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## The Tunisian Women in the Era of Independence<sup>(1)</sup>

In a long article published by Zeynab Cherny Ben Said in the magazine of IBLA, Institut des Belles lettres Arabes in Tunisia, the author discusses the impact of the era of independence which began in 1956, on the status of Tunisian women. She tries to show the gains obtained by women through the leadership and encouragement of the former president Al-Habib Bou-Rqibah.

The new era promised a change in family relationships and an improvement in women's status. Its main achievements have been the abolition of endogamous marriage, i.e. marriage restricted to cousins and other close relatives, proclamation of the freedom of marriage outside one's family and most important, the abolition of polygyny.

The new law gives equal rights to spouses in matters of divorce, limits the age of marriage, forbids unrestricted divorce practiced by men, declares that marriage is an agreement between two persons enjoying free choice and judgement. It ensures the strengthening of central authority and the abolition of the right of privileged families to neglect the exploitation of commonly owned lands. This practice violates the capitalist principle requiring the full exploitation of land that it may yield the highest possible income.

### Disadvantages of Tribalism

The ideology adopted by the new regime imposes a struggle against tribalism and clannish loyalty which indicate a primitive way of living, characterized by individuality, jealousy and inability to unite. Tribalism refuses to identify with the state, to which it becomes a rival. "Blood ties" says Foucault, the French philosopher, "act as a means of preventing social disintegration through the revival of the extended family and the traditions binding together family alliances. In a country exposed to famine, epidemics and violence, blood ties are necessary for survival. Only a strong state can work to eliminate the above mentioned causes of disintegration and confirm its power over tribal divisions."

### Planning Policy

The economic crisis of 1956-1961 obliged the government to act directly in order to ensure a minimum income of 50 dinars per year for the least privileged classes. Mechanized industry was encouraged, exportation was increased, a three-year plan, followed by a four-year plan, were successively adopted. Cooperatives multiplied, campaigns against illiteracy were organized under the name of "struggle against underdevelopment". Offices of professional training were created and women's work in factories was encouraged. Family planning was introduced with the aim of establishing an equilibrium between national income and the rate of population growth.

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(1) Cherny Ben Said, Zeinab. "Tunisian Women and Independence" IBLA. No. 159, 1987.

## What role should be assigned to women?

Tunisian ideology of the independence period oscillates between woman's role as educator and social guide and that of a participator in national development. Tunisian leaders are generally influenced by the ideas of Muhammad Abdo, Qassem Amin and Al-Taher Haddad, from the early twentieth century, when a differentiation between the roles of men and women was the rule. "A woman is a factor of stability within the disturbances that shake the country. She is a guardian of the lasting virtues. The new woman shall be a symbol of renewal, endowed as she is with intrinsic wisdom and spirituality which transcend pure intelligence." Besides abstract generalizations, there are also concrete statements affirming woman's capacity to handle social projects such as child care, teaching the illiterate, helping the needy, the sick and the distressed.

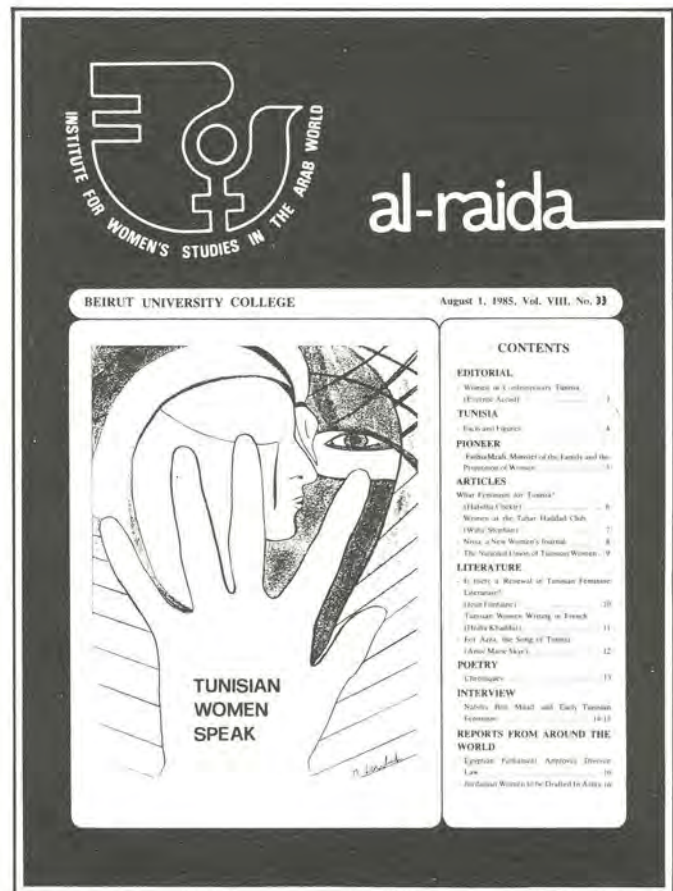
The intervention of the state in favour of woman's promotion produced two images of her: one is the image of the working woman, free from family duties and entirely devoted to her work. The other, that of the family woman, mother of the new generation. The two images meet or clash, but both are considered necessary for the application of national ideology. The complexity of the feminine question prevent the development of a clear vision of it and the emergence of initiatives encouraging woman's work outside the home.

## Conclusion

The personal status laws adopted by Tunisia are considered more evolutionary than any other laws of the same category applied in the Arab world. The Tunisian code is the only one that requires unconditional elimination of polygyny and considers females as sole beneficiaries of an inheritance in the absence of male heirs, a regulation which Tunisians share with the Shi'a sect. It may be proper to mention, in this connection, that the personal status laws are still under study in many Arab countries. In Algeria, for example, the code which was formulated a few years ago was strongly opposed by the feminine associations and consequently suspended.

Besides the problem of family laws, Arab countries have to face economic and social problems connected with woman's status. The era of independence, which achieved a number of reforms in favour of women, has not been able to apply the U.N. Charter which stands for equal rights between the sexes. The Tunisian law of inheritance, like that applied in other Arab countries, still allots to women half of the share allotted to men in inheritance.

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For more information on Tunisian Women, see Al-Raida, August 1, 1985, Vol. VIII, No.33, (Available at the Institute).