

CHAPTER 6

Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette (Tunisia) An Interreligious Crossing

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Abstract

The Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette (Tunisia) is an emblematic case for studying a Mediterranean crossing. Worship of Mary arrived in Tunis with Sicilian migrants, chiefly in the decades between the 19th and 20th centuries. During that period, La Goulette was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious town: Tunisians, Sicilians, French, and Maltese, and Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived there all together. Since 1885, in La Goulette, there has been a procession on 15 August in which both Jews and Muslims have participated. Tunisian independence disrupted this phenomenon: since 1962, the procession has been forbidden. On 15 August 2017, after 55 years, the Virgin Mary's procession returned to La Goulette, an event celebrated even by local Muslims. The 'new' Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette is the symbol of secularity – in the sense of *laïcité* – who sustains the rights of religious minorities in the public sphere. Alongside other contemporary multi-faith sites, La Goulette, the Virgin Mary of Trapani, and her procession have become

How to cite this book chapter:

Russo, Carmelo. 2022. 'Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette (Tunisia): An Inter-religious Crossing'. In *Locating the Mediterranean: Connections and Separations across Space and Time*, edited by Carl Rommel and Joseph John Viscomi, 129–51. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-18-6>.

less of a movement of the people and is now a larger symbol of the state and society at large.

Introduction: The Virgin Mary, the Migration, and the Mediterranean

In European and North American cities, immigration and religious diversity are related topics (Vertovec 2007). Debates regarding inter-religious dialogue, peaceful coexistence, multi-faith sites, etc. have revitalised public discourse in recent years. Nevertheless, multi-faith sites are not only contemporary and Western issues: until the first half of the 20th century, the Mediterranean world ‘hosted’ many religious sites and places of worship that were shared by different monotheistic believers (Albera 2005; Albera and Couroucli 2009). The Mediterranean area was a peripheral territory in a political and religious sense, both in the early modern world and in the contemporary one, between continuity and rupture, among relations, trade, and conflicts. The towns and cities on its shores constitute a porous boundary between the Christian and Muslim worlds that even housed scattered Jewish communities. In particular, in the North African landscape there were ‘mixed’ monotheistic places of worship and religious shrines attended by adherents to different religious communities (Albera and Couroucli 2009).

Starting from these premises, the aim of this chapter is to examine the case of the cult of the Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette, whose origins have their roots in a migration from Sicily to Tunisia.¹ Notre Dame de Trapani represents an example of how location and religious symbolism are deeply entangled with historical trajectories in the Mediterranean. Her worship is a case in point for studying religious interactions and multi-faith sites: between the 19th and 20th centuries, Christians, Jews, and Muslims were all devoted to her and attended her procession on 15 August, in La Goulette and broadly in Tunisia. Therefore, she is a means to explore how the religious locations functioned in the Mediterranean context, and her procession is a way of enacting or performing this pluralism. *Mutatis mutandis*, in recent years Mary’s procession in La Goulette continues to preserve her plural feature. After the difficult years that followed the ‘revolution’ of 2011, the procession of the Virgin of Trapani occurred in La Goulette on 15 August 2017, after 55 years. It took place in 2018 and 2019 too.

This chapter demonstrates that the procession of 2017 was not a nostalgic process linked to the past but rather it was connected to the present and the future of Tunisia. The ‘new’ Notre Dame de Trapani in La Goulette is more ‘Tunisian’ than ‘Sicilian’, judging by the event in 2017. She is the symbol of secularity who guards against menaces of Islamic extremism and who supports the rights of religious minorities. Nevertheless, the historical mythology and the rhetorical pluralism of the community in La Goulette constitute the basis for the readoption and the contemporary relevance of the Virgin and her procession. They are locating La Goulette in space and time, placing the town on a Mediterranean map of tourism by connecting its past to the present.

Tunisia and La Goulette as a Plural Ambiguous Context (19th–20th Centuries)

The history of Tunisia has long involved ‘ethnic’ pluralism. This country has always been a point of encounter and exchange, of autonomy and subjecthood in the context of competing Mediterranean empires (Lewis 2014, 22). In ancient times, Tunisian pluralism was composed of Phoenicians, Romans, the Kingdom of the Vandals, the Byzantine Empire, and Arabs. Since the medieval period, it had been central to the struggles for hegemony in the Mediterranean Sea, especially those between Spain and the Ottoman Empire, which symbolised the encounter and clash between Christianity and Islam. After 1705, the country formally existed as a vassal of the Turks, yet the Bey, the monarchs at the head of the Regency of Tunis, had a great deal of autonomy (Bessis 2019; Chérif 2008). Between the 15th and 16th centuries, different foreign components settled in the country. Among them were the Genoese in Tabarka (Gourdin 2008; Pignon 1980); European Jews, mostly after the Spanish crown drove them out of the Iberian Peninsula; people captured in Southern Europe to trade as slaves by raids of corsairs, mostly from South Italy (Bono 2005); and other slaves coming from sub-Saharan Africa, Andalusia, and Libya (Speziale 2016, 35).

In 1881, the French state and the Bey signed the Bardo Agreement, making Tunisia a French protectorate; only in 1956 would Tunisia regain its independence. Historians identify public works meant to ‘modernise’ the country promoted by the French Protectorate as the reason for enticing a new wave of Italian immigration in Tunisia.² The French undertook major improvements and developments in several

areas, including infrastructure, industry, transport, administration, public health and education, and the financial system (Kassab and Ounaies 2010, 352–54). Maltese workers, and many Italian ones, the vast majority from neighbouring Sicily – arrived in Tunisia attracted by employment opportunities, especially in factories and mines (Pasotti 1971, 16–17; Pendola 2007, 56–58), in accordance with a stereotypical scheme of ‘French capital and Italian labor’ (Pasotti 1971, 52–54). In particular, the French Protectorate promoted the building of the ‘*cit  nouvelle*’, the new European town – recognisable by its squared plan – east of the old Arab town, thus many Sicilians were employed as masons.

Certainly, there were poor, illiterate and proletarian Sicilians in Tunisia, who left the island because of the exploitation of workers, agricultural crisis, and political revolts of 1893–1894 (Renda 1963, 63–64). Others were rich landowners who preferred expatriation over the new political conditions after Italy’s national unification in 1861. From that date, still more Sicilians came to Tunisia because the Sicilian Mafia persecuted them, and Tunisia represented an escape from persecution and reprisals. However, some Sicilians migrated to Tunisia because they worked for the Mafia, whose networks, trade, and business extended into that country (Loth 1905, 331). They settled along north-eastern coastal areas, in rural villages, and in urban settlements, in which Sicilian presence was more concentrated (Lupo 1996 [1992], 154; Melfa 2008, 230–31).

Table 6.1: European presence in Tunisia between 1881 and 1911.

Year	France	Italy	Malta	Other Europe	Total
1881	700	11,200	7,000	100	19,000
1886	3,500	16,750	9,000	750	30,000
1891	10,000	21,000	11,700	750	43,450
1896	16,000	55,000	10,200	800	82,000
1901	24,000	71,000	12,000	4,000	111,000
1906	34,000	81,000	10,000	2,400	127,400
1911	46,000	88,000	11,300	2,700	148,000

Source: Pasotti 1971, 50.

For many decades, a paradoxical condition emerged: despite Tunisia being a French protectorate, Italian subjects continuously outnumbered French subjects, as [Table 6.1](#) shows (Pasotti 1971, 50).

The number of Italians surpassed 80,000 in 1906 and they stabilised around 90,000 until the Second World War (Passalacqua 2000, 218). The Italian presence was so significant that some scholars referred to Tunisia as ‘an Italian colony administered by French functionaries’ (Lewis 2016, 238). Sicilians were widely the majority. From 1891 until 1936, they ranged from 55 per cent to 75 per cent of the total population of Italians (Speziale 2016, 35). They represented themselves as proud of their origin, their culture, and their traditions, and attempted to bring with them many of the social institutions they had known in Sicily. Because of their numerousness, French right-wing politicians and newspapers soon began to spread the idea of the ‘Italian danger’, based on Sicilian ‘characters’, as dangerous for the daily life of other people. They depicted Sicilians as violent, rebellious, contrary to the Protectorate, and unfit for dignified work (Lewis 2014, 55; Pasotti 1971, 80; Loth 1905, 329–36).

Ordinary lives and sociality in Tunisia at the turn of the century were marked by ambiguity and an imbalance in power: French subjects against ‘the others’, because, according to a non-French perspective, the Protectorate pursued a discriminatory policy. The ambiguity also concerned ideas and perception of national and identitarian belonging. Nevertheless, people came from France, Italy – mostly from Sicily – Malta, Greece, Turkey, Albania, Spain, Portugal, and Russia. To a lesser degree, they came from Northern Europe and the Balkans, and other African areas. Under the Protectorate, plural sources of authority remained in the country. Not only the French and the Bey ones, but also those of Italy and Great Britain (Lewis 2014, 19–23). Therefore, people of different origins, nationalities and religions lived side by side with Tunisians and also among them, in some areas. This was especially true in the urbanised region around Tunis and coastal towns as Bizerte, Sfax, and Sousse, and on the Cap Bon Peninsula (Alexandropoulos and Cabanel 2000). In this respect, it should be noted that normally these ethnic and national communities all lived together not in cosmopolitan or pluralist harmony but rather with divisions in class and in space, through a multitude of connections and separations. For instance, different national groups lived in certain neighbourhoods of cities, and in specific rural areas (Clancy-Smith 2000, 2002). Concrete

examples are the *Petite Siciles* (Little Sicilies), which were neighbourhoods almost entirely populated by Sicilians in Tunis, La Goulette, Bizerte, Ferryville, Hammam Lif, Grombalia, Saïda, Redeyef, Sousse, and Sfax (Melfa 2007).

La Goulette was a case in point. At the end of the 19th century, it was a small portal town near Tunis. It was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious place, in which Tunisian, Sicilian, French, Christians, Jews, and Muslims and others lived all together. Paul Sebag (1998, 451) differentiated *Goulettois* pluralism into the categories shown in Table 6.2:

Table 6.2: Population in La Goulette between 1921 and 1936.

Year	Tunisia (Muslim)	Tunisia (Jew)	France	Italy	Malta	Total
1921	778	1,540	772	2,449	381	5,920
1926	1,998	2,074	1,264	2,921	299	8,556
1931	2,274	843	2,233	3,476	332	9,158
1936	2,343	1,668	2,713	3,801	265	10,790

Source: Sebag 1998, 451.

Though these are just population numbers, an important feature of La Goulette was its concrete mixing in urban space. As opposed to other towns, in La Goulette, the *Petite Sicile* was not an ‘ethnic ghetto’. Oral histories³ confirmed that people of different origins and nationalities in La Goulette inhabited the same buildings and constructed a new collective identity, that of *Goulettois*. Faithfulness and disparate origins would be based on friendship and solidarity. Differences would be a strength and pluralism a pride (Darmon 1969, 43). As Joëlle Bahloul noted in her masterful *The Architecture of Memory* (1996), these issues were common to many French colonial societies and emphasised by their memory. Referring to her relatives’ Algerian town of Sétif, the author’s informants remembered a two-storey dwelling with many apartments surrounding a courtyard: the upstairs inhabited by Jews, the downstairs by Muslims, which gave birth to a complex intercultural and interreligious household. Although the peculiar case study proposed by Bahloul was specific, the focus was not unusual in French colonies. In a tension between past and memory, history and myth,

those contexts reveal a multifaced situation in which both the ‘local perspective’ and the ‘global’ one are conversing (Bahloul 1996, 7–10). In La Goulette, Muslims and Jews also visited the Catholic church of the town, which was dedicated to Saints Augustine and Fidèle. Because of the visitors of different religions, the church was an important centre, a material point of encounter in the town for this pluralist community, and a sort of multi-faith site. The ‘location’ of the church – a town characterised by the *limen*, both a material place and a location that brought various communities together – created important conditions for the plurality. It is not only a container category since it is a location that enables and allows a meeting of differences, as it is stated in [Chapter 1](#). Non-Catholic worshippers came in the church to pray to a statue of the Virgin Mary of Trapani, which was there. It is a ‘copy’ of the ‘original statue’ that is in the Basilica-Sanctuary of Maria Santissima Annunziata in Trapani. Most Sicilians in Tunisia had at least one ancestor that arrived from the Western Sicilian province of Trapani. As late as in 1959, more than half of the Italians of Tunisia originated from Trapani (Finzi 2016, 58). The provenance of the Virgin made the church a central point for Sicilians. Even more important is that, in La Goulette, Sicilians, Tunisians, *Goulettois* in general, Catholics, Muslims, and Jews gave different meaning to the Virgin Mary, as will be explained below. However, Notre Dame de Trapani was the focus of a peculiar interreligious practice, especially during the procession of the Assumption, 15 August, in which Muslims and Jews also participated. The Church of Saints Augustine and Fidèle and the statue of the Virgin Mary located there exemplify the particular collective identity of *Goulettois* (Russo 2020, 40–49).

The Mythical Arrival of the Virgin Mary of Trapani to La Goulette

While conducting oral historical research, I inquired about the beginning of the worship of the Virgin Mary of Trapani to La Goulette. Sicilian witnesses of Tunisia often confused and mixed the mythical arrival of the Virgin Mary in Trapani and the spread of the ‘original’ cult of the Virgin of that Sicilian town. The first statue, the ‘original’ one, has Cypriot roots. According to a well-known legend in Trapani, it was carved in Cyprus between 730 and 739. It remained in a castle in Famagusta. In 1191, Richard I of England defeated the island and sold it to the

Templar Knights. They brought the statue to Acre, in contemporary Israel, until the Mamelukes conquered that city. At the end of 13th century, then, the Templars carried the statue on a boat, and brought it to Trapani (Mondello 1878, 11–25).

The arrival of the Virgin Mary in La Goulette was fixed by the 1974 novel *Chronique des morts*, written by Adrien Salmieri, an Italian novelist and writer born in Tunisia in 1929. Even though it appears curious, only in the mid-1970s did the mythical Goulettoise origin of Mary of Trapani assume a shared form: after most departures of European people and after the south shore of the Mediterranean had changed dramatically from the point of view of these pluralist communities. Starting from the novel, collective memory became a historical mark while being written from an outsider's point of view, providing symbolic legitimisation to oral representations (Bahloul 1996, 8). The story was written in French. Although it was the language of the colonisers, it has been used as a *lingua franca* enhancing plural sharing and communication. These elements reveal important themes about the location of La Goulette. The novel was a kind of recording of the oral history of the icon and contributed to the spread of the myth about the arrival of the Virgin Mary, commonly accepted knowledge among Italians from La Goulette and Tunisia. According to Salmieri's novel, the founding myth tells us that the statue had been sculpted in Cyprus. Between 1569 and 1571, the Turks besieged Famagusta, and local Christians gave it to Sicilian fishermen who lived in La Goulette. It is worth noting that the statue did not actually pass through Trapani. The seeming contradiction leads back to the ability of Notre Dame de Trapani to be venerated beyond the borders of the island. The Sicilian Jesuit Ottavio Gaetani highlighted the penetration of the cult of the Virgin of Trapani in different geographical and national contexts. He supported the thesis with the discovery of numerous statues of the Virgin of Trapani in other Sicilian towns, in many Italian regions, in France, Spain, Germany, and Hungary, and in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, including regions occupied by the Ottoman Empire (Mondello 1878, 67–68). Quoting Gupta and Ferguson (1997), the spread of the statues of the Virgin Mary demonstrates the quality of a location of 'being somewhere in particular' through connections and separations to other locations elsewhere, and through the ability to refract in other places (see the Introduction). Nevertheless, her settlement in La Goulette is very different from the one of other places mentioned above.

In that Tunisian town the Virgin Mary created a powerful symbolic universe tied to the communities in/around La Goulette because of the proximity, geographic and social, with Trapani, due to the wide presence of Sicilian worshippers. The resonances elsewhere in the Mediterranean, Europe, or the Middle East was not similar, because many other statues were commissioned by noble families or members of the clergy (Mondello 1878, 134–41). Nowadays, different statues of the Virgin Mary of Trapani are still located in different churches in Trapani and other Sicilian places.

An article in a local newspaper explains that the first procession in La Goulette took place on 15 August 1885 (E 1959). Because of the increase in Sicilian presence, the statue probably arrived at La Goulette shortly before that year. At that time, an association of fishermen had been founded in what was then a small town. The Virgin immediately became ‘the Virgin Mary of fishermen’, reinforcing her connection with the sea. Progressively the worship of Mary expanded from La Goulette to other Tunisian towns, mostly on the coasts. In 1909 the first procession took place in Tunis. The spread of the Marian cult, retracing that of Trapani, supported a wide production and trade of simulacrums. Some of them were imported into the country from Sicily. In other cases, Sicilian artisan immigrants in Tunisia produced statues. The proliferation of the copies of a peculiar statue of Virgin Mary is a common occurrence. In the former French colonial North Africa, it often involved both the country of origin and the destination one. A masterful example is the Virgin Mary of Santa Cruz, whose cult spread in the city of Oran, Algeria (Slyomovics 2019, 5–10).

The meaning and signification of the Virgin Mary of Trapani changes when she is in the two different locations – one in which she is firmly rooted in local histories, Trapani; the other in which she is carried with communities and protects wider communities. In Trapani, Virgin Mary was the bastion against Islam: she defended Trapani against privateer raids from North Africa, in particular from Tunisia (Mondello 1878, 79, 116). The Virgin Mary was the protector of Sicilian slaves – especially of Trapani – who had been captured by Tunisian privateers and were living in Tunisia. Giuseppe Pitrè,⁴ at the end of the 19th century (1978 [1900], XXIV–XXV, 335–36, 464–66), found numerous poems and short stories about struggles between the Virgin Mary and Muslims in which slaves of Trapani were freed by the Virgin. In 1535 an important event connected Trapani and Tunisia under the

Marian sign: Charles V reconquered Tunis and the Karraka fortress of La Goulette. The emperor went to Trapani to thank the Virgin Mary for her help and protection. He led 20,000 freed slaves back to Trapani (Mondello 1878, 79). These events tied the two places together, and together they form a narrative that binds both Muslim and Christian to this small Tunisian site.

The Reasons for an Interreligious Worship

After arriving in La Goulette, the Virgin Mary of Trapani's role was inverted. While in the Sicilian context Mary had protected people of Trapani from North African privateers, in La Goulette she became an interreligious symbol that protected every *Goulettois* welcoming Muslims and Jews. In the 19th and 20th centuries, various monotheistic worshippers, both Jews and Muslims next to Christians, attended the Church of Saints Augustine and Fidèle of La Goulette to pray to the Virgin Mary of Trapani (Salmieri 1996; Sebag 1998).

On the Catholic side, the polysemous nature of Notre Dame de Trapani was based on her skill to incorporate 'different Marys'. Although in the Italian diaspora of Tunisia many Marian figures were venerated, such as the Madonna of Pompei, the Lady of Mount Carmel and the Mary of the Rosary, the Virgin Mary of Trapani was the most important both for the large percentage of Sicilian people and for her miraculous power (see below). The main incorporation relates to the Lady of the Assumption, because of her popularity in Christianity. The one-day advance of the date of the procession is evidence: from the original day in Trapani, 16 August, to the Tunisian date, 15 August (Russo 2020, 138–48).

A crucial inquiry deals with the reasons for which Muslims and Jews venerated the Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette. There were theological reasons: for both Muslims and Jews, Mary was not an extraneous symbol in their own religious panorama. She is a figure in the Qur'an, in which she appears in 11 suras. In particular, the ninth sura is called the sura of Mary and the third, the sura of the family of 'Imrān, is dedicated to Mary's genealogy and family⁵ (Wensinck 1991, 613–15). Because of the problematic nature of Jesus, Jews do not consider Mary a holy woman. They do, however, appreciate her as a 'Jewish mother'. In some cases, there were biographical motivations for interreligious reception. Some worshippers were born to 'mixed

couples' and developed a peculiar religious sensitivity for the multiple religious communities of La Goulette, both the mosque of Sidi Cherif and the Catholic church.

The multi-religiousness of the Virgin Mary of Trapani bears above all a political meaning. Both Sicilians and Tunisians felt discriminated against by the French government and French subjects in Tunisia. In their prevailing perception, France constructed their inferiority, perpetrating a policy of violence established on the imbalance in power and inequality of access to resources.⁶ Sicilians considered the French Protectorate's decisions vexatious and malicious. In 1891, the French Protectorate forced Italian Capuchin monks to move to make way for French clergy (Pasotti 1971, 79; Russo 2017, 505). In 1908, a French band, *Société La Jeanne d'Arc*, replaced the *Stella d'Italia*, an Italian orchestra, to play in the procession at the Virgin Mary of Trapani Feast. In 1910, there was the proclamation of *Sainte Jeanne d'Arc* as Patron of La Goulette, to replace Mary of Trapani (Dornier 2000, 53; Russo 2017, 505). All these events undermined the Sicilian presence and were due to French policies, which aimed to subvert Italian presence and strengthen the Protectorate's power through the naturalisation law (Lewis 2014, 137–38). During the fascist period, the conflict between Italians and French grew more pronounced. Many Italians interpreted the dictatorship as support for their national pride (Russo 2016, 86–87). There was also a larger anti-fascist population in Tunisia (compared to Libya, an official colony, or Egypt), whose protagonists were members of the liberal bourgeoisie, often of Masonic affiliation; militants of the anarchist movement; members of the working class organised in the Socialist and Communist parties; or adherents of *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Freedom).⁷ Furthermore, a Tunisian section of the LIDU (Italian League for Human Rights) played an important role against the regime. Therefore, Tunisia was a dynamic political laboratory animated by such young Italian-Tunisians as Maurizio Valenzi, Loris Gallico, Marco Vais, the brothers Bensasson, and the contribution of political figures such as Velio Spano and Giorgio Amendola sent by the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, to provide international scope to the anti-fascist movement in Tunisia (El Houssi 2014).

Therefore, Sicilians – some of whom also opted for French naturalisation – and Tunisians of every religion participated in the procession emphasising their position against the French Protectorate. Being set apart from French power, the Virgin Mary of Trapani became a symbol

of discriminated people and was on the side of the weak. Oral histories narrate the procession as focused on subalternity, in accordance with Gramsci's terminology. Fishermen – Sicilians or Tunisians – were paradigmatic worshippers for their lowly state and modest background and in Tunisia Mary strengthened her role as fishermen's defender.

Through visions, voices, and dreams, the *Gouletteuse* mother of Jesus carried out miracles in favour of oppressed people, which was a common character for both Sicilians and Tunisians, as non-French people (Russo 2017, 506–7; 2020, 107–26). This matter was strictly linked to the topic of popular religiosity,⁸ thus people were devout followers of Virgin of Trapani for her apotropaic and thaumaturgical capability. The miracles dealt with health, wellness, wealth, and hope for the future, to which was added political redemption: the procession of 15 August became a political way for marginalised people to complain against French domination.

The procession was not only a religious manifestation but also a way to 'conquer' public places and affirm the 'right to exist'. There was a large 'popular' interreligious crowd, which connected faith with magical practices. It consisted of fishermen and poor, sick, and weak people. The subalterns were the protagonists of the religious festival. Worshippers relied on sacred objects such as candles, flowers, gold, necklaces, and bracelets offered to the Virgin Mary. They stroked the Marian statue, seeking her blessing. After official celebration, the worshippers put the Madonna statue on a bedrock near some braziers, so the Virgin Mary began to 'perspire'. Using a tissue, they took 'miraculous sweat' and brought it to sick relatives or friends (Darmon 1969, 27–28; Russo 2017, 501–2).

Independence disrupted this phenomenon. In 1958, the Tunisian government forbade the procession in Tunis. In 1962 in La Goulette, after a two-year ban, there was a symbolic procession in the courtyard of the church. It was the last one, because a definitive ban was promulgated. There were two main reasons for the prohibition: first, the Tunisian State interpreted the presence of the Catholic Church as a legacy of the French Protectorate; second, new institutions were based on secularity, according ambiguously to *laïcité française*. Although the Tunisian constitution of 1959 recognised Islam as the country's official religion, and the new personal status code borrowed elements from sharia law, unified law courts united Jews, Muslims, and Christians into a single, secular Tunisian legal system (Lewis 2014, 177).

Since the second half of the 1960s, many European citizens/subjects left Tunisia because of restrictive laws, which made it difficult to live and work in the country. Numbers constitute incontrovertible evidence: in 1964, 10,000 Italian people lived in Tunisia, showing an impressive decrease of more than 80 per cent since 1949 (Finzi 2016, 56). The year 1964 represented the peak of a series of injunctions that damaged the stability of foreign people. The government restricted their labour with laws in 1958 and 1961, and the requisition of their property with a law in 1964 (Pasotti 1971, 166–69). Because of these limitations, the majority of Europeans, even those who were born in Tunisia, left the country. After all, if Protectoral Tunisia's legal system had been divided between 'European' and 'Tunisian' jurisdictions (Lewis 2014, 65, 177), the new state led by the President Bourguiba maintained the division.⁹

Also in 1964, the Tunisian State and Holy See signed a new *modus vivendi* bilateral agreement, by which the Catholic Church renounced many privileges and accepted Tunisian jurisdiction and control. The daily life of Catholics changed, due to the decrease in their population and political influence, maintaining a role in education¹⁰ (Russo 2020, 36–40, 176). However, the Virgin Mary of Trapani remained in the Church of Saints Augustine and Fidèle of La Goulette, even between 1984 and 1986, when an association of La Ciotat (Marseille) tried to bring the Mary statue to that French town. This was not a foregone conclusion, as documented by similar cases in which some Virgin Mary statues followed the migration from other former French colonies. A valid example regarding this is the translation of a peculiar statue of the Madonna from Oran to Nimes across the Mediterranean around 1964 (Slyomovics 2019, 9). The association of La Ciotat was composed of *Goulettois* of Sicilian origins who had migrated to La Ciotat. It was named Association des Goulettois de La Ciotat et de Provence Côte-d'Azur and its members requested the intervention of the mayor of the town, Louis Perrimond. He wrote to the Tunisian consulate general to inform him of the association, which 'counts more than a thousand returnees from La Goulette and would like to celebrate in our town, every year on August 15th, the religious ceremony of *Notre Dame de Trapani* who gathered in La Goulette nearly 40,000 people coming from all the regions of Tunisia' (Archive of Prelature of Tunis, file 'La Goulette', n. 2; 1985, 31 October). The surnames of the members revealed Sicilian origins, such as Sansone, Cannamela,

Pinna, Bertolino, Savalli, and Piccito. They identified their main aim as the ‘repatriation’ of the Madonna of Trapani. After their failure to provoke interest on behalf of the mayor, the group sought mediation through the permanent representative of France to UNESCO, Gisèle Halimi, who was herself born in La Goulette in 1927 of a Jewish mother and a Berber father. In February 1986, Michel Callens, prelate of Tunisia, definitively denied the relocation of the statue from La Goulette to La Ciotat: ‘I have the honor to inform you that since the church of La Goulette is still in operation, there can be no question of transferring the statue that is venerated there’ (Archive of Tunisian Prelature, file ‘La Goulette’, n. 2; 1985, 21 February).

The Return of a ‘New’ Virgin Mary

The revolution of 2011 brought the country in a climate of uncertainty. Nonetheless, the Virgin Mary returned to the Tunisian public debate. On 15 August 2017, the procession occurred in La Goulette after 55 years, an unexpected event that saw participation by local Muslims and Jews. In March of the same year, there had been an anticipation of the new procession: the realisation of a mural painting of the Virgin Mary of Trapani in the church of La Goulette by Collettivo FX. This is a group of muralist artists operating in Reggio Emilia (Italy)¹¹ that proposed a large project entitled ‘La Madonna dell’adesso’ (Virgin Mary of today). The focus of the project was to bring up-to-date representations of the Virgin Mary in Italian towns in which she has a strong role in relation to ‘social identity’. The group programmed a series of tours through the Italian Peninsula to meet Catholic communities related to a specific Madonna and talk about a possible new role of Mary.

By chance, Collettivo FX knew the story of Virgin Mary of Trapani of La Goulette. In February, Paolo of Collettivo FX sent an e-mail to the director of the Institute for Italian Culture in Tunis to inform him of their project:

Among the proposals we also received, there was that of a Sicilian girl who pointed out the Virgin Mary of Trapani who belongs to the Sicilian community of La Goulette, famous for a procession attended by all the people, Christians, Jews and Muslims. It seemed to me a significant story that acquires even more value in this particular historical moment:

the opportunity to make a project in Italy that goes beyond the Mediterranean sends a strong signal.

Therefore, Paolo planned to start his mural project from La Goulette, because of its peculiarity of being an Italian Catholic community abroad. The aim was to realise a contemporary image through a mural painting to describe current meanings of the Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette. Nevertheless, by 2017 the Catholic community in La Goulette, and generally in Tunisia, had transformed from what it had been 50–60 years ago. The 2000s saw significant changes in both the national and social composition of the Catholic community in Tunisia. Sub-Saharan immigrants replaced Europeans. Most arrived in Tunisia as part of a more general movement of people from the Global South that aimed to eventually reach European destinations. One and a half thousand Ivorian Catholics settled in the country in 2003 following the displacement of the African Development Bank from Abidjan, caused by the Ivory Coast civil war. Nevertheless, a temporary Catholic population came from Europe to Tunisia for a limited working period (Russo 2020, 176–79). Finally, an important Catholic component is composed of Tunisian people who converted to Catholicism. Their paths ambiguously interweave with Tunisian conversions to Pentecostalism, which are more conspicuous than Catholic conversions (Bois-sevain 2006; 2014).

Because of these demographic changes, relatively few people took part in the meeting with Paolo to plan the mural project. Thus, the ‘Catholic community’ with which the artist collaborated consisted of ten Catholic sub-Saharan African youth (variously from the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo) who had a failed migratory experience, the Parson Narcisse (who arrived in 2012 from Chad), two Tunisians – a Muslim and an atheist – and an old Sicilian man, Nicola.

In order to understand the meanings of Notre Dame de Trapani, in a room of the church there was a two-day debate (14 and 15 March) in which Catholic people were meant to tell Paolo their ideas. From the speeches, it became clear that these Catholics coming from sub-Saharan Africa lacked knowledge about the story of the Virgin Mary of Trapani. They considered her to be ‘only’ Virgin Mary the mother of Jesus, and ignored the peculiar characteristics of her arrival from Trapani and her Tunisian settlement. On the other hand, they spoke

about topics such as neocolonialism, the exclusion of poor people by the 'rich world', discriminations in terms of mobility, and the lack of passports and documents. Therefore, the debate about the Virgin of Trapani turned into discussions about the lives of migrants. Most African Catholics ran into obstacles during their Tunisian experiences, which caused discouragement, fear of the future, and discrimination. They felt unsatisfied by their new Tunisian life, because of difficulties in finding work and exclusion from the local society. The frustration



Image 6.1: The mural of the 'new' Virgin Mary of Trapani, painted by Paolo of Collettivo FX in a room of the Church of Saints Augustine and Fidèle, La Goulette, Tunis. In dialogue with the new pluralist constellation of the city, Paolo of Collettivo FX decided to break from tradition and represented the Virgin in a new way, as the defender of migrants: in the painting they are under the coat of Mary, to be protected against their own passports and documents that are 'raining'.

Photo: Carmelo Russo

of sub-Saharan immigrants was such that they doubted the initial idea to go to Europe.

In dialogue with the new pluralist constellation of the city, Paolo of Collettivo FX decided to break from tradition and represented the Virgin in a new way, as the defender of migrants: in the painting they would be represented under the coat of Mary, to be protected against their own passports and documents that are ‘raining’ (see [Image 6.1](#)). Immigrant people strongly demand ‘the rain of documents,’ because



Image 6.2: The 2017 procession of the Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette, that has revived in the town after 55 years of prohibition. In the foreground, sub-Saharan African men are carrying the Marian statue, in order to confirm the leading position of subaltern people. The bishop and other persons of the clergy, Tunisian and European people, Catholic, Muslim, Jews and atheists, are participating together.

Photo: Carmelo Russo.

they symbolise the exclusion of poor black people from the equal access to the resources of the world. The early idea of Collettivo FX was to represent the mural on the external wall of the church. However, since Mary's mural outside could have triggered sensitivities about Muslims (such as the Parson Narcisse and other Catholic people scared of Islamic extremists), the parish priest chose to place the painting in a room of the church, the biggest one next to the hall of worship. On 17 March, Paolo completed the painting.

During the debate to decide the iconography, the Parson Narcisse – who had been in La Goulette since 2012 – discovered the story of the Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette. He had always considered the statue of the Church of Saints Augustine and Fidèle as a 'normal' simulacrum of Mary. On that occasion, he reflected upon the historical role of the Virgin Mary of La Goulette for subaltern people. Thus, the procession was revived in the town on 15 August 2017 (see [Image 6.2](#)). Narcisse turned to the mayor of La Goulette, who authorised a symbolic procession in the courtyard of the church. According to his vision, the Parson Narcisse imagined this procession as the beginning of a new ritual: he wanted to assemble the largest crowd in the streets of La Goulette.

Conclusion: Mary as a Tunisian Symbol

The procession of 2017 was not a nostalgic process linked to the past, but rather connected to the present and the future of Tunisia. Despite the paradox, the 'new' Virgin Mary of Trapani at La Goulette is more Tunisian and less Catholic and Sicilian. During the mass of 15 August, the mayor of La Goulette, the archbishop of Tunis and Carthage, Ilario Antoniazzi, and the Tunisian police were all present. In front of the church, there were many Tunisian flags. Above all, many Tunisians took part in the celebration. About 200 people were in the church for the mass: 35–40 per cent sub-Saharan Africans, 20 per cent Tunisians (of which 5 per cent were Catholics and 15 per cent were Muslim or atheist), and the rest were 'classic' Europeans. Outside, at least 100 Tunisians awaited the procession. When the statue went out, they gave her a big round of applause and *yousyous* to welcome her. In 2017, the Virgin Mary of Trapani was part of the Tunisian cultural landscape.

Tunisian intellectuals played a key role. For several months before the new procession, through blogs, social media, and websites, they

promoted the procession of the Virgin Mary of Trapani as a symbol of democratic expression and guaranty of minorities' rights. A relevant example is the dedication of Hatem Bourial. He is a Tunisian journalist, a writer, and an intellectual who is interested in the enhancement of cultural heritage, particularly about a plural Tunisian identity. Between 27 January and 16 August 2017, he wrote many posts on Webdo.tn.¹²

The return of the procession revisits a debate about defining Tunisian identity – is it an Arab and Muslim monolith, or a pluralistic Mediterranean identity? But there is something beyond the political background of 2017 procession: a new concept of tourism in the country. It provides for a shift from a seaside tourism – managed by foreign tour-operators – to a cultural one, in which the beach is not refused but combined with artistic, historic, folkloristic, and religious exploitation and development (Herzfeld 2005). These questions place La Goulette on a Mediterranean map of tourism by conjuring the pluralistic narrative of its past in the context of its differently pluralistic present. Some samples in the last years gained positive feedback: Sidi El Kantaoui zâwiya; Ghirba pilgrimage in Djerba; Aoussu Carnival in Sousse (reintroduced in 2015); the 'Festival du Poisson' in La Goulette; and cultural events such as the exhibition 'Lieux saints partagés', from November 2016 to February 2017, hosted by Bardo Museum, in which a section was focused on the Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette. While the procession's closure in 1962 represented 'the end of an era', 2017 was the beginning of a new 'age'.

Paradoxically, the 'new' Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette is the symbol of secularity – in the sense of *laïcité* – who guards against menaces of Islamic extremism and who sustains the rights of religious minorities in the public sphere. Both the mural and the return of the procession show that the Virgin Mary of Trapani in La Goulette has a political role in the present time, and is more than a nostalgic symbol of the past. She stands against those who want to instrumentalise post-revolutionary uneasiness in order to exclude non-Arabs and non-Muslims from rights and citizenship. She is still on the side of discriminated, weak, and subaltern people, not merely Christians in a Muslim context, but above all Tunisian people that stand for the plural origins of their own country and its involvement in Mediterranean relations.

Notes

- 1 Trapani is a town in the west of Sicily. The majority of Sicilian people who migrated to Tunisia came from that city and its surrounding area. Nevertheless, Sicilian people outside that area were also devoted to the Virgin Mary of Trapani. La Goulette is a coastal suburb of Tunis, 12 kilometres from the centre of the current capital.
- 2 Even before the establishment of the French Protectorate, the prime minister of the Regency, Khayr ad-Din, launched as early as 1870 a vast public works programme, because of progress on European models and the reform policy. Tunisian people were unable to satisfy a growing need for labour, which attracted many Italian workers (Melfa 2008, 66).
- 3 Marta Scialdone and I conducted two periods of fieldwork, in July–August 2012 and July–August 2013. We recorded 53 life stories of Sicilians of Tunisia. Since October 2014, audio and video, transcriptions, and photographs collected are stored at the ‘Diego Carpitella’ Laboratory of Anthropology of Images and Sounds at Sapienza University of Rome. Subsequently I conducted a second field research between 2014 and 2017 for my PhD program.
- 4 Giuseppe Pitrè (1841–1916) was a Sicilian medical doctor and senator for Sicily. He taught at the University of Palermo (Sicily) and wrote the first scientific studies on south Italian popular culture, pioneering ethnographic studies in his country.
- 5 ‘Imrān is the father of Mary, Joachim in Christian sources.
- 6 The history of Tunisia from the 1880s to the 1930s proves that the everyday manoeuvrings of colonised people posed obstacles to French administrators and forced them to react in ways that altered colonial governance considerably (Lewis 2014, 9).
- 7 A liberal–socialist political movement founded in Paris in August 1929 by a group of anti-fascist exiles, among whom emerged as leader Carlo Rosselli. His brother Nello, Emilio Lussu, and others, also played a prominent role.
- 8 The idea of popular religiosity/religion is well known in Italian anthropology and historiography thanks to Ernesto De Martino (1908–1965). In the 1940s and 1950s he conducted a series of field studies among poor and underschooled people of rural south Italy – the ‘people without history’ – focusing on the idea of their ‘crisis of the presence and religious reintegration’. Other scholars followed his perspectives. De Martino’s theories were based on the approach of Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci reflected on the fundamental character of societies based on class divisions. He focused on the colonial and semi-colonial people, as well as proletarians and peasants in the hegemonic nations, in relation to the dominant class: the bourgeoisie (Gutherz 2017).
- 9 After independence, the Tunisian state passed a law allowing Europeans born in Tunisia, with fathers and paternal grandfathers born in Tunisia, to acquire Tunisian citizenship. There were few people who opted for this choice (Russo 2016, 87).
- 10 In 2016–2017, there were nine Catholic schools in Tunisia, five of them in the capital and others in Aïn Draham, Bizerte, Menzel Bourguiba, and Sousse.

There are about 6,000 students – the majority Muslims – and 600 employees, including teachers, office workers, etc. (Russo 2020, 176).

- 11 Some muralist artists of Reggio Emilia formed Collettivo FX in 2010. They are involved in programmes between Italy and Spain, but are also politically active in cultural and social enhancement of Emilia-Romagna.
- 12 Their titles are eloquent: ‘Voici Notre-Dame de Trapani, la Madone de la Goulette!’ (27 January 2017); ‘La Goulette: La procession du 15 août pourrait reprendre en 2017’ (6 July 2017); ‘La procession de la Madone aura lieu le 15 août à La Goulette’ (10 August 2017); ‘Document: La procession de la Madone de Trapani par la photo’ (16 August 2019).

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