Chapter 8

Being among and between: Ecologies in Motion in the Kerkena Archipelago

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Abstract

The article explores the Kerkena archipelago, off the coast of Tunisia, as a critical space from which to rethink the relationships between ecology, borders, and migration in the Mediterranean. Through an ethnographic and situated approach, the text interrogates the fractures produced by the externalization of European border policies and the predatory economies that shape life on the islands. The relationship between date palms and the island's inhabitants becomes a starting point for reflecting on responsibility, transformation, and interconnection. The islands, as nodes in a global archipelago, emerge as a collective subject, oscillating between geographic marginality and political centrality.

Keywords: Sea, Archipelago, Borders, Ecologies.

Riassunto

L'articolo esplora l'arcipelago di Kerkena, al largo della costa tunisina, come uno spazio critico da cui ripensare le relazioni tra ecologia, frontiere e migrazioni nel Mediterraneo. Attraverso un approccio etnografico e situato, il testo indaga le fratture prodotte dall'esternalizzazione delle politiche di frontiera europee e dalle economie predatorie che modellano la vita sulle isole. Il rapporto tra le palme da dattero e gli abitanti dell'arcipelago diventa un punto di partenza per riflettere su responsabilità, trasformazione e interconnessione. Le isole, come nodi di un arcipelago globale, emergono come un soggetto collettivo, in bilico tra marginalità geografica e centralità politica.

Parole chiave: Mare, Arcipelago, Confini, Ecologie.

1. Introduction

The following reflections begin and live in the Kerkena Islands, a Tunisian archipelago off the coast of Sfax, at the northern opening of the Gulf of Gabès[1]. During my doctoral ethnographic fieldwork, various insights and countless questions – some I posed, others directed to me – emerged in a whirlwind of encounters, uncertainties, affirmations, and disruptions. It was a vortex that disoriented and confused me.

Upon my arrival, I embodied and represented the world I came from: a white woman with an Italian passport – a land-based researcher in Tunisian sea, interacting with fishermen whose perspectives on the Mediterranean were quite different from mine. Soon, even my name began to change, acquiring a different accent (Khosravi, 2024). My gestures, clothing, and skin tone shifted too, until the 'we', which I thought I was part of, became fractured – not disintegrating but breaking into thousands of pieces: «We did not know whom we meant when we said we» (Rich, 1985: 217).

Here, I will not delve into the methodological nuances of how I interacted in this settler-colonialism. Instead, I aim to explore how we sought answers – or new ways of questioning – that would not separate here from there, the North coast from the South coast, the victim from the oppressor. This article reflects on the idea of «being among», oscillating between a desire for globalization and a yearning for rootedness (Latour, 2018). It explores the possibility of belonging without choosing rigidly between nature or culture, black or white, or forming a neatly delineated 'we'.

This reflection was facilitated by living on islands that, beneath their apparent terrestrial boundaries, could not exist without the surrounding marine space: would they lose their effective meaning of being islands? Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1996), Kanak leader of New Caledonia, once said, «for a small country like ours, independence means carefully calculating interdependencies».

[1] This article is based on reflections that originated and were further developed in my doctoral dissertation: *"With cuttlefish and with octopus, we will give you everything, oh Ocean". In the political ecology of the Kerkennah archipelago: an ethnography of spaces and bodies in relation.*
My Ph.D. research began in 2021 and concluded in 2024 at the University of Genoa.

Fig. 1 – Palm leaves loaded on a babour, on the way to replace the worn-out sections of a charfia some twenty miles North-East off the port of El Ataya. Kerkena Islands, Gulf of Gabès (Photo by Paolo Saverio Boero)[2].

This tension between autonomy and interdependence plays out and reshapes itself in many directions – including in the very words I use. I noticed that I sometimes refer to this Tunisian archipelago in the singular «in Kerkena» and other times in the plural «in the Kerkena Islands». I believe this indecision stems from the way this archipelago is conceived: as an articulated fragmentation (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018), a composition of islands and, at the same time, islands each on their own – autonomous, yet not self-contained.

To inhabit the margin and the sea has left these islands with spaces of creativity and self-management, where it becomes possible to alternate pronouns, allowing for the possibility to choose what they are – or, rather, what they might become. «It's all a matter of imaginative capacity. Yeats wrote: "In dreams begin responsibilities". That's absolutely true.

[2] The photos used in this article from here on are by Paolo Saverio Boero, whom I sincerely thank. The photos date back to September 2023.

Conversely, where there is no strength of imagination, responsibilities cannot arise» (Murakami, 2008: 43).

The «archipe-logic» (Martinez-San Miguel and Stephens, 2020) in its very unfolding highlights how the relations and movements of people, goods, and ideas form a continuous process that connects and transforms the entire world into an archipelago, rendering concepts such as 'small', 'invisible', or 'vulnerable' relative and contextual – understood as part of a historical process.

What does it mean to be a collective of islands at the centre (or south) of the Mediterranean? The sea marginalizes and interrupts smooth and comfortable dialogues with the continent, while at the same time placing the islands within international flows and currents. Indeed, the archipelago finds itself at the heart of a seductive and invasive globalization: from the south, heavy industrialization brings with it the fertile leftovers of phosphate processing[3], while on the western horizon, offshore hydrocarbon extraction platforms rise[4]. New boats with 'mass' and predatory fishing techniques appear everywhere at sunset: a gradual impoverishment of land, sea, and future perspectives has led to a departure from artisanal and local fishing practices.

From the north, longstanding neighbourly relations intertwine with regulatory policies that reinforce border regimes and a voracious market, along with the influence of social media, which promotes exaggerated wealth and desirable lifestyles. These flows cross the Kerkennah Islands, giving them a unique form as they are inserted into a global discourse – while at the same time being shaped and transformed by the islands themselves.

The article starts from the relationship between date palms and the other inhabitants of the islands. This is a matter of local ecology, specific yet entangled with broader networks crisscrossing this sea, both northward and southward. It is not merely an introduction or a preliminary image.

[3] Several phosphate-processing industries line the Gulf of Gabès, using raw materials extracted from the Gafsa mining basin in the Tunisian interior (Pontiggia, 2021). The phosphate is processed to produce and export phosphate-based fertilizers, used to boost agricultural output.

[4] Off the southwestern coast of the islands, several offshore hydrocarbon extraction platforms rise on the horizon. These are currently operated by Perenco, a Franco-British company legally registered in the tax haven of the Cayman Islands (see: https://www.petrofac.com).

This relationship has been and will remain a node to unravel, not a concluding point but one that implies the archipelago's central positioning within the Mediterranean. It also gestures toward the externalization of borders and the European Union's responsibilities, from geopolitical boundaries to the demands of a voracious, insatiable market, creating divides to sever connections.

A nodal point in the island's ecology, between land, sea, human beings, and marine collectives. An ecology that is anything but fixed or static but rather interwoven with – and within – history. The paper will develop in this direction: from the relationship with the palm tree, to the construction of borders, through questions linked by the ever-changing ways of thinking and inhabiting the world and the sea.

2. It Takes a Palm to Make a Date

Belonging to the Arecaceae family, the *Phoenix dactylifera*, or *deglet nour*, is a robust plant with a slender trunk that can reach up to 30 meters in height. Its growth resembles a column, and I will draw on this resemblance to offer a non-scientific description. Just above the wooden swelling – its 'capital' – an explosive, broad, and lush canopy unfolds, varying in fullness depending on the surrounding fertility. The rigid leaves emerge there, transitioning from vibrant green to gray-green and eventually straw-yellow as they dry. In certain seasons, intricate clusters of branches with yellow or red buds emerge between the 'capital' and the leaves, destined to become the beloved fruit. Dates are yellow, then golden-orange, and finally reddish-brown when ripe. The best quality is said to be marked by the fruit's transparency; when held between thumb and forefinger, one can see the seed through the pulp. Depending on the type of palm, dates are eaten at every stage of ripeness – yellow and crunchy, less sweet but tasty, or fully mature, sweet, and melting in the mouth.

The Greeks named these trees, linking them first to the Phoenicians (*φοῖνιξ*), who supposedly spread them throughout the Mediterranean, and then to the word for 'finger' (*δάκτυλος dáctylos*), referencing the fruit's elongated shape, and *φέρω phéro* (to bear): the palm that bears dates. Yet, in the Kerkena Islands, the palm tree is not merely a bearer of fruit.

Although less famous than the palms of southern Tunisian oases, whose dates are exported worldwide (now priced beyond local affordability), in Kerkena the palm is part of everything (Tarchouna, 2019). Seemingly static and grounded, it connects sea, land, and sky.

Until two decades ago, palms did not require protection as a 'vulnerable species'. They were fundamental to an already simple ecology (in terms of available elements, not composition). Palms, camels, sheep, humans, certain grains, perhaps a few olive trees, some grapevines, and figs formed the ecosystem. The Kerkena soil is more creative than biodiverse – quite the opposite of its surrounding sky and sea, teeming with migratory birds, countless fish, octopuses, and algae in the Gulf.

In 1961 André Louis wrote about 'the king tree of Kerkena': palm trunks were used to build houses. Fibers from the leaves and date branches were woven into baskets or made into brooms. The hard, woody part of the 'capital' produced tools for tenderizing octopuses before eating them. Dates are also suggested in the Quran as food. Smiling slyly, as we sat at tables littered with pits, locals whispered that the Prophet recommended eating no more than three or four dates a day.

Dates are the first food to break the fasting during Ramadan's Iftar, eaten plain or filled with butter, dried or ground into flour, or made into various sweets. Sonia[5] boiled them for hours in large pots. A sweet smell filled my room as I watched her with a frown, and she, unbothered, entrusted me with overseeing the task.

In Kerkena, parts of the palm tree, particularly the extended leaves, are used to construct the *charfia*. This is a fixed fishing technique, a traditional, artisanal method that shapes not only the islands' identity but also the economies and politics of its inhabitants. The *charfia* is a stationary sea trap, historically made entirely from palm trees. However, there are fewer palm trees in Kerkena now. Desertification, soil salinization, and olive cultivation have encroached upon their space. Those who work with palm trees are no longer around. Consequently, the demand for palm imports, especially from Gabés and its oasis, has increased. Yet, Gabés' oasis has

[5] Some of the proper names used are real, while others are not, depending on the relationships established and the context. Behind these names (and many others who are present yet invisible) are the people who have co-composed and composted this article, as well as the entire research (and life) in Kerkennah.

also lost over half its size. It is suffering under the strain of coexisting with a large phosphate processing industry. This has led to rising costs, including the transportation costs that climb alongside fuel prices.

As a result, the local *charfia* is no longer as 'local' and, more importantly, no longer as sustainable as it used to be. Transporting large, numerous palm leaves is challenging and cumbersome. The Rais, Walid's father, worked exclusively with palms for his *charfia*, and during his journeys, his *babur* (small boat) was often loaded with leaves. Enormous and unwieldy, walking on that thick layer of leaves felt strange – much sturdier and less rough under bare feet than I had imagined. Walid found all that effort unnecessary, or at least excessive.

More fuel, more labour – why not replace it all, or at least some parts, with plastic and its derivatives? What does this transformation mean for the relationship with the sea, the land, and the Gulf's inhabitants, whether human or not?

I went fishing with Walid and his crew early one morning. He took me to work with him at dawn, when the air was cool, and the tide was still low. In a small *flouka*[6], just the two of us and bundles of palm leaves, we headed to a corner of the *charfia*. The leaves in that area were damaged and sparse. After a series of manoeuvres, using the motor and then the *karìa* – a long pole used to steer or push toward a specific spot – we entered an acute angle formed by palm leaves. Once there, with a single knife stroke and a smirk, he cut the strings binding the bundles and, taking them one at a time, replenished the rows of the aging *charfia*. The worn-out sections were detached and discarded into the sea. The new leaves were inserted one by one, creating a dense barrier, leaving no way out. He drove them into the clay seabed with precise, swift movements, adjusting them calmly after. Watching him, I thought it looked simple, automatic. The seabed is clayey – the palm stalk doesn't 'break' the ground but sinks, enveloped by quicksand-like mud, which is difficult to penetrate deeply. It's a time-consuming task that needs to be done quickly, as the rising tide makes it harder. Perched at the bow, I handed him the knife when needed and arranged the palm leaves in order – a task of little utility, I must admit.

[6] The *flouka* is a wooden boat with an external engine. Other types of wooden boats are: the *babour*, which is larger with an internal engine; the *canua* which is smaller and without an engine, oars are used to move.

Meanwhile, surrounded by the rustling of yellow, dry leaves, Walid steered the rudder with one foot, drove the stalks into the sand with his hands, and checked with his eyes to ensure every gap was covered. Then, suddenly, with a sharp gesture, he tore off the tip of the palm leaf – the part pointing skyward. Again, and again.

I looked at him questioningly, as always. «If I don't remove the tip» he explained, «as soon as the wind picks up, the fronds rustle, and I can't hear where the fishes are». That's all he said, leaving my astonished expression unchanged. Walid added no further explanation.

Fig. 2 – Planting palm leaves in the *charfia*.

3. Archipelago

I will try to depict Kerkena pretending that its image might have the fleeting form of something drawn on the waves of the sea.

«Questo bonsai non è una pianta piccola
La forma gli deriva dal tenersi
delle radici rispetto alla chioma
in una proporzione calibrata,
e il suo vivere batte il proprio tempo –
tutto raccolto intorno alla parata
minima dei rami sotto la luna
come dentro la scatola dei versi,
radice quadrata in sé, è formula»[7]
(Bre, 2015: 6).

The archipelago consists of between 14 and 24 islands and islets. While Wikipedia and all the written sources I consulted report only 14, the people of Kerkena have given me numbers within this range. Perhaps counting them, distinguishing between land and sea, between submerged and emerged, is not so clear-cut, static, or stable?

The Kerkena islands are narrow and fine, both in width and altitude. Strips of land in a shallow, warm, and rather salty sea. The land is arid, also very salty, and not very fertile. Once a land of date palms, it must have looked like a sort of oasis by the sea. Now, it is mostly a land of olive trees, along with some figs and vines. There are a few remaining cereal crops and a lot of *alfa*, a type of papyrus.

To reach the islands, one departs from Sfax, Tunisia's second largest and most significant city, about a three-and-a-half-hour drive south of the capital. The destination is Sidi Youssef, the southern port of the archipelago. The only public transport connecting them is the ferry. The trip takes about an hour and a half. For a passenger without a vehicle, the cost is one dinar, the equivalent of € 0.33. Presenting a document certifying

[7] This bonsai is not a small plant / Its shape comes from the balance / between its roots and canopy, / calibrated in proportion. / And its life beats its own rhythm – / all gathered around the minimal parade / of branches under the moon, / as if contained in a box of verses, / a square root unto itself, a formula.

Fig. 3 – The waterfront of Remla, on the South-Eastern coast of Kerkena.

that you are from Kerkena allows you to travel for free.

Sonia, born and raised in Kerkena with parents and grandparents also from the islands – specifically from one particular area – has never obtained this document. «What would I do with that piece of paper?» she says. What's the point? Traveling on the ferry with her, I have never paid for a ticket either. With a quick stride and amid countless greetings, smiles, and handshakes, we made our way onto the ferry deck.

4. Ploughing Furrows, Part I

The ferry awaits, its entrance wide open to cars, passengers, and trucks. Depending on the season, these trucks are filled with sheep, palm leaves, and construction materials, but above all, they are loaded with white refrigerated vans, now empty after delivering seafood to the Sfax market.

In front of the open ferry deck, cars and vans line up, ready to board. On the other side, a group of soldiers or, more frequently, members of the *Garde Nationale* stand watching. At some point – not overnight, but

Fig. 4 – Poles and nets forming part of a charfia are left drying in the sun, on an adrift iron boat, before being taken ashore to be repaired.

rather abruptly – a line was drawn between the Kerkena islands and mainland Tunisia. An imaginary border, a fracture separating those who can cross from those who cannot. An internal wound within Tunisia itself (Garnaoui, 2024).

Since 2011, with an escalation between 2015 and 2016 (Giuffré, Denaro and Raach, 2022) access to the ferry has become controlled and militarized. Only those originally from the archipelago, preferably certified, or tourists are officially allowed to enter the islands. Tourists, who travel for leisure and by privilege, are identified by their skin colour.

Those stopped at the checkpoints and denied access to the islands are often individuals with physical characteristics associated with sub-Saharan origins. But it doesn't stop there. Even those who are «not so black», following a clearly demarcated line of colour (Balibar, 2010), such as young Tunisian men, often find it difficult to gain passage.

There are always ways to burn through and breach borders, but at what cost? The border regime seeks to cut and disrupt movements because these islands are central to Mediterranean dynamics, located less than 90

miles from Lampedusa. They have been a key departure point for irregular migrations (almost exclusively Tunisian), not only due to their proximity to the island that serves as Europe's 'gateway' but also because of the ease of access to the sea, the availability of suitable transport, and the navigation expertise.

6. Plowing Furrows, Part II

Traveling from Sfax to Kerkena means moving for about 20 kilometres from west to east. During the crossing the sun sets behind you, highlighting the city's silhouette. Along this stretch of the Sfaxian coast the ferry's schedule, which departs Sfax in daylight and arrives at the thin Kerkena islands in darkness, coincides with the time when the sea fills with trawlers vying for space, calmly yet aggressively, with the imposing ferry. They don't seem the least bit intimidated by their illegal actions.

Trawlers equipped with drag nets move very slowly and in this part of the sea navigate from north to south, perpendicular to the ferry's path. They drop their nets and begin ploughing the sea, first in one straight line, then back in another. Their speed remains constant – very slow. The trawling boat tilts slightly; its bow lifted due to the weight it must haul. Regulations stipulate that they can only fish during certain times of the year (to respect the biological rest period), at least three miles from the coast, and only in depths greater than 50 meters.

In Tunisia, as in Italy, this fishing method is subject to strict legislative restrictions to ensure «environmental respect». As noted in a *Voxeurop* (Mancini, Manisera and Poletti, 2023) article, industrial fishing, driven by European demand, has shifted its environmental impact to non-EU countries like Tunisia, where regulations are less stringent: «Boxes of frozen marine creatures, ripped from the sea beds of North African fishing banks and consumed somewhere in Europe» (Ben-Yehoyada, 2019: 117).

Meanwhile, the militarization of the sea increases, funded by a tightening border regime that is anything but indiscriminate: it decides what to let through and what to stop, what to look at, what to illuminate, and what to conceal.

7. How Deep is the Sea

Once disembarked at Sidi Youssef, a crowd of jostling people, cars, and scooters spills onto the dock. At the port, alongside several policemen and plainclothes *Garde Nationale* officers – whom everyone knows and recognizes – there are also many (though not enough) taxis, which are quickly swarmed by the disembarking crowd. Additionally, two buses follow the islands' arterial road, cutting through land and sea from south to north along the eastern coast. The surrounding landscape blurs land and sea into one.

The sea experiences significant tidal variations, with an amplitude that is the highest in the Mediterranean, exceeding one meter (Aloulou, Elleuch and Kallel, 2012). These variations expose or submerge islands and connections between them. The number of «ghost atolls» is high, known only to those who inhabit the sea – not to Wikipedia, which likely cares little for uninhabited and nearly invisible atolls.

At the juncture of salty water and land lie the *sebkhas*: marshy areas, extremely salty, either bone-dry or very muddy depending on the rainfall. They are gray-yellow, with sparse, small shrubs. Not even palms can grow there. These areas stretch for kilometres between the coast and urban spaces, covering about half of the archipelago's territory, and are considered *territoire maritime*.

This flat archipelago is extremely windy, particularly in these areas, where the wind faces no obstacles and can reach high speeds. I watched, fascinated, as these stretches of *sebkhas* seemed devoid of human presence. In fact, they slowly encroach on urban spaces. Sea, wind, small fish and eggs, crabs, tiny bushes, and a wide variety of birds – it almost seemed like a place from which to imagine new possible futures.

But then I walk around with Sami, who shows me the spot where he retreats when he's in a bad mood, or I see a man and his wife roll up their trousers to their knees to collect shellfish. And I would think about global unravelling (Taussig, 2023) and the webs of invisible (and invisibilised) interdependencies.

8. Highs and Lows

A composition of earth, water, and salt. The sea surrounding the islands has a shallow seabed and is extremely rich in marine plant and animal life; it is, in fact, part of the «nursery of the Mediterranean», the Gulf of Gabès. These characteristics give it a sandy-green colour, more or less bright and clear depending on the area of the sea being crossed. In summer, along the coast, the sea smells like hot peach tea.

The high tidal range is due precisely to the Gulf's formation, which amplifies local oscillations in this area compared to other parts of the Mediterranean. These «water flow oscillations» are sea movements caused by gravitational forces, characterized by regular periodicity and amplitude. On the islands, the tides follow a semidiurnal cycle: each lunar day (every 24 hours and 50 minutes) there are two high and two low tides. They depend on the moon's gravitational pull, which directly affects earth's oceans, creating two bulges: one on the side of earth facing the moon and another on the opposite side due to centrifugal force.

While less influential due to its distance, the sun also plays a role, occasionally affecting the tides, especially during new and full moons. On these days, when the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth are astronomically aligned, the tides reach their maximum intensity – these are called spring tides because the gravitational forces combine. Conversely, when the three bodies form a right angle (first and last quarter moons), neap tides occur.

On the islands it is said that the sea is alive for ten days and dead for five. During the first three days of the live sea, water becomes more abundant during both high and low tides, and strong currents begin to emerge. On the fourth, fifth, and sixth days, the intensity peaks – the sea is exuberant, vibrant. From the sixth to the tenth day, the currents gradually weaken until the climax of the third day of the dead sea, when everything is calm and still. Then the cycle begins again. Everything moves. And everything is connected to this movement.

Those who navigate this sea always keep in mind its circular temporality – this ebb and flow, changing and returning. It's a flow and reflow that impacts marine collectives as well as human ones – a turnover of water, salinity, and inhabitants. The island fishers live in harmony with the movement of the sun, moon, sea, and fish. Their fishing techniques

depend on rotations and attractions, and perhaps it's no coincidence that in English, *time* and *tide* resonate so closely.

For example, when casting their nets into the sea and retrieving them the next day fishers must consider the time of day, and particularly the phase of the month, to decide in which direction to unroll them. During a dead sea, they can be more relaxed – there's little risk to the nets, except for the possibility of them remaining empty; even the fish are calmer and less likely to stray.

Typically, nets are placed perpendicular to the incoming and outgoing tidal currents to gather everything that passes through. When the sea becomes alive the position of the nets rotates by ninety degrees, aligning them parallel to the currents to prevent them from being torn, displaced, or filled with seaweed. The relationship with aquatic plants is controversial – it depends on the type of algae. Some light-green, gelatinous algae clog the nets, blocking the fish from getting trapped. These make everything slippery – for both the animals, which can escape, and the fisher, who struggles to recover the nets as they slip from their hands, heavy and slimy. In fact, the effort may be tripled because these algae have a corrosive effect, making it crucial to clean the nets immediately.

However, the fishing technique that best represents the relationship and interplay with the tides is the *charfia*, whose principle revolves around these water oscillations and their consequences.

A *charfia* is a fixed fishing structure. Its shape resembles a Z or a leg + foot: a long arm leads to a shorter one, forming an acute angle. The shorter section, the foot, ends in a large enclosure (*grande chambre*), which often leads to two or three smaller ones (*petite chambre*). Once a marine animal enters the first large chamber, it's over: if the *charfia* is well-constructed, it forces the animal further into an increasingly confined path.

At the corners of these polygonal chambers, *drine* (traps) are secured among the nets, land, and sea. The shape of the *charfia* can vary from fisher to fisher and from one area of the sea to another. When it was first explained to me, a drawing (fig. 5) was made by tracing a finger in the sand.

The «torso», or at least parts of it, is still typically constructed with palm leaves, while elsewhere PVC poles and nets dominate. The head is the large chamber, and in this case, there are no smaller chambers, but directly the *drine* traps instead, which are the small circles on each corner.

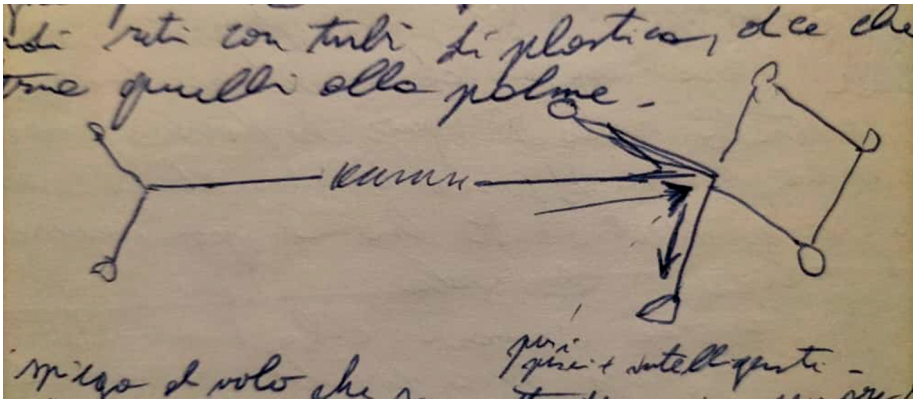

Fig. 5 – Model of the *charfia*: a sort of stick figure.

The basic structure, however, consists of the trunk/body plus one of the arms, which can then be connected to another body plus arm and so on, up to a maximum of three long sides. To build it, theory alone is not enough; you must also know how the currents and fish move in the stretch of sea you are dealing with. Only with this knowledge you can plan the structure of the *charfia*.

With the high tide, the fish come in, arriving from the central Mediterranean into this marine plain; then, as they feel the sea receding and are carried by the currents, they take the exit route. While leaving, they might follow the palm leaves that offer them shade, snacks along the way, and often a good hiding spot for their eggs. Once they take the direction proposed by the *charfia*, the guided path leads them into the *drine* traps. If the *charfia* is well-built, you'll notice right away because everything moving in the sea guided by the currents ends up in the chambers and traps – nowadays, this means mostly and essentially plastic.

After the demanding work of construction, the fisherman can harvest the fruits of his labour every other day (if he relies on it as an income source), otherwise the off-days can stretch to two, three, a week, or more. «Harvesting» means retrieving the *drine* traps, untying the knots that hold them in place, lifting them, emptying them into the boat, closing them back up, putting them in their place, and retightening everything securely.

The *drine* is a cross between a cylinder and a cone. It has a wide, circular base, and the sides are squared rather than rounded like the cylinder

Fig. 6 – A fishing chamber at one end of a *charfia*.

or slanted like the cone. The top narrows into a circle with a radius significantly smaller than the base. Previously made with various parts of the palm tree, now the supporting cage is made of iron, enclosed with a thick mesh. The fish enter through the circular base, a wide mouth that opens into the *charfia*'s chamber. From there, they can't escape because inside there's a sort of cone whose tip is open and leads into the cage, but at the same time is half-closed by wires (often plastic, though I've also seen leftover copper wires used, the kind meant for electrical conduction) arranged to prevent a reverse path. So, once the fish enters, it stays trapped in the *drine*'s belly, alive and in water, until the fisherman arrives to pull up the trap and open it from the «end», untying the knot and releasing the cord securing the net's tail. Holding the iron ring at the opening, they empty it into the boat. These *drines* are about one meter in diameter at the circular opening and at least one meter twenty high. Pulling them out of the sea full of fish, repeatedly, is hard work.

Whenever possible you approach with the boat, usually a *flouka* or a *canua*. You tie the boat to a *charfia* pole and grab the *drine*. When the tide is too low, you take off your trousers and do the work standing in the water

Fig.7 – A metal-mesh drina being lifted onboard to harvest the trapped fish.

with your feet sinking into the seabed.

In 2018, the *charfia* was declared an intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO. This recognition was spearheaded mainly by a small group of intellectuals, scholars, and politicians, alongside some fishermen. From the first docking in Kerkena, arriving at the port of Sidi Youssef, one is struck by the presence of these rows of palms in the sea. Knowing of my personal interest in the sea, it was also one of the first things everyone talked about. The *charfia* has become a symbol of the islands, the pride of the archipelago, and everyone has something to say about it. People display them, make small keychains or lamp holders as souvenirs.

It's part of the composition of the landscape, so much so that in Tunisia these islands are generally associated with this fishing technique. Everyone in the archipelago claims that the best fish or octopus in the world comes from Kerkena, and in particular from the *charfia*, which is why it is sold or bought at a slightly higher price. It is so deeply entwined with the archipelago's relational ecology that its peritonealisation almost goes unnoticed. At least that was my impression – very few people mentioned

the connection to UNESCO, and it certainly wasn't those who worked with the *charfia* daily.

Keeping up with the times, the materials have changed; as mentioned, palm leaves are now rarely used, replaced by PVC poles and nets. While I've already mentioned some advantages, there's also the issue of disposing of plastic in case of breakage or replacement, as well as the microplastics released into the water throughout its use. Furthermore, using nets instead of palm leaves creates a true barrier, a boundary that disrupts the movement of marine collectives and boats alike, making «traditional» sailing navigation even less fluid.

Additionally, this new method of constructing *charfias* has made them cheaper and less elaborate, thus more accessible. Over the past decade, the number of *charfias* at sea has increased tenfold, I was told. Whilst in theory a permit from the *municipalité* is required to have a *charfia*, in practice, three-quarters of the structures are built without proper authorization. It's an excellent investment for laundering money and disguising the high profits that some organizers of migrant departures earn from the criminalization of migration.

Even in the year I spent in the archipelago, the sheer number of *charfias* popping up overnight was impressive. Omar, a retired hairdresser now working as a fisherman, was complaining as we went fishing, that all this «illegal construction» was absolutely *mush normal* – unacceptable. When did this happen? He asked rhetorically. «Before, there was only my structure, plus that one over there on the left, and two more in front; then he built one closer, and now who knows when or how this whole mess appeared. Now you have to zigzag to navigate».

And Omar was someone who would let me steer, a calm and smiling person who spent the whole navigation humming with a cigarette between his lips. Only two things seemed to anger him: the inflation of *charfias* and the rise in the price of shrimp sold by middlemen who bought them for 2 dinars and resold them to fishmongers for 10. At the market, those shrimp, just slightly less fresh, were priced at 16 dinars.

8. To conclude

«What happens when people and things cling to one another?» (Ingold, 2020: 5). With the *charfia*, what emerges is «the essential continuity between worlds» (Artaud, 2012: 101) – not only with the fish, but also with the sun and the moon, with plastic, and of course with the palm tree. Driving stakes into the seabed becomes the construction of a cosmogony (De Martino, 2007), «in a relationship of mutual susceptibility» (Colombo and Rahola, 2023: 166) with a sensitive matter in constant transformation. And the sea is part of all this.

These islands are so flat that, if it weren't for this coastal sea shielding them from the exuberant and deep Mediterranean, they would be swallowed up in an instant. With their sea-shield, the relationship is familiar; it does not seem like a sea that frightens, intimidates, or is impossible to manage. On the contrary, every area of this sea has its own name, identifying on the basis of geographic characteristics (higher or lower areas, zones with more or less algae) and its proper name (e.g., *bhira Gremd,* which would literally translate to Gremdi Lake).

The sea surrounding Kerkena is part of the archipelago and also situates the islands at the heart of the Mediterranean, within global currents and flows: «The currents hit the islands, producing phenomena of cultural erosion: and yet the islands create local vortices, eddies that give meaning and direction to the currents themselves» (Favole, 2010: XIV).

In a brief essay titled *To the Planetarium* (2006)*,* Walter Benjamin discusses astrology and astronomy, the transition from one to the other – or rather, the intertwining that eventually formed between them. According to Benjamin (2006: 70-72), nothing better distinguishes ancient man from modern man than the former's dedication to a «cosmic experience». In contemporary modernity, the relationship between human beings and the cosmos becomes more complex through technology, which seems to make everything both infinitely close and infinitely distant at once. This transformation also involves the human body's connection to its surroundings, producing a new form of cosmic connectivity.

But this is not a story of linear evolution – from an idyllic, collective past to an individualistic present. The archipelago, without too many lights to illuminate its roads, seems to embody this very idea of 'non-purity'

(Clifford, 2010): an entanglement – often contradictory and with no need for synthesis – between consonances and dissonances with the surrounding world and its transformations.

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