Éveil d'une nation / *Ṣaḥwat umma*

By M'HAMED OUALDI

Children from schools, families from various parts of Tunisia, articles in the international press, including *The New York Times* and *Le Monde*: the exhibition *L'éveil d'une nation / Ṣaḥwat umma* (The Awakening of a Nation), on display in Tunis from November 27, is a landmark event in Tunisian cultural life (AZIMI; GALL & BLAISE). Over 45,000 visitors become aware of the richness of precolonial times and of the need to reconsider the nineteenth century in Tunisia and other former provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

Opening the doors of the abandoned palace of Ksar Saïd in the western suburbs of the Tunisian capital and uncovering portraits, medals, military and civilian costumes—hitherto stored in the state archives—, the curator of the exhibition, Ridha Moumni (Riḍā Mūminī), and its patron Olfa (Ulfā) Rambourg want to tell the story of the Tunisian state reforms in the second half of the nineteenth century, the story of the “awakening of a nation.” In the exhibition, they emphasize this period of reforms as a founding moment, as a first Tunisian “modernization,” that connected the country to a European modernity. They highlight the portraits of beys (i.e., rulers of the Ottoman province of Tunis) and their high-ranking officials painted by European artists in a region where, due to Islamic norms, figurative representations had hitherto remained very rare. Each of these portraits shows the dignitaries in European military uniforms, adopted from the 1830s, in complete rupture with former Ottoman outfits. Between these regalia of a new time, original texts of the reforms, written in Arabic, are on display: the beylical decree of 1846 which outlawed the slave trade two years before the abolition of slavery in France; the Fundamental Pact of 1857, which granted rights to Jewish and Christian minorities, including the right to acquire property; excerpts from the Tunisian Constitution (or *qānūn*) of 1861, the first constitution in the Muslim world that established a new legal hierarchy as well as elements of control of beylical rulers, including a civil list for this dynasty [[↗ Commemoration / Memorial Days](#)].

The rationale for this kind of exhibition and for encouraging such admiration for all the features of this new state culture is explained at the entrance of the exhibition and in interviews given to the press as an “apolitical” act, born out of a pure desire to recover an “unknown” past. But the very beautiful staging of the first tokens of Tunisian political modernity is in many ways very much in line with the way the story of reforming Tunisia has been conceived and been taught in this country for more than sixty years. The main aim of such a way of narrating history after the country’s independence in 1956 seems to be to remind us that Tunisia has existed before the French colonial rule and that its leaders were already farsighted: as pioneers, they had begun to shape a nation [[↗ Father Figures](#)]. The story of a necessary “modernization” of the country from above that national rulers have always stressed has been analyzed and questioned by historians and political scientists ever since then. Advocacy for a European-style modernity also caused disillusionment among the population in the face of the authoritarian excesses of postcolonial regimes.

However, if one goes beyond this storytelling, some of the paintings and historical documents displayed in the exhibition can open up other ways to devise and to understand

the second half of the nineteenth century. On one of the walls are exhibited documents sent from Istanbul that resituate the province of Tunis into its Ottoman context and make the national narrative of a Tunisian exceptionality less absolute. In another room, a painting depicts the violent repression of tribesmen in the holy city of Kairouan. In an exhibition that, by definition, is centered on the elite of the Tunisian government, it is one of the very few representations of the Bey and his troops repressing the great popular uprisings of 1864 against fiscal and legal reforms. This valuable document could inspire a whole new exhibition about popular will [↗**“The System” vs. “The People”**], more than six years after the revolution that overthrew President Ben Ali’s dictatorship and gave birth to a democratic regime. It is here that the true contribution of this exhibition resides: it encourages its visitors to participate in the heated debates that are going on today in Tunisia about history and “national identity”; it forces historians who walk through this exhibition to envision other cultural events of a similar magnitude. It forces us to be aware of the great difficulty of realizing and making others understand other stories less centered on the state and the nation [↗**Past vs. Present**].

The exhibition ends in a moving way on an apparently banal object that, however, embodies a traumatic moment in the history of this country: the round table on which was signed—in 1881 and in the very same palace where the exhibition is held, the Ksar Saïd [Qsar al-Saïd]—the treaty leading the way to the occupation of Tunisia by the French army. The establishment of the French Protectorate was the moment when all the insignia of the Tunisian monarchy still displayed in the second half of the nineteenth century lost their real power. But it was only at the independence of Tunisia in 1956 that this table and other objects from the same period were covered with white sheets and left to accumulate dust—the dynasty of the Ḥusaynid beys, regents of Tunisia from 1705 to 1957, now being regarded as an “ancien regime”.

Related Entries

ARRAYS – Commemoration / Memorial Days ♦ Father Figures

CODES – Past vs. Present ♦ “The System” vs. “The People”

References

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