Museums and Political Democratization in Tunisia

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Abstract

This article explores the role of museums in the democratization process using the case of Tunisia. Using several case studies, including the Bardo Museum, I illustrate the ways in which museums have been seized upon to shape a new democratic culture of citizenship marked by freedom of expression and civic engagement. This article argues that museums, like traditional political institutions such as referenda and parliaments, can act as generators and promoters of democracy. The findings highlight both the potential and challenges faced by museums in this transformative role, shedding light on their significance in post-revolution Tunisia, beyond their traditional functions as cultural repositories.

Keywords: museums, democratization, Tunisia, citizenship, civic engagement

Introduction

The Tunisian Revolution of 2010–2011 marked the catalyst for the wider Arab Spring, a wave of uprisings and protests that swept across the Arab world. Sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in the town of Sidi Bouzid, the Tunisian uprising quickly evolved into a mass movement against authoritarian rule, corruption, and economic injustice of the Ben Ali government. Unlike many of its regional counterparts, Tunisia's revolution led to a political transition to democracy, positioning the country as a unique, though fragile, democratic experiment within the post-Arab Spring landscape. Labour movements were integral to the campaign, especially the UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), which assumed a leading role within the Tunisian 'National Dialogue Quartet' in consolidating democratic gains (Cavartorta 2015). In late 2011, the country's first representative government in more than three decades was formed, as the Constituent Assembly was seated. Within a few years, Tunisia held multiple free and competitive elections and drafted a new constitution (2014) which stipulates freedoms of expression, assembly, and the press; protects the right to access information; and cites men and women as equal before the law.

Despite significant hardships and moments of democratic backsliding, Tunisia has become a focal point for scholars of democratization over the past decade. Their work discusses Tunisian exceptionalism as the only success story of the Arab Spring and the role played by civil society, governmental institutions, and political parties in shaping the Tunisian democratic experience (Hill 2016; Ould Mohamedou and Siske 2017; Sofi 2021). While some consideration has been given to the consequences of the Revolution on heritage and tourism (Coslett 2020; Perelli and Sistu 2013; Saidi 2017), the roles of heritage and museums in the democratization process remain understudied.

This article examines the place museums have been assigned in the democratization process by the various actors of the Revolution, and the consequences of democratization on Tunisian museology since the ousting of Ben Ali in 2011. It argues that museums, like traditional political institutions, such as courts, referenda, and parliaments, have been recognised as both generators and promoters of democracy. Building on fieldwork, interviews and archival research undertaken in Tunisia since 2012, I examine three institutions – the Bardo Museum,

the Jewish Museum of Tunisia, and the Museum of Democracy – and demonstrate how they have been called on to mobilise, memorialise, and teach democracy. These sites were selected for their differing natures as state and non-state initiatives, as well as for the distinct ways in which they have been used – either internally, as newly founded institutions with clear ideological orientations (as in the cases of the Museum of Judaism and the Museum of Democracy), or externally, as pre-existing sites drawn into wider political struggles, such as the Bardo Museum. In studying museums and democratization in Tunisia, this article adds a new cultural dimension to political studies of the 2011 Revolution, while also expanding traditional understandings of how museums can enact democratic citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Democratization, Museums, and the Middle East

Democratization is largely understood as the passage from another political system to democracy, although the character, nature, and meaning of the process is still debated (Gruel and Bishop 2014). In the context of this paper, I consider democratization as the changeover from authoritarianism, where state leaders 'direct and regulate society without being accountable to citizens' (Potter 1997: 4), to the evolution and consolidation of an institutional organisation where the ultimate decision-making powers belong to the people. Nevertheless I recognise that democratization is not exclusive to transitions from authoritarianism. It is a 'non-linear,' 'long term,' and multivalent process. As there are many forms of democracy, there are many paths to democratization (Gruel and Bishop 2014: 2).

Since the seminal work of Seymour Lipset (1959), there has been a large array of research dedicated to understanding the factors that promote transitions to inclusive democracies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and former East European Soviet-satellite countries (Harris 2002; March 2006; Kipgen 2015; Lynch and VonDoepp 2019). One important line of inquiry has been the role played by civil society, through revolutions, popular protests, or the forging of more incisive political skills over time (Putman 1993; Garrioch 2002). Another argument connects democratization with institutional change. As Leslie Anderson (2016) argues, this has proven especially relevant in the study of countries where civil society is disinterested in or recalcitrant to democratic change: 'in such contexts, preexisting institutions of the state, including the presidency and the courts, constitute a source of authority, ideas, and innovation through which a formerly authoritarian nation can gradually transform into a democracy' (2016: 4). Using a polity-centred approach, Anderson suggests that institutions can create and operationalise democracy. Anderson focuses on political institutions, but what of cultural institutions, such as museums? What role do they play in the transition to, installation and consolidation of inclusive democracy? And with what limitations? How do museums create citizenship cultures and practices? In other words, how can museums be what sociologist Richard Sennett (1998) famously calls 'spaces of democracy'?

The birth of the modern museum is connected to democratization and democratic consolidation. Public museums emerged in late eighteenth century Europe, in a period of revolutions, modernization, and colonial and national expansion. They helped to create a public for emerging democracies and to teach this public how to behave like modern citizens (Anderson 1983: 163-185; Bennett 1995, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill 1995; Duncan 1995; MacDonald 1998). Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002: 9) shows that, since the 1960s and the rise of Western social revolutions, the 'pedagogic' model of democracy, based on a learned understanding of politics, has been challenged by a 'performative' one, based on 'the politics of experience'. The latter, he argues, has forced museums out of their encyclopedic posture into a more 'embodied approach', based on life experience. In other words, it is no longer enough for museums to manifest publics for democracies, they must embody the principles of democracy themselves. This approach has materialized through New Museology (Vergo 1989) and its emphasis on decolonization, community engagement, and civic participation (Sandell 2013, 2016; Message 2013). It has also encouraged communities across the world to open their own museums and use them to support their social and political claims (Crooke 2008; Watson 2007).

The wave of democratization across Eastern Europe, Southern Africa, and Latin America

since the early 1990s – coupled with the rise of memory studies and the concept of 'difficult heritage' (MacDonald 2009) – has opened new lines of inquiry into the relationship between museums and democratization, beyond the experiences of liberal western democracies (Marchall 2010; Ngcobo 2018; Norris 2020; Iordachi and Apor 2021). This body of work is concerned with the ways in which contemporary identities are processed and shaped through the memorialization of an unwanted and traumatic political past. It argues that museums provide visitors with an opportunity to grapple with the past but also, and most importantly, to learn from violence and achieve some form of restorative justice.

In a region largely characterized by absolute monarchies and autocratic governance, it is unsurprising that scholarship on museums in the MENA has primarily emphasized their role as tools of state legitimacy, deeply embroiled in state political ideologies (Davis 1994; Maffi 2000; Valter 2001). Amidst this dominant narrative, some studies have explored the construction of alternative narratives in both state and non-state museums, showing how these institutions have, at times, been used to resist or complicate official histories (Pieprzak 2010; Zolberg 2011). A more recent line of research has focused on museums as 'soft power', including heritage diplomacy and museum franchising (Wakefield 2020). The question of democratization and museums, however, remains underexplored in the context of the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in relation to how institutions of the region engage with political transitions and civic participation.

Museums in Tunisia

Throughout Tunisia's modern history, museums have frequently been mobilized to support the ideological and political agendas of successive regimes. The modern institution of the museum emerged in the late nineteenth century, as a result of Ottoman and colonial interests in collecting and archaeology. Under the Protectorate (1881), the French administration created many museums, starting with archaeological ones and later adding museums of crafts. Unlike in France, in the same period, where museums were designed for nation building and citizenry formation, in Tunisia they served different pedagogic missions. First, they demonstrated France's sophistication as a colonial nation (Bacha 2013). They also served as teaching sites for the local artisans enrolled in French-operated craft schools (Rey 2019). Only after independence, in 1956, did museums in Tunisia achieve a national status. Thereafter, they were highly mobilised as national agents, teaching Tunisians how to forge a new relationship with their past and their country. To further this aim, public engagement programs (Angle Maguire 2023) and decolonization efforts were initiated across the sector to democratise culture and help Tunisians transition into their new standing as citizens of a free nation, albeit a non-democratic one. The coming to power of President Ben Ali, in the late 1980s, coupled with local and international developments, encouraged a different kind of citizenship culture. Museums were no longer tasked to unify Tunisia, but to propel it on the international scene. This was evidenced by the booming of cultural tourism and development of heritage sites. Many museums were renovated or created and renewed attention was given to public engagement with international visitors, as well as the local public.

The 2010 Revolution brought mixed consequences for Tunisia's museum sector. It introduced new bureaucratic burdens and financial instability, alongside intensified cultural negotiations in response to both rising civic activism and religious extremism (Rey 2015). Museums have been called upon by the various actors of the Revolution to support (and sometimes undermine) the broader democratization effort. The Bardo Museum offers a particularly illustrative example of how this process has unfolded in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Bardocracy

The site of the Bardo Museum has long served as a powerful political and cultural symbol of state power unity throughout Tunisia's modern history (Coslett 2020). Originally built as the palace of the Bey of Tunis, the building was converted into a museum during the French Protectorate and later nationalized following the proclamation of the Tunisian Republic in 1956. The surrounding precinct also came to house both the national parliament and an adjoining military complex. In 2009, the Bardo was selected by the authorities to be part

of an extensive redevelopment plan designed to elevate it to international status and boost Tunisia's tourism sector.

As a highly strategic site with international renown, the Bardo Museum became a key arena for democratic mobilization in post-revolutionary Tunisia. For the people of Tunis, it served as a rallying point where the emotions of the Revolution – anger and joy, sorrow and bliss, shame and pride – could be expressed and, perhaps, slowly processed. Shortly after the fall of the regime, the Museum, still under renovation, offered a silent but imposing background to the knots of citizens pressing their demands in front of parliament. When the 'new Bardo' finally opened to the public, Tunisian authorities deliberately anchored its inauguration in the strong republican tradition envisioned by Habib Bourguiba for an independent Tunisia. The Museum was officially reopened on 25 July 2012, the Day of the Republic (La Fête de la République), exactly 55 years after Bourguiba delivered his historic speech before the Constituent Assembly proclaiming the Republic (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The interior of the new Bardo museum. Photograph by Virginie Rey, 2012.

This democratic legacy was violently disrupted just a few years later. On 18 March 2015, the Bardo Museum became the target of a terrorist attack orchestrated by affiliates of the Islamic State, resulting in the deaths of twenty-two people, including both Tunisian staff and local and foreign visitors.The attack provided a tragic opportunity for the Tunisian government to consolidate the connection between the Bardo and the democratic values won by the Revolution (Rey 2019). A week later, the Tunisian government organised a *marche silencieuse* (silent walk) under the slogans 'Je suis Bardo' (I am Bardo) and 'Le Monde est Bardo' (The World is Bardo), in reference to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris that had occurred just a few months prior. To fight obscurantism and reposition Tunisia on the tourism map, the Bardo was selected a few months later to reveal the names of the four finalists for the prestigious Goncourt Price in French literature. During the ceremony in October 2015, one of the seven members of the jury said: '[i]n this museum, where the most cruel and senseless tyranny expressed its hatred of freedom, we, the Goncourt Academy, came to do something democratic,

we voted. And this symbol is very strong').[1] Connection to democracy was again evident the following year, on 26 July 2016, a day after the Day of the Republic, when the Treasury Room at the Bardo Museum was transformed as a exhibitionary space for the display of the Nobel Prize medals awarded to the so-called political 'quartet': the four leaders who maintained political discussions and peace until the new constitution was drafted. Shortly before the award ceremony in Oslo, the General Secretary of the UGTT, Houcine Abbassi, declared in a press interview, that the prize was not attributed only to the quartet, but to 'the victims of the Revolution and the jihadist attacks, the women and the youth, the political parties and, beyond that, Tunisian society as a whole'.[2] He further explained that the Nobel Prize would be exhibited at the National Bardo Museum 'as a symbol of dialogue, a dialogue that will win over terrorism.' Minister of Culture Sonia Mbarek and Wided Bouchamaoui, Nobel laureate and President of the Tunisian employer's union (UTICA), expressed similar sentiments during the inauguration of the display at the Bardo.[3]

On the first anniversary of the attack, the state commissioned a memorial mosaic of 27-meters square to be erected outside the entrance of the Museum. The mosaic features the portraits and the names of the twenty-two victims of the attack surrounded by traditional motifs. In the centre lies a representation of *L'Odyssé*, one of the masterworks of the Museum, as well as two medallions reading 'Everyone is Bardo,' in French and in Arabic, yet another opportunity to show Tunisia's commitment to the democratic values of the Republic for which it stands (Fig. 2). It was in front of this *tableau macabre* that French President Emmanuel Macron gathered with Tunisian officials to honour the memory of the victims on the second day of his highly mediatised visit to Tunisia in February 2018. Before leaving the Museum, the President took a moment to write a message in the *Livre d'Or* (guest book) of the Museum:

> In memory of the victims of the Bardo attacks and to all people who have been the victims of terrorism in Tunisia, I want to underline France's solidarity with Tunisia and the Tunisian people. You gave [terrorism] the most beautiful response there is: Democracy, freedom, equality between men and women, and culture. May culture always win. And it will win because of its power.[4]

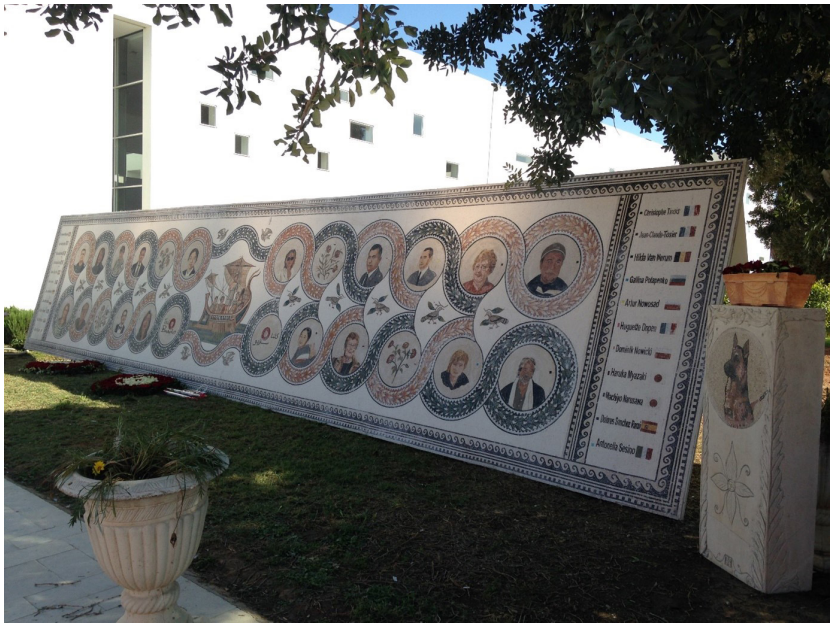

Figure 2: Mosaic memorial at the Bardo Museum. Photographed by Yamen in 2016 for Wikimedia.

After his self-coup on 25 July 2021, President Kais Saeid closed the Bardo Museum. The elegant wrought iron doorway which used to welcome more than 80,000 visitors per year was shut and military guards watched the perimeter. Located in the same Tunis precinct as the parliament, the Museum was considered a dangerous zone and President Saeid ordered its closure with immediate effect. This decision left many people perplexed and angry. Museum supporters across Tunisia and France launched digital media campaigns, gathering support from many high-profile intellectuals and politicians, including the President of the Arab World Institute, Jack Lang. They signed an emotional collective editorial published in celebrated French newspaper *Le Monde* (12 March 2023), which stated: '[c]losing the Bardo is like closing access to three thousand years of Tunisian history. Closing the Bardo is like closing access to a common history we share.' Many Tunisians posted slogans on social media, such as 'Bardo Museum: Against Oblivion' or 'Free the Bardo Museum,' with daily photos of its collections, to show that the Museum's legacy lives. To no avail. Tunisian museum authorities were also confused. Former president of Institut National du Patrimoine (INP), the national body in charge of heritage preservation and management in Tunisia, Habib Ben Younes launched a public campaign to reopen the Museum, calling its extended closure 'absurd'.[5]

Considering the Bardo's significance in Tunisian history and its recent mobilisation as the sounding board of the Revolution, it is difficult not to read Kais Saeid's decision to close the Museum as a political statement. In shutting down the Bardo, Saeid signalled that access to culture, like democracy, can be suspended at any time. Little did he know that his decision would be met with an outpouring of support from Tunisians. The public appeals launched to reopen the Bardo undoubtedly showed that this museum was an important actor of the heritage sector in Tunisia and an emblem of Tunisian identity. Most importantly, they suggest that the work of the heritage sector to rid museums from their colonial and elitist standing and transform them into sites for the Tunisian people, about the Tunisian people, has come a long way. It is fair to say that, in a period of political change and upheavals, the Bardo has succeeded in mobilising a public for Tunisian democracy, inside its walls, as well as beyond them.

Minority Jewish Heritage in Support of Democracy

As the Bardo Museum was being promoted as the symbol of cultural unity, some minority communities—social, ethnic and religious—seized the opportunity of the Revolution to propagandise their own cultural agenda, pushing against the homogenous, safe and customary identity that the state promoted (Pouessel 2016). The Jewish community of Tunisia was one such minority community, and its current battle for a museum of Jewish Tunisian heritage a *cause célèbre*.

Tunisia has been home to Jewish people since the second century AC. Following the Muslim conquests of Tunisia in 647, Jews enjoyed some degree of freedom, with periods of discrimination (Sebag 1991). The influence of the Vichy regime, on the one hand, and the creation of Israel, on the other hand, in the mid-twentieth century, led to a marked growth of antisemitism in the region. This was happening in a period when Arab nationalism, and with it the Arab language, was gaining momentum as the preferred expression of identity in the Maghreb, the Levant, and the Gulf. Unsettled by this new political climate, the Jewish population of Tunisia emigrated en masse, especially to France and Israel. Between the end of the 1940s and the Six-Day War (*Naksa*) in 1967, the number of Jews in Tunisia went from 100,000 to less than 10,000 people (Ben Achour 2019). Today, the Jewish community accounts for less than 0,1% of the Tunisian population, or 1500 individuals, most of them living in Djerba and Tunis.

The preservation of Jewish cultural heritage in Tunisia started at the beginning of the French Protectorate (1881), a period when Jewish communities enjoyed some economic and cultural protection in Tunisia. A section on Jewish heritage was set up at the Alaoui Museum, following the creation of the Musée Arabe by Director Paul Gauckler in 1895 (Bacha 2013). The display consisted of garments and objects traditionally used for religious rituals. Other collections of Jewish objects followed in the Museums of Traditional Art created by the French across Tunisia between the 1930s and the end of the Protectorate in 1956 (Rey 2019). After

independence, Jewish collections were assembled and put on display in some of the new Museums of Popular Arts and Traditions that were multiplying across Tunisia, including in Djerba, which possesses the largest Jewish community in Tunisia and remains a pilgrimage site for Jews from around the world. The Museum was renovated in 2008 and the section on Jewish culture was enlarged and enriched. A display of Jewish jewellery was also created in 2006 at the Museum of Traditional Heritage of Moknine.

Alongside Morocco, Tunisia is one of only two Arab countries to exhibit Jewish culture in its museum displays. Unlike Morocco, however, where the state has been actively acknowledging Jewish culture as part of its heritage (Wagenhoffer 2014), Tunisia retains the marginal status of Jewish heritage. In a Republican country where successive political regimes have defined the national identity as Arab-Muslim, sidelining minority communities, Jewish culture is always presented as a discrete aspect of Tunisan society which is strongly connected to the region on display. Narratives are written by heritage experts within a patrimonial tradition that makes minimal room for the voices and experiences of the community itself. This practice is complicated by the fact that Judaism is often associated with Israel and historical and contemporary imperialism and, as such, remains a controversial topic.

The Revolution and the democratic values it supported has opened new opportunities for minority cultures in Tunisia (Pouessel 2012), inspiring many social and cultural communities to organise their own memorialisation projects (Rey 2018). Gilles Jacob Lellouche had been a vocal member of the Jewish community in Tunisia. Born in La Goulette, he migrated to Paris in the 1970s, where he opened a restaurant. During a stay in Spain, he first had the idea of creating an association that promotes Tunisia's Jewish heritage of Tunisia. In the 1990s, he founded Dar el-Dekhra (The House of Memory). The association was created in France, due to Ben Ali regime's dictatorial rule. In the late 1990s, Lellouche came back to the Tunisian island of La Goulette, where he opened a kosher restaurant, Mamie Lily (named after his mother), which quickly grew to be a culinary institution and a nerve centre of the Jewish community of Tunis. After the Revolution, Dar el-Dekhra was finally moved to Tunis and became the first public association representing Jews in Tunisia. At Mamie Lily, Lellouche started to organise Jewish cultural activities—workshops, conferences and meetings. The aim was to unite the community but also to show other Tunisians that Jewish heritage was an integral part of the country's cultural heritage: '[m]any think that the Jews of Tunisia came with the European settlers, three hundred years ago. But we've been here for three thousand years'.[6] In addition to publishing several books (Allali 2014; Lellouche 2015), the Revolution afforded Dar al-Dekhra a longstanding dream: to open a small museum dedicated to Jewish Tunisian heritage. Located upstairs from Mamie Lily, the Museum of Arts and Traditions of Tunisian Judaism was inaugurated in 2012, on Purim, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the saving of the Jewish people from a massacre by the Hachemites. The opening was attended by many foreign diplomats and famous figures from the Tunisian Jewish community. Comprised of pictures and rare objects, the Museum's collections revolved around five themes: artisanship, literature, art, religion, and daily life.

As Lellouche explained in a 2012 conversation, it was important for Dar el-Dhekra to take advantage of the democratic momentum gained with the Revolution and to secure support from the Tunisian Presidency. In a bid to heighten the profile of Jewish heritage and increase media visibility, Dar al-Dekhra invited interim President Mohamed Moncef Marzouki to visit the Museum. During the visit, in 2014, Marzouki declared:

> I would like to thank you for inviting me. Let me reiterate that Tunisia is the land of peace, the land of coexistence, the land of brotherhood, a country that rejects all kinds of discrimination between its citizens—whether racial, religious, or sectarian. We are proud of all our Jewish citizens, who have played an important role in the history of this country.[7]

Lellouche's work contributed greater visibility to the Jewish community and its heritage after the Revolution, but this visibility came at a price. After the Tunisian police informed him that his name was on the list of several terrorist plots, Lellouche announced on Facebook in 2015 that he was closing Mamie Lily and, with it, the exhibition space upstairs. This decision was a sad moment for the Jewish community of Tunisia and its allies, who feared that Jewish

heritage, like Mamie Lily's courtyard, would soon be forgotten.[8]

Building on the democratic momentum of the Revolution, some members of the community mobilised the following year around a new heritage project: Le Musée du Patrimoine Juif Tunisien, the first public institution entirely dedicated to Jewish culture and heritage in Tunisia. The Museum is the brainchild of academics and cultural figures in France and in Tunisia, including CNRS Professor Lucette Valensi and Professor Habib Kazdaghli from the Laboratoire des Régions et Ressources Parimoniales de Tunisie (Laboratory of patrimonial regions and resources of Tunisia) at University La Manouba, in Tunis, which have been a driving force behind the museum. To support the project, an association was created in 2018, the International Association for the Protection of Jewish Tunisian Cultural Heritage (AIS-PCJT). The association oversees organising the collection of artefacts, objects and audio-visual material in Tunisia and overseas. Collections are stored at L'Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Museum of Judaism in Paris. An initial inventory of Jewish collections in Tunisian museums, at the Bardo and in regional institutions, as well as in synagogues, was also undertaken in 2017. Unlike most Jewish museums in the US, Europe, and Australia, however, the Tunisian Jewish Museum could/would not talk about persecution, suffering, or a forced exodus. In a country where the Jewish population is almost non-existent and where antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiments are very much alive, the Museum took a positive, celebratory stance focusing on what Aomar Boum (2020) calls, in the context of Morrocco, 'Convivencia', religious coexistence. It would give Jewish culture visibility and showcase its cultural influence.

In the face of what happened to Mamie Lily, Habib Kazdaghli was aware that support from the government was critical for the Museum to survive. He aimed to secure an equal partnership with the state and to integrate the Museum into the official heritage network (Kazdaghli 2020). This would be an opportunity to naturalise Jewish history as an integral and living part of Tunisian heritage. When the idea of a museum was first proposed in 2016, it received public endorsement from Salama Eloumi Rekik, the former Minister of Tourism, who declared that the project was 'feasible' and 'necessary',[9] but the state has made no formal commitment to date.

As Sabine Marshall (2010) observes, the role of memory in supporting democracy depends on the nature of the political transformation at hand. Heritagization is a contested and slippery terrain tied to power relations. The state's involvement in confronting or addressing uncomfortable memories, especially related to historical injustices or controversial events, often hinges on which communities are pushing for recognition or accountability. In the post-revolutionary context, Judaism remains a sensitive topic in Tunisia. The Laboratoire has been in the firing line of religious radicals for some time. Kazdaghli himself has been called a 'Zionist' and a 'traitor' and been under police protection since 2012, after Salafist protesters stormed La Manouba in an attempt to reform the University according to Sh'aria Law.[10] As Kazdaghli (2020) explains, the Revolution has had mixed consequences for minority communities. On the one hand, it has led to an increased curiosity and respect for cultural and religious diversity. On the other hand, there has been an influx of religious radicalism against Judaism and other minority faiths. Resistance to the project also comes from Arab nationalists and the Left, two political factions with ideologies running deep in the region, as well some members of the Jewish Tunisian diaspora for whom exodus is too traumatic.

Among the Jewish community of Tunisia, however, the Museum is considered a beacon of hope for building a more inclusive country where minorities can feel safe and valorised. Far from claiming victim status, the Jewish community of Tunisia, or at least its intellectual elite, see an opportunity to erect Jewish culture as a barricade in defence of democratic rights and, in turn, against obscurantism. Jewish-Tunisian novelist Maya Nahum (cited in Kazdaghli 2020: 181) claims:

> This project is for Tunisia, the world, the outside, the Jews! Promoting a better understanding of diversity in this country will strengthen the fragile but burgeoning democracy! Jewish heritage in defence of democracy? This is the greatest irony of Arab history! The Arab Revolutions have failed. Tunisia is the only [MENA] country where democracy subsists. Can the Jewish Museum be its corner stone?

In Europe, North America, and Australia, discussions about citizenship, democracy and inclusion in museums are intimately connected to and dependent on New Museology (Message 2010). In Tunisia, these debates do not always align. What we call New Museology in the West, a movement that focuses on visitors' experiences and the accessibility of exhibitions, has been happening in Tunisia in different ways since the 1960s, through projects designed to democratize and decolonize museums, such as those cited above in the context of the Bardo Museum (Angle Maguire 2023). Ensuing debates about diversity, inclusion, and equality, which have been raging in Western countries, however, have been slow to materialise. While museum professionals have been increasingly supportive of and vocal about the multidimensionality of Tunisian culture, museological reforms have been met with a lack of financial support and cultural resistance from government agents, conservative elites, and religious leaders (Rey 2019). Therefore, in promoting an agenda of diversity and inclusion in which all Tunisians are equal partners in the nation, the ongoing project for a museum of Tunisian Jewish culture might help to foster new museological behaviours and cultures that encourage conversations on the meaning and value of being a citizen of a democracy. Until a robust and empowered intellectual discourse around the social and political role of museums emerges in Tunisia, grassroots heritage initiatives will remain essential instruments to fight against a unidimensional vision of citizenship, suggesting that democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights are complicated by power relations that exist beyond the pale of parliamentary definitions.

3D Democracy

Amid Tunisia's ongoing efforts to consolidate its democracy, a new and compelling institutional concept emerged to explore and legitimize civic engagement in February 2021. Opened in collaboration with the Fondation internationale pour les sytèmes éléctoraux (The International Foundation for Electoral Systems—IFES) – Le Musée de la Démocratie (maṭḥaf al-dīmūqraṭīa, in Arabic) uses augmented and virtual reality to retrace the history of the Tunisian Revolution and present information about democracy and elections. Located in the building of the Instance Supérieure Indépendente pour les Elections (Organisation for Independent Elections—ISIE), the museum's room is divided in areas with activities or *étapes* through which visitors explore democracy-related themes using tablets, headphones, and VR sets (Fig. 3). For a fuller experience, they can download an application on their phones or tablets. Before finding a permanent home at ISIE, the Museum started as a pilot exhibition at the French Institute of Tunisia within the context of the Journée Internationale de la Démocratie en Tunise (International Day of Democracy in Tunisia) in 2020. Located in Tunis, the Museum features a travelling exhibition touring Tunisia, but the final aim is to install exhibitions in all twenty-seven offices of ISIE. Guided visits in collaboration with the Ministries of Culture, Education and Tertiary Education are also being planned. Paradoxically, in an attempt to be inclusive, the display is in Arabic only— French is often considered as an elite language in Tunisia. It features Arabic subtitles and sign language for hearing impaired people and people with reading difficulties. Tunisians who cannot make the trip to the Museum in person can visit the Museum online, muséedelademocratie.tn or download the application on Apple Store or Google Play.[11]

The layout of the virtual museum is very similar to that of the physical museum: Nine exhibits, in the form of short films, pictures, or digital activities are placed on top of columns, around a rectangular room (Fig. 3). To start the virtual visit, visitors must simply click on the blue and pink icons positioned on the exhibits.

Figure 3: Inside the virtual Museum of Democracy. Screenshot taken by Virginie Rey from the Museum of Democracy's website, 2024.

The display is mainly concerned with civic knowledge, focusing on citizens' understanding of the political system and their rights and responsibilities. The language is informal and engaging. All prompts are in Arabic with captions and translations in sign language for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers. Starting from the right, Exhibits 1 and 2 tell the story of the Revolution. Exhibits 3 and 4 discuss the history and the meaning of the national flag and the Palace of Cartage, the official residence of the President. Exhibits 6 and 8 explain the system of elections, while Exhibit 7 gives information about the Assembly of Representatives:

> As you know, the first Constituent Assembly was in 1956 and was headed at that time by Habib Bourguiba. After that, the first House of Representatives was established in 1959 and was headed by Jallouli Al-Fares. This was the first Republic (…) The Tunisian Revolution happened in 2011, and at that time a new Constituent Assembly was established, which contributed to the establishment of the Second Tunisian Republic [during which was written] a new constitution. Thus, we had a great *rendezvous* with history, and we established the Assembly of People's Representatives. (Museum panel)

As the text above suggests, for Tunisian authorities, Le Musée de la Démocratie is an accessory to the democratic apparatus. In a declaration to the press, President of ISIE, Nabil Baffoun, called the Museum 'a new building block to the [Tunisian] Republican structure,' a 'supporting element to [the] democratic and constitutional institutions,' and a 'temple of democracy'.[12] The Museum exemplifies the nineteenth century 'pedagogic' museum where specific knowledge or 'cultural objecthood' (Bennett 2005) is mobilised to build civic capacities and social governance. Indeed, in an interview to the press, Nicolas Kaczorwski, Director of IFES, explained that the Museum was born out of a realization that, since the Revolution, people were not talking about what democracy really means and how it works because they were too preoccupied with the economy.[13] A digital museum about democracy was imagined as a modern and original way to communicate with Tunisians, especially young people, and 'educate' them about their civic rights and duties, Kaczorwski continues. The experience is meant to encourage them to vote and participate in the political life of the country.[14] In other words, the Musée de la Démocratie functions as a 'civic laboratory' (Bennett 2005) where the order of objects and certain understandings of the world are refashioned. It is designed to produce a new citizenry for Tunisian democracy, challenge existing political imaginaries and resocialise citizens around a new political project in which they are asked to be active participants after decades of censorship and authoritarianism. As Baffoun says, '[w]ith the museum, we want to foster a civic culture in Tunisia'.[15]

Writing about the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) in Canberra, Kylie Message (2010) argues that the MoAD's greatest strength lies in its capacity to consider democracy as an evolving concept, inviting visitors to reflect on and debate questions relating to social justice and inclusion, as well as issues of local, national, and international interest. Similarly, Le Musée de la Démocratie is an important first step towards empowering citizens to support democratic and participatory governance. Yet for all its intentions to be dynamic and inclusive, using technological advances to further this engagement, the Museum proposes a safe, classroom-based civic education programme that does not show democracy as a complex and ongoing process. In approaching constitutional democracy mostly as a legal device made of rights, responsibilities, and rules, the state clearly has missed an opportunity to cultivate civic skills and dispositions, such as tolerance, public civility, critical thinking, and willingness to listen and compromise. It also fails to address a wide variety of governance and social issues of importance in Tunisia, such as human rights and religious and cultural diversity. Perhaps, this is because, as argued above, the Revolution is relatively recent and the democratization process a fragile exercise, plagued with economic downturns, religious radicalism, political setbacks, and disappointments. For the moment, and picking up on these frustrations, Le Musée de la Démocratie remains on a mission to give democracy a good name, celebrating the positive aspects of the Revolution. As Souad Abderrahim, Lord Mayor of Tunis, declared, '[s]uch a museum is important as it allows to display the good aspects of democracy, as we have experienced them for the past ten years [so] we can share our post-revolutionary story with the younger generations'.[16]

Conclusion

The Revolution of 2011 in Tunisia saw the ousting of President Ben Ali after decades of autocratic rule and the establishment of a democracy. Transition to democracy is most evident in institutional and legal changes, leading to free elections, the printing of new bank notes, and the drafting of a constitution. Streets and squares have been renamed; statues of the Ben Ali taken down; presidential palaces and art collections have been seized, and textbooks have been purged of the praise they heaped on the former president. The Revolution has also unleashed the development of new citizen-led patrimonial practices and institutions dedicated to the representation of formerly closeted identities (Pouessel 2016).

This paper has argued that another important site of the democratization process has been the museum. Using three case studies, this article considered how museums have been mobilized (and demobilized) at times by various groups to support (or undermine in the case of Islamic State) the democratic process in the past ten years. Building on Anderson's argument (2016), it becomes clear that Tunisian museums, much like traditional political institutions, have functioned as both operators and generators of democracy. I argue that, although political parties and parliament have been central to democratic governance, museums have uniquely contributed to civic engagement by offering emotionally impactful spaces that encouraged a participatory and expressive culture of citizenship, especially in the aftermath of authoritarian rule. Sometimes, this culture is carefully curated and actively sought, as in Le Musée de la Démocratie where a full programme of civic education has been deployed by the state. Other times, it materialized organically, as at the Bardo Museum or around the project of the Museum of Tunisian Jewish heritage.

The museums under examination have played host to various expressions and modes of citizenship, including disputed and contentious ones, pushing the definition of democracy into new territories that Tunisia might not be ready for. They have also enabled new democratic behaviours and actions, such as protesting, debating, and voting. Overall, three interplaying central functions of museums have emerged in relation to democratization in Tunisia: memorialization, as a way of shaping collective memory and acknowledging past struggles; mobilization, through the museum's engagement with contemporary political and social issues; and education, as a means of fostering critical awareness and participatory citizenship.

In conclusion, museums in Tunisia are far from voiceless spaces. Since their emergence in the 19th century, they have actively participated in key cultural and political negotiations—

between colonial and postcolonial narratives, tradition and modernity, majority and minority identities (Rey 2019; Coslett 2020). These ongoing negotiations are deeply political in nature and play a crucial role in shaping how citizenship is conceptualized and practiced. In the post-revolution context, museums have been, and continue to be, central actors in shaping and sustaining democracy through remembering the past, engaging with the present, and educating for the future. By hosting contested expressions of citizenship, museums have pushed the boundaries of democracy, raising the question of how ready Tunisia is to embrace the full diversity of its citizenry. The future challenge lies in state museums keeping up with evolving civic dynamics, ensuring inclusive, dialogic, and participatory museology that reflects Tunisia's pluralistic society.

Notes

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