by his father to his own or a friend's business in the north to learn to trade.² He is brought home to the Mzab at the age of between fourteen and sixteen to marry, then returns to the north and pays periodical visits to his home until he has made enough capital to take things easier, look after his family and his property, and concern himself earnestly with his salvation. Since he cannot spend money on luxuries, he makes investments, he marries frequently but never more than one wife at a time (which, of course, means a fresh payment for every wife), he endows his mosque so that the clergy is kept and every child can be taught, and – last but not least – he improves his garden and his summer-house, which is costly, because it needs constant care and the employment of servants and animals to draw water, keep the

¹Mercier (1922, p.51), in this context, points out the effect of 'une logique collective et emotionnelle', as opposed to practical, individual reasoning.

²It is estimated that about 5000 Mozabites, or about one-sixth, are absent from their homes every year (Capot-Rey 1953, p.164).

water-channels in repair, add fresh soil and fertilizers, and look after the plants and trees. 'The Mozabite,' said Gautier (1923, p.153), 'is a shrewd business man from the Tell who – at ruinous expense – keeps a country-house in the Sahara' (see also Charlet-Cozon 1905, p.68; Capot-Rey 1953, p.320).

Judging by appearances, this would seem true. But nothing is quite what it seems in the Mzab. The State of Secrecy still obtains, and although there may not be very much more to hide now, it was not so long ago that little was known about the Beni Mzab except that one met them everywhere. In 1878 Émile Masqueray visited the Mzab and, as the first outsider of any race or creed, was allowed to see and then to copy one of the important Mozabite books, the *Chronicle* of Abu Zakaria (Masqueray tr. 1879). Some years later he was given insight into the *qawānīn*, or written laws of the Mzab,¹ and thus opened up the Mzab as a field of study. In 1882 France annexed the Mzab and made Ghardaya the military headquarters of a territory stretching from Jelfa in the north to El Golea in the south. The Beni Mzab co-operated willingly with the French administration, and accepted nominated caids, French law-courts, mission-schools, and hospitals, while the French, of course, respected their religious practices and customs, including that of locking the gates of their cities every night when the strangers had left (Robin 1884).

It was not until 1925, when Mlle Goichon came to live in the Mzab, gained the confidence of some women, and was able to study family life, that any particulars concerning the life of women and small children became known at all. And incidentally, stories of massacres, assassinations, and religious upheavals came to light that had happened during the preceding thirty or forty years without ever so much as a murmur reaching the world outside.

The role of the women is determined by one fundamental law: no Mozabite woman is ever allowed to leave the Mzab (Goichon 1927, p.1).² Apart from the hived-off colonies, no Mozabite woman is found in any other place. William Marçais, in his preface to Mlle Goichon's important work, calls the women the armature of Mozabite society; they do, indeed, hold it together, since a man cannot take his family when he goes away and would lose it altogether if he did not return. The women of the Mzab are, therefore, in a very special sense the guardians of the hearth not only of the family but of the whole city; and since young wives of the age of twelve or thirteen can hardly be expected to run a family and a household in a fully responsible manner, the city-fathers set up an authority whose duty it is to supervise the conduct of the women and to see that they observe the laws strictly and that the children are brought up in the correct way. This authority is vested in the guild or order of women who wash and lay out the bodies of the dead – in French, *les laveuses des morts* (Goichon 1927, pp.220 ff.).

The women who fill this office, which is unpaid and highly respectable, are chosen by the clerks from among the most virtuous, capable, and intelligent matrons of the town. Their influence on family life is all-pervading, and they are feared and respected, because they have access to every house, they must be consulted on all occasions, and they have the disciplinary power of excommunication, delegated to them by the *ḥalqa*. It may be believed that they do their duty conscientiously, methodically, and strictly.

Their principal function is to teach. The dogma that all Muslims are equal includes women, who have therefore to be taught to understand the Koran and to understand their prayers, for prayers merely recited do not go to heaven (Masqueray 1886, p.57). They have also to be taught something of the laws and the history of their city and sect. Women do

¹In the Mzab, these laws, although not codified, are written down and registered, while in the Berber townships of the Aures and in Kabylia, where religious government is absent, they are preserved by oral tradition only (Masqueray 1886, p.50).

²This law is discussed by Zeys (1886), Morand (1910, ch. 11), and other authorities.

not go to the mosque, so the *laveuses* lead their prayers and occasionally preach to them. They are really female clergy, dons, and provost-marshals, all in one.

There are five *laveuses* in Ghardaya. There are also five men in this city who perform the same pious office on the bodies of men. The *laveuses* deal only with women, dead and alive. Once a year, the *laveuses* from the five cities of the Mzab meet in conference to exchange information, learn from one another's experiences, revise old regulations, and define any modern transgressions or deviations from proper behaviour.

Every detail in the conduct of a woman is regulated: her dress, her ornaments, her hair style, her use of cosmetics (which is allowed in certain ways, forbidden in others), and her deportment in the street (provided she is allowed to leave the house). She must not show her hand to a man when paying in a shop; it must be covered by a corner of her garment. She may not dance, nor sing at a feast, although singing at work is allowed if the text is approved. She is forbidden to weep over the body of a dead person (be it her own child or mother) – Arab weeping-women are engaged to do that, Mozabite women remain silent. She must not raise her voice in laughter, in conversation, or when calling someone – one calls by clapping one's hands. She is forbidden to speak from roof-terrace to roof-terrace, and so on.

Children are reared in equally precise and strict ways. For example, a baby is made to stand upright in its second month; it is exercised by being held up by the feet, head downwards, and having its back and sides slapped; it is rocked on the left knee, the mother's left foot resting on the right knee. The baby is carried on the arms while it is in swaddling-clothes, and later astride on the left hip – never on the mother's back.

A Mozabite woman may not marry a stranger, but men are allowed to marry women of other races and creeds, including Christians and Jewesses.¹ She retains her father's surname, but in all other respects passes into the family of her husband. In the husband's absence it is his mother who supervises the household, lives in the house if possible, and exercises authority.

Shortly after the annexation of the Mzab by France, European observers began to speculate how long the medieval and reactionary society of the pentapolis could survive close contact with the progressive, scientific, and rational forces of the modern age. E. Zeys, a lawyer and humanist, advocated annulment of the law prohibiting the emigration of women and looked forward to the emigration of whole families from the inhospitable valley and to the 'victory of civilization' (Zeys 1886, p.54). Dr Amat, army physician and scientist, who gave the first accurate account of the valley and its people, predicted the rapid decadence of the Mzab for economic and social reasons. He argued that the loss of the slave trade, improved transport, and above all the newly-found security would tempt the people from their walled cities in the desert and draw them to the easier and more comfortable life in the fertile regions of North Africa (Amat 1888).

It has already been suggested that the determination of the Beni Mzab not to mingle with the population of the country, but to maintain their homes and families in the desert and to wish to die and be buried in their native valley, is founded on pride in their exceptional faith, in the sacrifices which this demands, and on the superior attitude towards the world which it engenders. However, a traditional social group on the defence could not resist the pressure of 20th-century Western civilization by will-power alone; it would have to dispose of considerable material, spiritual, and intellectual resources, to make good that defence. Does Mozabite society possess these resources?

If it is true to say that tribal and traditional societies succumb to Western influence

¹Except in Beni Isguen, the 'holy city', where marriage with a non-Mozabite woman entails banishment (Morand 1910, p.442).

principally through poverty, ignorance, and inferior organization, it follows that the Beni Mzab are protected by their wealth, education, and privileged urban government. They are sufficiently in command of modern commercial practice and capitalist procedure to hold their own in highly competitive markets, they have long been familiar with European ways and languages, and their domestic authorities, who admit no strangers, have to contend only with traditional problems. But these meritorious or fortunate circumstances would be of little avail without the spiritual strength of this community. As in the case of Calvinism and its insistence on personal responsibility, discipline, and asceticism, the acquisition of wealth is not allowed to become merely an instrument of individual advantage, but remains a moral duty with the aim of glorifying God and sustaining the community. So the Mzab is still a theocracy and a society of equals.

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LEGENDS TO PLATES

(ALL PHOTOGRAPHS WERE TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR DURING A VISIT IN 1951)

PLATE I

Ghardaya and the Mzab Valley from Melika. The photograph was taken a day or two after a heavy rainfall. The barrage is designed to create surface and subterranean reservoirs, and well-heads can be seen in the middle distance. The valley, where it widens and accommodates the five cities, is 7 kilometres long and from 800 to 1800 metres wide, its sides rising to a height of about 80 metres. The surface is sandy. The walls of the cities are from 4 to 5 metres high, carry irregular crenellations, and are in places reinforced by towers.

Tirest or Well Operated by Animal-Power. By a system of horizontal haulage, the animal, walking away from the well-head, lifts a skin which holds between 10 and 13 gallons. The contents of this are emptied into a tank, from which the water is distributed to a number of *segghias* or water-channels.

Pollinating a Palm-Tree. A bunch of male inflorescence is tied to a bunch of female flowers. During the work a special prayer is sung in a loud voice resembling a street-vendor's cries.

PLATE II

Ghardaya from the French Borj (Fort). The foreign quarters are grouped round the foot of the hill on which the old city stands. This is walled, and no strangers reside in it.

The Market-Place at Ghardaya. Arab tribesmen are selling wool and animals in the market, which lies outside the old city walls. The buildings are made of stone and *timshent*, a very hard mortar, their arches being formed with the help of palm-branches.

The Ghardaya Mosque. The interior is whitewashed and bare, and the floor covered with mats. The shape of the minarets is characteristic of Mozabite mosques. The seated figure is a Sha'amba Arab.

PLATE III

Beni Isguen, the 'Holy City', from Melika. The learned clerks of Beni Isguen are the acknowledged guardians of Mozabite doctrine, and the city's rules of conduct are the strictest in the Mzab.

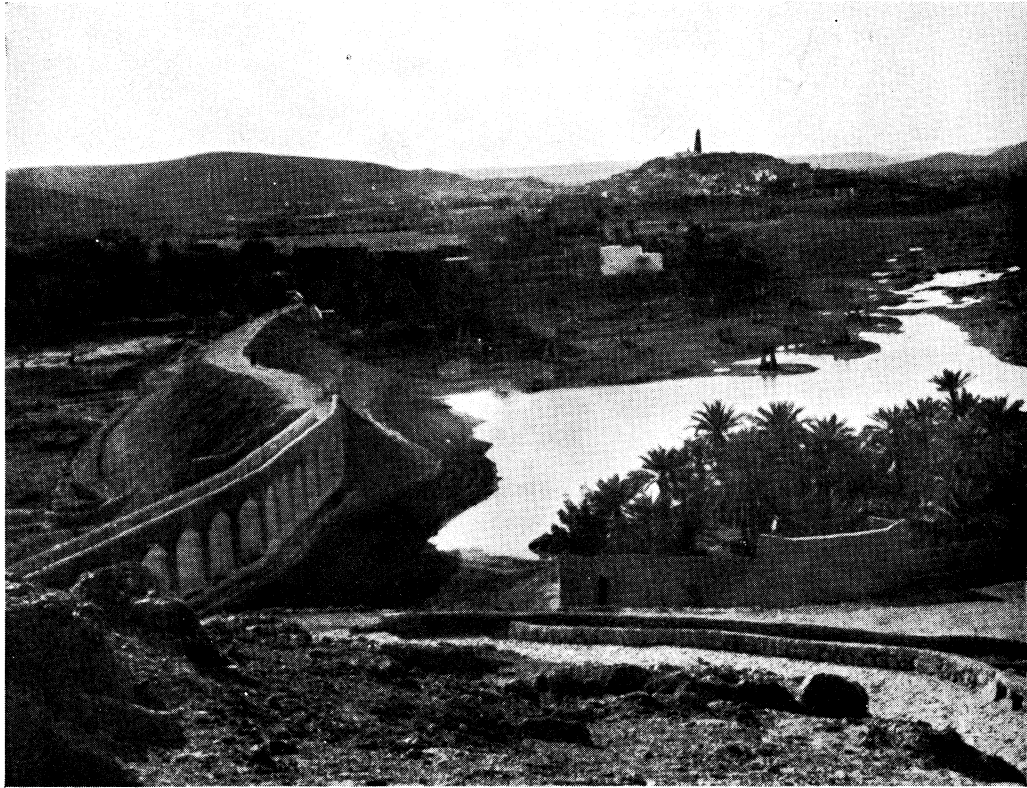
Beni Isguen from a Watch-Tower. The city is kept scrupulously clean. Smoking, singing, whistling, or any unseemly noise in the streets is forbidden, and strangers who do not conform are asked to leave.

PLATE IV

The City of Bou Noura. Bou Noura and El Ateuf lie below Beni Isguen, Melika, and Ghardaya on the Mzab River and are slowly being starved of water. Both cities have been ravaged by fierce civil strife and each is split into hostile camps.

The Cemetery at Melika. A typical Mozabite burial-place, ruled by strict uniformity. None of the stones are marked.

GHARDAÏA AND THE Mزاب VALLEY FROM MELIKA



TIREST OR WELL OPERATED BY ANIMAL-POWER



POLLINATING A PALM-TREE



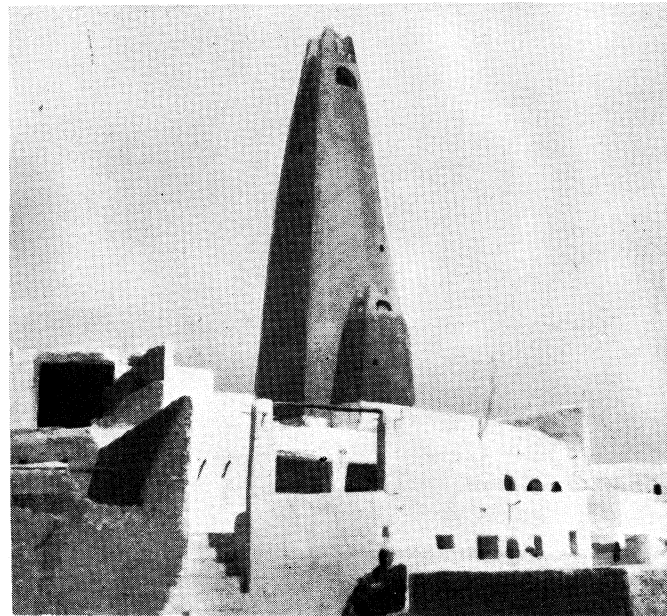
GHARDAYA FROM THE FRENCH *BORJ*



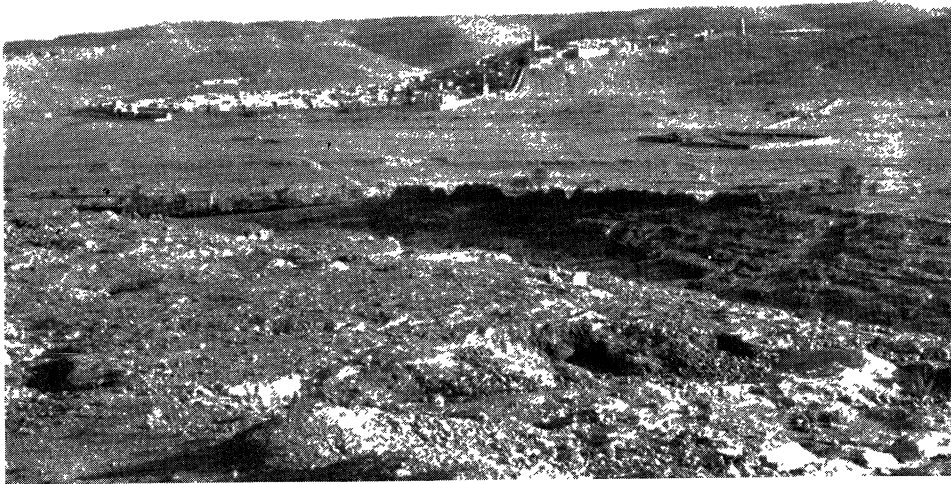
THE MARKET-PLACE AT GHARDAYA



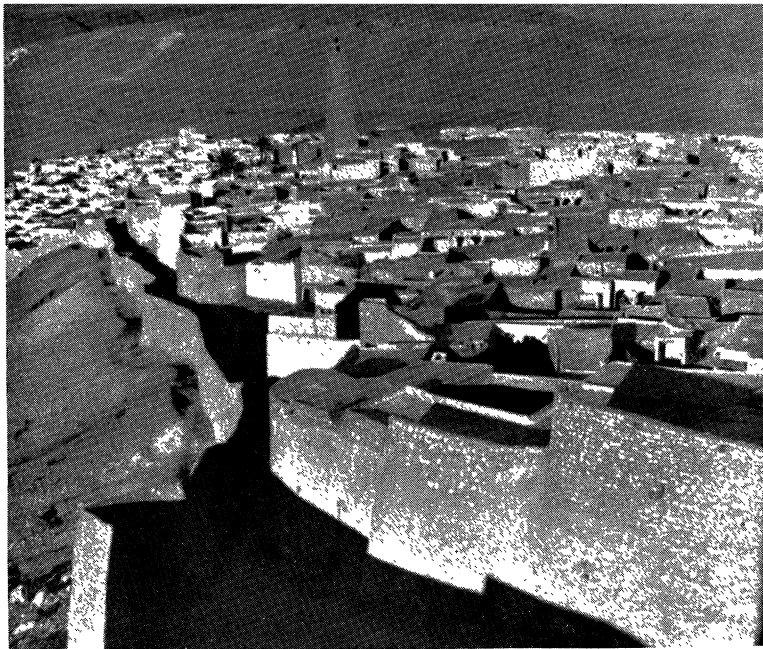
THE GHARDAYA MOSQUE



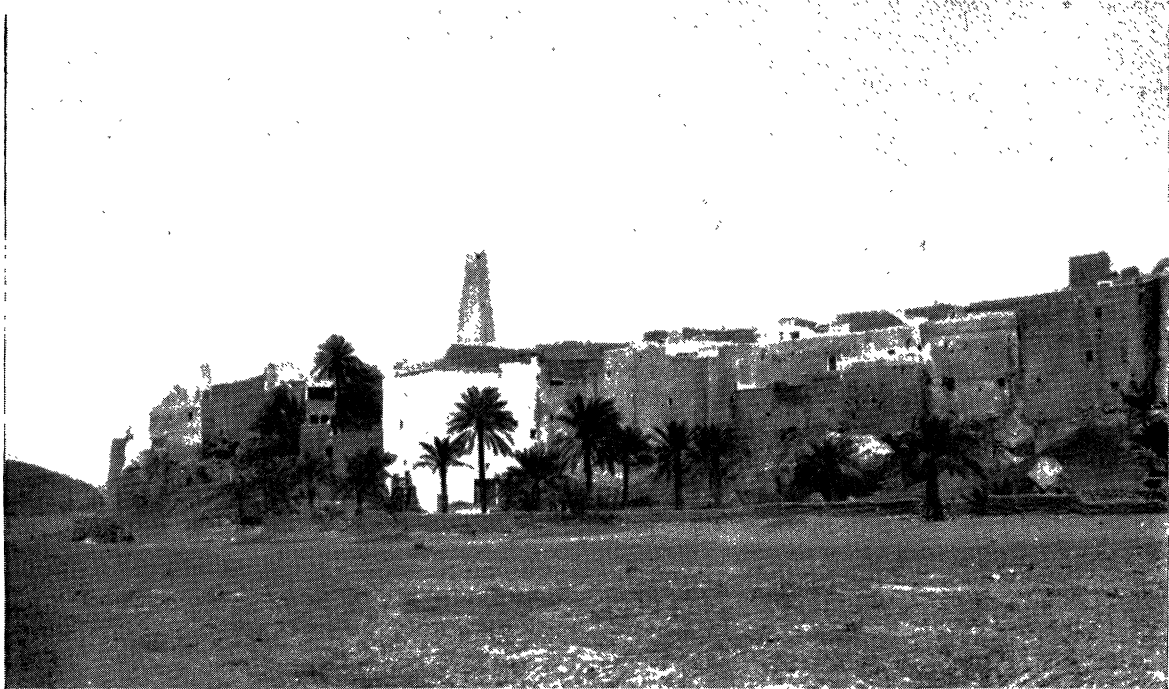
BENI ISGUEN, THE 'HOLY CITY', FROM MELIKA



THE WALLS OF BENI ISGUEN FROM A WATCH-TOWER



THE CITY OF BOU NOURA



THE CEMETERY AT MELIKA

