

**Roslind Varghese Brown.** *Tunisia*. New York, London, Sydney: Marshall Cavendish, 1998. 128 pp. \$35.64, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7614-0690-7.



**Reviewed by** Leland Barrows

**Published on** H-AfrTeach (April, 1999)

Upon first leafing through this generously illustrated introduction to Tunisia, a recent addition to the Cultures of the World series of the Marshall Cavendish imprint of Times Books International, an adult reader cannot help but think of the *Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale. The tone is the same. Or perhaps a better if more derogatory point of comparison would be that of the "TVB"--*tout va bien* (all is going well)--summing-up by worldly-wise readers of the news as reported by *El Moudjahid*, the FLN party newspaper in Algeria; the point being that Algeria aside, even Tunisia has problems at which this book only hints. Of course, it is intended for junior high school students in the United States in the hope that it will open their minds to foreign countries and cultures. Possibly a "TVB" approach is what is best for that age group, even though this reviewer has some doubts.

The 128 pages of this book include chapters on "Geography," "History," "Government," and the "Economy"; on the Tunisian people, specifically their "Lifestyle," "Religion," and "Language"; and on the "Arts," "Leisure" activities, "Festivals," and

"Food." It also includes a "Map of Tunisia," a page of "Quick Notes" on Tunisia, a one-page "Glossary" of terms, a "Bibliography" listing only six entries, and finally, an "Index." A fairly straightforward expository text is amply supplemented by fifteen text boxes and 114 illustrations of various sizes (including one on the cover and another on the title page), most of them in colour.

The text boxes are a mixed lot that amplify points raised in the text. One of these (p. 47) traces legal evolution in Tunisia from *sharia* and rabbinical courts to the 1957 Code of Personal Status. Another (p. 53) briefly describes how the olive agro-industry took off in the early years of this century.

A striking black-and-white photograph (on p. 37) portrays a very small, strange looking French naval vessel, a steam *aviso*, hardly larger than a small yacht, moored in the French naval base at Bizerte in the early years of the French Protectorate. The picture would suggest that French naval power at the time was insignificant or that Bizerte never counted as much for the French, as did Mers-el-Kebir in Algeria or Toulon in France,

as major bases for their Navy. Or does this illustration represent author Roslind Varghese Brown's attempt at an anti-colonial joke? Other than the works listed in the "Bibliography," no photography or illustration credits are listed at all, an unfortunate omission. It would be useful to know the source(s) of the illustrations, or is the reader to assume that they have all been derived from *Tunisia in Pictures* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1992), one of six items listed in the "Bibliography."

Being a historian, this reviewer was drawn to the eighteen or so pages devoted to Tunisian history that gallop from pre-history to the forced retirement of President Habib Bourguiba in 1987 and his replacement by former Minister of the Interior and Prime Minister, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the current Head of State. The Phoenician establishment of Carthage is of course described as well as the three Punic wars. Although one small illustration (p. 24) portrays Hannibal's crossing of the Rhone River with elephants, the author misses a chance to comment about a more recently claimed truism that only Indian elephants can be domesticated, not African ones of the sort used by Hannibal's armies. Although Brown credits an unnamed Roman general with the recapturing of Capua, in Italy, from Hannibal's forces in 211 BC, she says nothing about the earlier battle of Canae in 216 BC, considered to have been, from a tactical point of view, one of the most innovative battles in history. Hannibal virtually annihilated the Roman army (even if the Romans eventually won the war).

Brown devotes short paragraphs to other epochs in Tunisian history: Roman rule, the Vandals, the Byzantine reconquest, and successive Muslim dynasties following the initial Arab conquest in 670 by Uqba ibn Nafi-Umayyads, Abbasids, Aghlabids, Fatimids, Zirids, Almohads, Hafsids, conquest and rule by the Ottoman Empire after 1574, and finally, the Mamluk Husseinid Dynasty in 1705 that lasted until 1957. Here the

author confuses Khair al din, an initiator of direct Ottoman rule in the Maghreb, known as Barbarossa to the Europeans of the early sixteenth century, with the twelfth century Hohenstauffen German Emperor, Frederick I Barbarossa (1152-1190), who began the style, "Holy Roman Empire." The author's descriptions of the circumstances under which Tunisia became a French protectorate between 1881 and 1883 are overly brief, and she confuses the results of the Congress of 1878 that concluded the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 with the Berlin Conference on African Affairs (November 1884-February 1885), the latter, not the former, being popularly perceived as the Conference by which "the European powers divided Africa among themselves" (p. 36). True, the earlier Conference did facilitate eventual French entry into Tunisia as a kind of *quid pro quo* for the British leasing of Cyprus from the Ottoman Empire, and Tunisia did come under French rule before the second Berlin Conference was held.

The author chronicles the major steps towards the regained independence of Tunisia on 20 March 1956 (through revocation of the Marsa Convention of 1883 and the Bardo Treaty of 1881) under the leadership of (then) Prime Minister Habib Bourguiba and his Neo-Destour Party. Again, however, she is a bit doubtful about her facts, for on an earlier page (p. 23) she states that "Tunisia became a self-governing country on July 25, 1957." It was on the latter date that Bourguiba deposed the last Bey of Tunis, ending the Husseinid Dynasty, and had himself proclaimed President of Tunisia.

Fortunately, there is more to this book than history. There is a good deal of accurate contemporary description, for instance, that of the careful tightrope walk in which the government must engage as it arbitrates between the need and the national policy to modernize and the demands of Islamic traditionalists. It also presents the high points of the language policy of independent

Tunisia (French versus Arabic, and within Arabic, classical Arabic versus literary Arabic versus dialectal Arabic). The chapter on religion in Tunisia, particularly on the fundamentals of Islam, as well as those dealing with the arts, leisure time activities, and festivals are particularly good even if they suggest inspiration by the *Office National du Tourisme Tunisien* (ONTT).

The author could have said and portrayed a little more under the rubric of transportation than she did. Although she mentions the existence of a railway network 2,250 kilometers long serving two-thirds of Tunisia, she fails to provide any pictures of trains, and yet some of the Tunisian train sets, particularly those operating between Tunis and Sfax, are impressively modern. She should also have indicated the railway lines and the principal roads on the map of Tunisia that she provides on page 122. Also, good photographs of the Central Station in downtown Tunis and of the main terminal of El Aouina Airport outside Tunis would have been of value.

The chapter on Tunisian cooking is very informative and in a way courageous for citing a traditional dish, *Maarcassini*, made from wild boar, forbidden to Muslims (but eaten discreetly by members of the Tunisian elite and by visitors from Europe and North America). The author provides a text box (p. 121) giving a detailed recipe for *Harrissa*, spicy tomato paste that is used as a condiment in many North African dishes. Given that this substance is available commercially throughout Europe and North America (the best known brand, *Harrissa du Cap Bon*, being sold in tubes like tooth paste), it would have been more useful if Brown had given a recipe for something that cannot be bought ready made, like *chorba* (soup of various kinds), *odja* (eggs scrambled with onions, peppers, tomatoes, and slices of *merguez* sausages), *couscous*, or *tadjine* (a pastry made with chopped meat and eggs), the ingredients for which are easily available in Europe and in North America.

The strength of this book is clearly its illustrations, yet even here one would have liked Brown to help relatively young and unsophisticated readers read behind the gloss. A picture on page 67 shows an outdoor cafe the customers of which are exclusively young males. She could have explained that there was a time that ended in the early 1980s when numbers of young women could be found, unaccompanied, sitting in the cafes of Tunis. This feminine presence was striking, particularly to visitors from neighbouring Algeria. Now the scene is much as it is portrayed in this illustration, and commentators speak, in the case of the cafes of Tunis, of how Tunisian women have lost the *battle of the cafes*. This lost battle is the direct result of the rural exodus that has filled Tunis and other Tunisian cities with poor and relatively unwesternized (unfrenchified) persons among whom traditional views of the role and place of women in a Muslim society prevail. Given that Tunisia has had a strong state-supported birth control program<sup>H^Hme</sup> since 1964 and that abortion has been legalized (facts that are acknowledged on pp. 47 and 76), Brown should have included a photograph of the front facade of a birth control clinic in a large town showing the name and purpose of the establishment in large letters, in Arabic and in French, over the front door.

Another illustration that could have benefited from more careful explanation is that of the so-called Bourguiba family mausoleum in Monastir (p. 48). The building is obviously beautiful, very expensive, and constructed in a neo-Moorish style; however, contrary to what the caption says, former President, Habib Bourguiba, is not yet entombed in it. He is alive but not in the best of health. The author might have pointed out, however, that Bourguiba (originally Habib Abu Ruqayba) came from a very poor family that could certainly not have afforded a family mausoleum. The building portrayed came much later, a "gift" of the Tunisian state.

Finally, a rather peculiar photograph (on p. 79) of a newly wed Tunisian couple includes in it a boy of around seven with the explanation that he is a "family member." Although the child may be the brother of the bridegroom or the bride or even the son of one of them by a previous marriage, the photograph suggests a very late shotgun marriage.

As with any American book of this type, the author cannot avoid being more-or-less politically correct. The term *gender* is used in one spot where *sex* would have been more appropriate; *craftsmen* are systematically called *craftspeople*, and the author elicits some embarrassment at use of the term *Berber*, for fear that it might have a pejorative origin (p. 65). Likewise she informs the reader that *Africans* in Tunisia (a founding member of the Organization for African Unity) constitute a "minority group," a statement that would surprise the majority population of Berbers-more-or-less-Arabized who think of themselves as Africans, specifically North Africans, or as Maghrebins, and who know that their Berber ancestors were the original human inhabitants of North Africa. Because the author prefers not to designate the minority group in question as "Black" or as "Negro" Africans, that indeed they are, she ends up implying that the vast majority of the population of Tunisia is non-African. Finally, a beautiful view of the *Avenue Habib Bourguiba* in Tunis includes the explanation that it was recently renamed *Avenue 7 Novembre* to commemorate Bourguiba's ouster. The caption should also have mentioned that the avenue in question was originally named *Avenue Jules Ferry* after the French Prime Minister who imposed French protectorate status on Tunisia. After all, Brown does concede that the part of Tunis in which this Avenue is located was built by the French on land reclaimed from the sea during the protectorate period.

What can one really say about this book? Certainly it fulfills the parameters of the series of which it is a part. It gives a superficial, if colour-

ful, introduction to Tunisia, suitable for American middle or junior high school students for whom the factual errors indicated above will not be that important. One hopes that the intended readers will look at the pictures, skim the text, and read other, more substantive, books about Tunisia.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrteach>

**Citation:** Leland Barrows. Review of Brown, Roslind Varghese. *Tunisia*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2959>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.