

# The higher education system in Tunisia before 1956

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**Abstract.** *My interest after my studies of computer engineering in Tunisia for using this discipline in practice for the benefit of this country led me to the doctoral school of history of science and technically to the FEE CTU in Prague. I am mainly interested in the period of the 1980s, which is the content of my thesis, and which requires archival work, a study of the existing literature on the subject, and a subsequent in-depth analysis of the development of the education in Tunisia, which preceded the inclusion of IT courses in Tunisian universities. My master's studies were devoted to computer science, I have the technical prerequisites to understand the application of computer science in Tunisia, but I still do not have a relevant background for the historical evolution and the conceptualization of the system education in Tunisia, especially after its independence from France (after 1956). This is why I have chosen for this study as the main question the mapping of the university teaching in Tunisia before 1956.*

## Keywords

History of Science and Technology, History of Education, Tunisia, Educational reforms, before 1956.

## 1. Introduction

The starting point for the research was the situation before the establishment of the Protectorate and the approach of domestic elites to reforms in education and understanding the role of France in the creation of the colonial system in relation to the experiences and ideas of the main representatives of the colonial administration in Tunisia.

The methodology to be applied is based on the perspective of the history of education, which emphasizes the interaction between education and society, seeking to address the development of educational institutions and identify the intellectual forces, political and social involved. This perspective understands the role of education in the historical process and pays attention to the

external influences that shape and transform it, in other words, this line of research focuses on the network of relationships that links education to the society. Finally, this perspective conceives education as the mirror of the problems and aspirations of an era, the entry into the understanding of societies, of know-how and know-how accumulated over time. It should be noted that the objective of this article is to approach and to reflect on the educational situation of the 20th century in Tunisia. Within this framework, I established the following hypotheses: What is the relationship between education and the development of the educational system with the construction of national identity? What role do Islam, the Arabic and French languages play in Tunisia in the development and dissemination of education during the time period to be studied? What were the results of these educational reforms?

In order to determine the horizontal development of education in Tunisia, I will have to go through many archival documents in the future, which I do not, however, have at my disposal yet<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, my article will be based on the consultation of the Laws and Decrees related to the educational reforms decreed by the Tunisian government, a selection of the professional historical literature at my disposal, both by Tunisian and French authors.

## 2. Historical context of the education in Tunisia

The starting point of the historical context for studying educational reforms is the beginning of the process of independence of Tunisia from the French colonial power, but it is essential, in a concise way, to understand how and why the project of Tunisian emancipation was triggered. It is a question of situating it in 1881, with the entry and occupation of French troops in Tunisia<sup>2</sup>, which succeeded in imposing themselves against the domination exercised by the local rulers of the Ottoman Empire,

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives in Tunisia and documents of the Ministry of Education, Archives of the University of Sfax, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France, CARAN - educational systems in France.

<sup>2</sup> During the second half of the 19th century, Tunisia's institutional balance came under pressure from the European powers, France and Britain, to integrate liberal principles such as equality before the law and taxation, freedom religion, freedom

of trade, the abolition of monopolies and the granting to foreigners of the right of access to property. See CHOUIKHA, Larbi and GOBE, Éric, *Histoire de la Tunisie depuis l'indépendance*, La Découverte, France, 2015, p. 10.

the *Beys*<sup>3</sup>, who had built a society segmented into tribes, clans, villages and urban castes, but which failed to create a political community or to define a public interest, a defender of Islam and an administrator of justice and where individuals, a compact state, strangled by debt, which collected taxes in return for protecting its subjects from internal disorder and external enemies<sup>4</sup>.

France, through the figure of the protectorate, subtly subjugates sovereignty in administrative, judicial, and financial decisions and reforms, avoiding the formal annexation of Tunisia. The economic and social transformations of the country induced by France led to a recomposing of Tunisian society, giving rise to the emergence of a local bourgeoisie, the development of waged agricultural work, the sedentarization of nomadic or semi-nomadic Bedouins and to the emergence of a working class linked in particular to the mining sector. In addition, the traditional elite, the *khâssa*, joined the liberal professions introduced by the colonizer, that is to say the training of lawyer, doctor, pharmacist, among others. The result is a remarkable accumulation of educational capital, especially bilingual, transformations that also affect members of the petty bourgeoisie linked to small trade, crafts, and the cultivation of olive<sup>5</sup>.

The impact of this cultural and social change generated a new elite of intellectuals, close to the popular sectors, which created the first Tunisian nationalist and emancipatory political party, the *Neo-Destour*, in 1934. It is in this scenario that appears the figure of Habib Bourguiba<sup>6</sup>, founding member of the party already mentioned, who will become the undisputed leader of the Tunisian nation. Bourguiba, on the way to seizing power and controlling the state apparatus, enjoys the support of the Tunisian Communist Party and especially of the General Union of Tunisian Workers, people trained in the liberal professions, civil servants, part of the petty bourgeoisie, employees, and workers in the public and private sectors. But he must face the hostility of the religious elite of *Zitouna*<sup>7</sup> (FIG. No 1), because of his claim to reform certain practices and institutions of Islam and, within his own party, that of Salah Ben Youssef, secretary general. The dispute lies in the fact that Bourguiba based his political project on Western instrumental norms and values, the ideas of progress, rationality, and modernization, while Youssef, who was ultimately defeated, exiled and assassinated, defended a discourse Arab nationalist based on Islam.



Fig. 1. Ez-Zitouna Mosque, in 1890 with the old minaret, place of classes before 1960 (Source: Profburp user.)

### 3. Reforms in the French Protectorate

The reformers Machuel, Cambon, Millet and Lavigerie (they come from France) held republican views, they were aware of the need to promote the French language and through it to consolidate French power in Tunisia. Therefore, the cooperation of secular and religious circles worked in Tunisia, even if the two groups were at odds in continental France. In Tunisia, however, they were based on a common agenda based on French. This was especially strengthened by the spread of the Alliance française, whose members were the above-mentioned reformers. A large number of Tunisians and Beys signed up for the Alliance française, so a platform was formed outside the state administration with a unified goal, which was to spread the French language and strengthen France's position in Tunisia. During the 19th century, Tunisia had to come to terms with the European reality brought by the French, which led the country to reform the state administration and the school system. Following the Ottoman Empire, Tunisia also used the experience of Cairo and Istanbul. The second educational reform implemented by *Hayreddin* in *Sadiqiya* she was important for the suppression of Bard's school. This school arose out of the first reform during the reign of Ahmad Bey. *Sadiqiya* was a reform establishing the regulation of higher education. University mosque in *Sadiqiya* was also partly created as a supplement to *Ez-Zitouna* at the time when *Hayreddin* was introducing reforms.

Similar to this was the support of *khaldouniye* formed outside the official Psolechen structures. In Tunisia, protectorate treaties included all schools under the jurisdiction of the Education Authority, including *kuttabs* (a network of elementary schools in each village, in which the trivium and memorization of the Koran were taught, the number of students was around 15,000, more than a fifth lived in the capital)<sup>8</sup>, *madrassas* (boarding schools attached

<sup>3</sup> Beys: Turkish title which originally designates a "clan chief". In precolonial Tunisia, he was, after the conquest of Tunis by the Ottomans in the 16th century, the officer responsible for collecting taxes from the inside the country during biannual tax expeditions. At the beginning of the 16th century, he established himself as the first political figure in the country. See CHOUIKHA, Larbi and GOBE, Éric, *Histoire de la Tunisie depuis l'indépendance*, La Découverte, France, 2015, p. 10

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Founding member and first secretary general of the Neo-Destour. Born in Monastir, probably between 1901 and 1903, he was the last son of a large family of the Sahelian petty bourgeoisie. He studied at the Sadiki school, considered a

hotbed of nationalism, and at the Lycée Carnot. He studied law in France. He returned to Tunisia in 1927, where he established himself as a lawyer. He was also distinguished by his solid and dual Arab and French culture, influenced by positivist rationalism, and by being an effective organizer and pragmatic negotiator. He died in 2000. See CHOUIKHA, Larbi and GOBE, Éric, *Histoire de la Tunisie depuis l'indépendance*, La Découverte, France, 2015, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> The great mosque-university of Tunis in which the ulemas were trained - the scholars versed in religious sciences, that is to say the teachers, the cadis (judges) and the muftis. See CHOUIKHA, Larbi and GOBE, Éric, *Histoire de la Tunisie depuis l'indépendance*, La Découverte, France, 2015, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> BROWN, L. Carl. *The Tunisia of Ahmad Bey, 1837-1855*, 1974, p. 149-151.

to mosques in larger cities, especially in Kairouan, Sfax, Tunis, the basis was Islamic law) and *Ez-Zitouna* (at the main Tunisian mosque. In essence, it was a larger madrasa, but in its meaning it was more like a university, the number of students was approx. 800)<sup>9</sup>. Another traditional element of Tunisian education was the *palace schools in Bard*, where members of the ruling dynasty and prominent Mamluks studied under the supervision of private teachers. On the basis of this school, a polytechnic was established in Bard in 1840. In 1855 it was reformed into a military academy<sup>10</sup>.

Reformer *Hayreddin* was aware of the need to improve the education system. The first his step was the introduction of secular subjects in Ez-Zaytoun in 1874, such as mathematics, literature and history, and the supervision of the Minister of Education in 1876. However, this did not change the traditional religious methodology based on memorization. However, *Hayreddin*'s main contribution in the field of education was the establishment of *Sadiqiya* in 1875, which was to provide the teaching of the Qur'an and related jurisprudence as well as modern education in the style of the French lycées, including foreign languages. Graduates of *Sadiqiya* soon began to compete with *Ez-Zitouna* graduates for clerical positions.

In Tunisia, schools were built without destroying the original ones according to Cambron's slogan "build without destroying". Machuel did not interfere with kuttabs, but tried to show that French schools were more modern and promising. It was a mass education effort based on a unified language, which was appropriately followed by the development of the Tunisian cultural background. As a result, the preferred type of school in Tunisia was a mixed French-Arabic system, in which French and Arabic were taught in order to connect the cultures and thus facilitate their coexistence. The main reformers were around 40 when they arrived in Tunisia (Lavigerie was a little older). They all experienced defeat in France during the Franco-Prussian War (1870) and experienced the beginning of the French Third Republic. They also had to deal with the dispute between secularism and Catholicism and also between republicanism and monarchism. In this dispute, all subscribed to the republican tradition. Machuel, Cambon and Millet form an equal partnership based on mutual respect for each other's experience. Moreover, they all met directly in Tunisia.

The *University of Ez-Zitouna* is considered the first university established in Tunisia, it is a university located in Montfleury (Tunisia), in the Great Mosque of *Ez-Zitouna* for more than a thousand years. It is the oldest educational institution in the Arab world, as a school was founded there in 737. Among its distinguished medieval teachers or pupils were Sidi Ali ibn Ziyad, the jurist Malik ibn Arafah, the sociological predecessor of Ibn Khaldun. Many scholars and Alous came to lecture here, such as Ibn al-Abbar (died 1259), Ibn Asfur (died 1270), Hazim of Cartagena (died 1285), and Ibn al-Qumaz (died 1293). Mathematician Ubaili (mortgage 1356). Also Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashour, Taher Haddad, Abdul Aziz al-Tha'labi, jurist and judge Muhammad ibn Ammar, reformer of Algeria Abdul Hamid ibn Badis, history of Algeria Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, the president of Algeria Houari Boumediene or also known as Abou al-Qasim al-Chebbi, and a remarkable study in modern times.

After the independence of Tunisia, on April 26, 1956, the modern University of *Ez-Zitouna* was established. Educational reforms in 1958 (FIG No 2) and the creation of the Tunisian University in 1960 reduced the importance of the *zitouna*. The University Library was also incorporated into the National Library of Tunisia. *Ez-Zitouna* University was replaced on March 1, 1961 by the *Ez-Zitouna* Faculty of the Faculty of Law and Theology as an integral part of the University of Tunis. Its status as an independent university was abolished by President Habib Bourguiba in 1964–65, and it was also downgraded to a seminary at the University of Tunisia. Under Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali, the educational institution remained officially and physically separate from the mosque itself. In 1987, the *Ez-Zitouna* name was restored after the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali changed its name under Bourguiba's management.

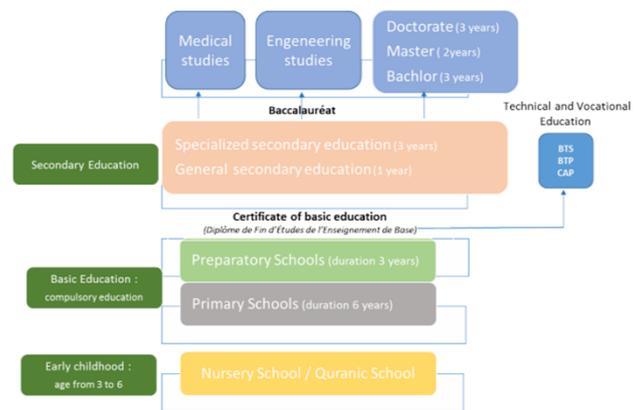


Fig. 2. The Tunisian education system after 1956 (Source: Tunisian Technical Cooperation Agency (TTCA).)

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## 4. Conclusion

The construction of Tunisian nation, through its history, its mentality and its particular religious tradition, involves an element of differentiation from the so-called nation-state which was born with the advent of capitalist modernity and which has its epicentre in the tradition, mentality and Western European history. Tunisia is an interesting case, because it allows us to understand how

<sup>9</sup> BROWN, L. Carl. *The Tunisia of Ahmad Bey, 1837-1855*, 1974, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> OUALDI, Mohamed. *À l'école des palais: les maîtrises de l'écrit parmi les mamelouks des beys de Tunis, des années 1770 aux années 1860*. 2009, § 27.

culture is built from the local, but also from the “ex-foreign”, the “intruder”. The European element, i.e. liberal ideas of progress, nation-state building, industrial development, individualism, democracy and the separation of state and religion entered in Tunisia over time, both under the pressure of the English and the French during the Ottoman domination, which crystallized with the process of French colonization and were legitimized by the project carried out by President Bourguiba. The education during the period studied was more in line with the ideas of the West, that is, to train individuals to strengthen the productive engine of the country, hence the fundamental importance of establishment of an educational system, which is nothing other than the institutionalization of knowledge, the establishment of a normative framework which defines which knowledge is more important than others. In other words, these new ideas are transmitted from outside, sometimes by imposition, in other cases in a "negotiated" way, almost surreptitiously, and are incorporated, assimilated and reinterpreted into the daily life of society.

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