

# First religious fieldwork

On popular Islam, highlands of North-western Tunisia, 1968

## 1.1. Preparation

Scattered throughout the landscape on the 200-kilometre-long drive from Tunis to the capital of Tunisia's Khumīriya region, I did indeed see the white domed shrines that, as centres of the cult of saints, had played a major part in my research planning back in Holland. If you are all set to study the popular religion of North African peasants such a confirmation is quite welcome when the long-distance taxicab, in which you are sitting crammed tight with five fellow-students, is driven headlong around hairpin bends from the open plains into wooded country bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to the surroundings of Central European holiday resorts visited in childhood. The cold fog turns into rain and we find ourselves amidst the hotels and public buildings of yet another *déjà-vu*: °Ayn Draham.

After having sweated, with varying interest, over foreign language publications on socio-cultural phenomena far and near for three and a half years, without having done any empirical social research as yet, and with mounting doubt that my training within the field of anthropology was a suitable preparation for such research (or for anything at all), I was at long last allowed to take part in the research-training project that the University of Amsterdam had established in North-western Tunisia.

During a preparatory period of half a year the six prospective participants had had ample opportunity, at weekly meetings, to get acquainted with the team of four anthropologists that would be in charge: an experienced North Africanist; a younger lecturer whose brilliant, virtually completed, dissertation about India was merely proof to us that he could not in any way be knowledgeable about North Africa; and two teaching assistants who had already gone through the North African baptism of fire. In that preparatory group, we brushed up our French. We also discussed some relevant general literature, which mistakenly confirmed our suspicion that there was hardly any anthropological information available about the research area. In those days the common anthropological orientation was still quite mono-disciplinary; for instance, one hardly searched for historical sources concerning the site of one's anthropological fieldwork. We did not receive any training in how to identify and

use bibliographies, archives, etc. Besides the physical effects caused by our first tropical injections, doubts about what would be the best equipment, and financial worries (the grant from the University would turn out to barely cover half the costs), the fear preyed on our minds that we were not preparing ourselves in the best possible way for the research project – neither academically, nor for the living conditions and the expectations of the local population regarding our behaviour out there. And so the physical and mental tribulations that – as our South Asianist kept emphasising gleefully – would afflict us with growing intensity once in Tunisia, began before we left Holland.

Much time was spent in discussing these problems. Those in charge (the senior North Africanist Douwe Jongmans and the more junior South Asianist Klaas van der Veen) convinced us (for a few hours) of the fact that they were truly unsolvable. The research-training project had opted for an individualistic set-up in the sense that, after a few weeks of collective work, each participant would be in his own village, dozens of kilometres apart from the others, and that each would be wholly responsible for his own research. Inevitably this implied enormous uncertainty, and the pretence of more effective preparation would not alter that in any way. Unforeseen contingencies would occur up to the very last day in the field. All of this did not, however, relieve us of our obligation of writing a detailed research plan before departure – and just as well because, once in the field, that research plan turned out to be extremely useful.

The human-relations aspect concerned us most of all. What the team of supervisors and previous participants told us became so distorted in our minds that during those last weeks before setting out for Tunisia our future informants, and especially the interpreters who had been recruited for us, came to appear as double-dyed liars, not to be trusted in anything; from the first moment of contact they would be expected to be only interested in our money and our equipment; they would be exceedingly unsavoury in all their manifestations, and capable of lapsing, at any given moment, into the sorts of acts of violence that had characterised the highlands on the border between Tunisia and Algeria before the colonial conquest (1881) – and which had even been the pretext offered for that conquest in the first place. As amongst novices in seclusion, the night before their initiation, the most terrifying rumours circulated.

To top off the preparatory stage, shortly before our departure we were presented with an elaborate schedule of our obligations regarding the reporting and processing of materials after the fieldwork; whereas until then any possible results of our research had been played down as unimportant.

Perhaps I was the only one who spent that final night in Holland delirious and vomiting. Perhaps it had to do with those last injections. At any rate, during my first intercontinental journey (at that time still by car and boat) to my first research location, much of this anxiety had given way to a certain touristic excitement, followed by weariness and slight disappointment. Our initial group accommodation did not exactly contribute to making the anthropology student's dream come true: a

small apartment (ugly and dreary as any comparable concrete building in Holland) was to house the six participants and all of their luggage for the first few weeks. Someone had been hired to do the cooking and the cleaning. The supervisors stayed in a nearby hotel, in what we suspected to be incomparable luxury.

## **1.2. Collective on-site preparation**

Gradually, in well-calculated doses, Khumiriya and its inhabitants are set loose upon us. We meet the first interpreters, who live in villages in the vicinity. Contrary to our expectations, they turn out to be well-dressed, neat, intelligible and friendly. On two fascinating walks around the best known sheikhdoms (the smallest administrative unit in this region) the project leader opens our eyes to the ecology of the mountain region and its socio-cultural consequences. No more enjoying the scenery: even the most magnificent valleys turn into ‘social/economic/political units determined by natural constraints’, woodlands left intact ‘indicate the absence of springs’ (the land would have otherwise been cultivated), the signs of erosion (large parts of the mountain slopes denuded of trees, their soil exposed like open wounds by progressive landslides) are not picturesque but tragic.

The distance of non-commitment gives way to the beginnings of participant observation.

Then it is time for our first independent exercise: groups of two students and an interpreter are formed, each to map a section of Hamraya, an extensive village about two and half miles from ʿAyn Draham. Hasnāwi *bin* Tahar, the eldest interpreter at thirty-nine, will work with Pieter Tamsma and me in a part of Hamraya where he had lived the previous year with one of our predecessors, Guus Hartong.

The interpreter leads us up the mountain slopes at a rapid pace. At the edge of the forest we manage to take refuge, for half an hour or so, in a discussion about the symbols to be used on our map. The interpreter gets bored. Then the terrible moment comes when we finally have to step into Khumiri village society on our own account. Tamsma volunteers to map the highest part of the village all by himself. Hasnawi and I will focus on the lower compounds. Stumbling, I follow the interpreter into a farmyard, where he calls out to the invisible occupants, and I frantically start to pace the area for measurements while taking notes and avoiding the gaze of people appearing in a doorway. My intention is to pretend that these lonely activities are very absorbing and constitute a matter of course to me, but the feeling that what I am doing is completely insane in the eyes of the onlookers, as well as my own, gets stronger and stronger. In the end I find myself standing on a large jutting rock about sixty feet from the farmyard in an expert observer pose, but I seem to be unable to create on paper a coherent pattern out of the tangle of roads, paths, clusters of trees, huts, small plots of land, the brooks down below and the wooded slopes in the distance. I break into a cold sweat. You see now: even at the first, most simple, attempt I give myself away; I am not an anthropologist at all and will never be one ... .

Our South Asianist drops by and takes some of the tension away. Tamsma returns, and we are invited into a house and drink strong sweet tea. Once the people stop being faceless it actually proves possible to carry on a simple conversation through the interpreter. Ignorance of what is considered polite here does not in the least lead to immediate catastrophes: interpreter and host obligingly enlighten us. The name of 'Msjeyer – Monsieur – Goos' (Guus Hartong) is mentioned; as 'brothers' of 'Goos' we are invited to continue his friendly relationship with the residents. The spell is broken. When we return the following day, making a map no longer poses a problem.

Then it is time for collecting census data and genealogies in the same village. Our interpreter is closely acquainted with the inhabitants and has had ample experience with the Dutch students' weird interest for long-deceased or migrated relatives. And sure enough, to our great satisfaction our informants dish up genuine and elaborate genealogies without any problems. The most impressive sections of our textbooks thus come within our reach. Because gathering this kind of information turns out to be so easy, and because we are so flabbergasted at seeing it all work, we forget that these interviews are rather tiresome for the people involved. And we are tongue-tied as soon as the conversation takes a less standardised turn. The informants are, however, very patient. And Hasnawi is very talkative in our stead. One of the interlocutors (already we exclusively refer to them as 'our informants') starts telling us about the history of his lineage and with bated breath we jot down our first real myth of origin.

Every day interviews are conducted or processed. And at nightly meetings the South Asianist (the North Africanist has gone back to Holland for a short while), impressively extemporising, points out the social-structural principles that can already be observed in our modest material and lectures us on various technical aspects of the fieldwork: dealing with the interpreter, interview techniques, taking notes, processing data systematically, recording every observation, incident and conversation into the day journal, etc.

All of this proves a great stimulus to our analytical enjoyment. We work hard and keep to strict timetables. We continually seem to be in a hurry. A few participants come down with a heavy case of research fever and keep on struggling with lengthy genealogies till the early hours of the morning, tallying up marital relationships. Why do their girlfriends have to be so far away for so long ... .

The first letters from Holland are long in coming. And at night it is bitterly cold in the students' apartment; everyone develops a cough. Our hesitant attempts to relax seem to be looked upon with suspicion by the South Asianist and his assistant; our only day off in three weeks turns into an over-collective and over-directed school outing to the ruins of Bulla Regia, an old Roman city. Being in each others' presence continuously, night and day, starts getting on our nerves. There is hardly any co-operation or exchange of information between the twosomes, as though we are already real anthropologists, protecting our own little fieldwork area, our own data,

and as though conflicts only remain suppressed by virtue of that ‘avoidance’, a classic anthropological concept after all.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the last collective interview day all the participants and interpreters walk across the densely-forested slope to the VW van that will bring us back to ‘Ayn Draham. Due to what I have mistaken to be the local taboo on all reference to bodily functions, I decided to lag behind unnoticed, and the next thing I know I have lost all sight of the group. I follow the path down, running where possible, but do not catch up with my fellow researchers. When I ask a young boy if he has seen them, he of course does not understand what I am saying and directs me back up the mountain. Soon there are no paths any more; I am walking through an overgrown clearing. I am lost. And at that moment I realise I have not been alone for even one second in the past three weeks. Some of the weight of having been compulsively preoccupied for months now with the research and its preparation is finally lifted from my mind – I am in a beautiful oak forest, a brook with strange red foam flows alongside of me, there are nice little birds. I relish the silence and delight in being a tourist once again for just one moment.

But it is getting dark. I have neither map nor compass and think of the enormous wild boars that allegedly roam these forests. In my mind’s eye I see supervisors, students, interpreters and inhabitants of surrounding villages desperately searching through the night; a disaster for the whole project. I call out. After a while I hear the horn of the van being honked in the distance below, and moving towards the sound I pretty quickly meet up with the group again.

A beaming Hasnawi claims to have saved me: he was the only one to notice that ‘*Msjeyer Weem*’ was not there when they were just on the point of driving off. He is the interpreter assigned to me. He will live with me for three months in a one-room house of five (!) square meter ground area.

### **1.3. First days in the village**

My lodging had taken quite some doing. Popular religion was seen by the Tunisian authorities as a painful symbol of the backwardness of their country since it varied considerably from the formal, although at that time rather elastic, Islam advocated by urban religious leaders. So my research subject was delicate, and the supervisors had selected an area for me to work in a sheikhdom which had been on very good terms with the project right from the start. Several students had done fieldwork there in the previous years and the population had found that research was nothing to be feared.

The area designated to me consisted of two villages situated one above the other on a mountain slope and separated by a stretch of uncultivated land. In the lower village there was a large shrine dedicated to one of the most important regional

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Avoidance’ designates a mode of highly elusive and restrictive behaviour of individuals belonging to social categories between which strong structural tensions exist, e.g. son-in-law and mother-in-law.

saints, Sidi Mhammad, from whom the settlement took its name. The upper village was called Mayziya. Another participant in the research project, Coen Beeker, had researched residence patterns in Sidi Mhammad in 1966, building up excellent relations with the inhabitants, which he still maintained by sending letters and parcels. As he had paid hardly any attention to Mayziya, it seemed reasonable that I should focus on that village in particular. A small house for me to live in had in fact been found in Mayziya long before my arrival. However, immediately before I was to take up my residence in the village, it appeared that this dwelling had been deemed not impressive enough by the local branch of the Tunisian unitary political party, which had then proceeded to select a house for me on the outskirts of the village of Sidi Mhammad. By local standards it was indeed grand, with a decent roof, a good lock on the door, a large yard, a clear view of the major shrine of Sidi Mhammad (he turned out to have four shrines within a radius of two kilometres) and of the Mediterranean, twelve kilometres away. To accommodate his family, the owner had no option but to build a shelter from branches and leaves elsewhere on his land. This man turned out to be, of all people, <sup>c</sup>Abd Allah bin <sup>c</sup>Aisa, the one person Beeker had particularly warned me about. I had got the most controversial figure in the village as a landlord, someone who cared little for the traditional rules, and who was the only avowed antagonist of the local sheikh (not a religious figure here, but rather a kind of mayor). This was the man who had been forced to vacate his house for me. Even our South Asianist could not do anything about it. However, although I was intimidated by <sup>c</sup>Abd Allah's big body and strong blacksmith's arms, exceptional directness of speech and compelling attitude, he turned out to have qualities of sincerity, rebelliousness, and humour that greatly endeared me to him in the long run.

With other lodgings I undoubtedly would have produced different results. Not so much on account of the disappointment of the inhabitants of Mayziya (who would also have liked to receive letters and parcels but now had to realise that all the benefits of my stay would once again go to the village of Sidi Mhammad) or my landlord's peripheral position in the village, but rather because with him, his mother and his brother (under quasi-kinship obligation to me because I too lived on the late <sup>c</sup>Aisa's land), I now proved to have some extremely intelligent informants, who had intimate knowledge of popular religion and were devoted participants in all the attending ritual activities.

My first weeks in the village were nowhere as bad as I had expected. The accommodation and lack of *modcomfs* were no problem at all: of course there was no gas, electricity or running water, nor a toilet or a shower, but all in all it was less primitive than any hike through the mountains in Europe. That my informants were able to lead a complete life without all the material achievements of my own society, and that I could adapt myself to a fair degree to their situation, I found almost edifying after a while. And besides, Hasnawi saw to it that I had my cup of plain, ordinary, Dutch light tea in the mornings – a despicable beverage in Khumiriya where tea is supposed to be black, strong, syrupy and extremely sweet. He was eager to

please and to show his expertise – after all, it was his third lucrative year as interpreter for the research project.

My landlord actually seemed quite sympathetic; although it did get very much on my nerves that he had to observe closely in all detail, the very first day, whatever I was going to unpack in the way of kitchen utensils, office equipment and provisions. His house was decorated with colour photographs cut out from the popular weekly *Paris Match* (which hardly anyone in the village could read), notably a photo report of the coronation of the last Shah of Persia, and a series of cheerful photographs of a girl in varying states of undress showing what one can do with camomile prepared in various ways – washing one's hair, grooming one's face, etc. I gladly left them on the walls. They were a fitting preparation for the female breast improvement advertisements (from a similar provenance) I was soon to admire in the major shrine of Sidi Mhammad, pinned up between the sacred flags and votive candles, right above the tomb of the saint himself.

My first scoutings around the village and surroundings yielded a wealth of fascinating information, because besides being a European and a prospective anthropologist, I was an ignorant city-dweller to boot, without any knowledge whatsoever of farming. After a few weeks those nice green blades of grass that I enthusiastically wrote home about, turned out to have developed into stalks of rye and wheat. Everywhere I only met friendly people. I made a speech in the local store-*cum*-men's assembly, in which I held forth on the close ties that connected me with '*Msjeyer Coon*'. Everything I said was well-received, even when I told them outright that I was interested in the local saints and their veneration. They would help me with everything, they promised, and that is exactly what happened.

As for the reaction of the population, I experienced only one really anxious moment. On the morning of my second day in the village an official of the local unemployment relief work organisation (the villagers' main source of income) came along to my little house to see Beeker's mimeographed fieldwork report, which happened to be in Dutch. The pages at which this much-feared official opened up the report contained, to my horror, tables with names of villagers and amounts of money. These tables were an innocent statement of the amount of rent they would be willing to pay if they had to move to a newly constructed village. But the official could not read Dutch (the days of massive migration from North Africa to the Netherlands had not yet started), and I feared he would misconstrue the report as an indication that I was there to serve some sinister political end. It was just these kinds of complications that the supervisors had explicitly warned us about! I realised only years later that what had prompted my visitor to beat a hasty retreat was probably not his suspicion that I had sinister intentions compromising the security of the state, but the threat of me being in the service of some higher-order officialdom which these tables represented to him.

Later that day I began the interviews. Fairly soon I got into the habit of beginning each conversation with a new informant with questions about census data and genealogies. In this way I could find out about someone's qualities as an

informant in an area where he or she could easily supply me with answers without becoming insecure or suspicious. I had worked on these kinds of questions during the preparatory village survey at Hamraya, and could keep the conversation going even though I had hardly any sensible questions to ask yet about religion. In this way the informants got used to the interview situation (in so far as this was still new to them, after Beeker) and to talking through an interpreter while I, as an unexpected bonus, gained insight into the complicated kinship structure of Khumiri society. In the course of the research these auxiliary data proved to be more and more relevant to my main subject. Usually these genealogical exercises developed into more religion-orientated conversations after about half an hour.

I resolutely forced myself always to walk around with my notebook, bring it out and take notes, necessary or not, ridiculous or not. Within a few days everybody had become so used to this that no attention was paid any more. This hopefully eliminated the danger of my informants being able to tell from my occasional excited scribbling which spontaneous statements or actions aroused my interest, with undesirable effects on their remarks and behaviour. At the same time it also provided me with a concrete opportunity to identify with my researcher's role, which helped me to overcome a lot of diffidence.

I would continually stumble upon new aspects of the religion. I explored the first few of the dozens of shrines that I was to find in my immediate research area. After one day I was already allowed to witness a ritual slaughter and distribution of meat in honour of Sidi Mhammad. The high point of those first days was a séance (I was to experience many more) during which the local representative of the Qadīriya brotherhood (widespread throughout the whole Islamic world), went into a trance accompanied by singing and flute and drum music, and manipulated cactus leaves with enormous spines without hurting himself, as if he were rendered invulnerable by the invisible saint that came to possess him in his trance. I was deeply moved by the experience. That night I wrote in my journal:

'If I will be able to penetrate into the conceptual world and the motives behind all this, my stay here will have been worthwhile.'

(It proved to be just that.) My lack of interview technique hampered me more than the much-feared reticence of my informants. Even the women turned out to be surprisingly approachable. It only took a couple of weeks before our interviews with them no longer needed to be chaperoned by elders. After the first ten days I was already under the impression – completely unjustified of course – that I was beginning to comprehend somewhat the cult of saints and shrines in Khumiriya.

In those same deceptively euphoric first weeks, however, my main research instrument, my relationship with the interpreter, was almost irreparably damaged.

#### **1.4. The interpreter**

The dangers of getting into an over-friendly and over-relaxed relationship with one's interpreter had been stressed to such an extent during the preparations in Holland and

‘Ayn Draham, that I eagerly – in this respect it was at least clear what I had to do – apply the Western, businesslike, virtually impersonal relationship model:

‘He is being paid comparatively well to do this job, and that is that.’

I actually saw Hasnawi as a needlessly complicated instrument to amend certain bothersome, yet seemingly minor, shortcomings in my communication with the informants: the mere fact that, in spite of having studied Arabic for one and a half years, I neither understood their dialect nor had a clue as to their customs and manners. I refused to admit my total dependence on Hasnawi (though it had been over-emphasised by the supervisors), not only in terms of the language, but in fact at every step I took. And when he alluded to it (emphatically confirmed by the supervisors in his sense of being utterly irreplaceable), I flew off the handle. I accused him, sometimes even in the presence of others, of not translating everything that was being said. That he should be allowed to decide for himself what was relevant enough to translate, never entered my mind – I did not realise that the conversations we took part in, outside of the interviews, were generally of the same silly and diffuse nature as conversations in the pub, the launderette or the doctor’s waiting-room in Europe. We did not come to any normal exchange of views about the organisation of the research (*my* research) and of our stay in the village of Sidi Mhammad. And so, while the informants gradually began to appear to me as the most fascinating and sympathetic people alive, an unbearable tension developed between Hasnawi and myself that expressed itself numerous times a day in peevish or quarrelsome remarks, alternated by irritated silences.

And that despite the fact that the poor fellow was forced to abandon his house and compound, cow and wife in order to work himself to the bone for a pittance, with only one day off a week, one-and-a-half hour’s walk away from home under the unsteady guidance of someone young enough to be his son – and work, not only as a translator (which is tiring enough) but also as a cook, cleaner, informant, PR-man and singer-musician (a specialty of Hasnawi which came in handy in the religious sphere). Even more importantly, whatever stressful burden I laid upon our working relationship, his culture demanded the most far-reaching identification between people who work, eat, drink, sleep and spend their spare time together, with a continuous exchange of gifts and services, cordialities and confidences. We had to be ‘like brothers’, or at least appear that way. Hasnawi surely had reason to complain, and that is exactly what he did in all tones of voice.

My informants of course did not fail to notice the tensions, and several marginal characters from the village (among them my landlord, i.e. my most important contact in the village next to my interpreter), aspiring to the lucrative and seemingly cushy job, came to defame Hasnawi when he was not there. I decided I had to get rid of him as soon as possible. What use was he to me anyway?

Fortunately our South Asianist was able to intervene just in time. His general anthropological insights, his fieldwork experience, and the way in which he applied these assets in his organisational contacts with the local society, more than counterbalanced his lack of specific knowledge about Khumiriya, as I began to

realise. In a number of heart-to-heart talks my shortcomings were made quite clear to me, as well as the fact that I would have to get along with Hasnawi anyway, since one was not allowed to change interpreters.

More than thirty years later, Hasnawi's way of behaving and his idiosyncratic French vocabulary have continued to be standing references, cryptic to others, in the family that I since raised. Occasionally I still have nightmares about him, even though I have meanwhile written the novel that details the story of our collaboration; the interpreter comes off a lot better in it than the young researcher.

### **1.5. Days of distress**

After several weeks I had quite gotten over my initial exhilaration. The conflict with my interpreter had taught me (at least that is what I read in it) that fieldwork requires the researcher to be aware at all times of his own actions and of the premises on which they are based, and perpetually to keep track of how his presence influences the relationships of the people around him. These are inhumanly arduous demands, especially at the outset, when new impressions so overwhelm the researcher that he can barely take any distance from himself, can hardly predict how his behaviour will be interpreted, and is as yet unable to assess fully in which respects the society he is researching allows him to be himself, to have his own opinions and preferences, to say 'no' when he does not feel like doing something. Human life and living together require a minimum of distance, knowledge, predictability and routine. With these one has a grip on reality, and the possibility of behaving spontaneously, relying on behavioural automatisms, and being happy. I saw myself voluntarily deprived of these basic conditions and placed in a kind of laboratory simulation of the genesis of neuroses.

This had little to do with culture shock. Apart from the bloody slaughter of sacrificial animals, Khumiri society failed to shock me. Coming from a family utterly shattered by internal conflicts and abuse in a working-class neighbourhood of Amsterdam, I was not exactly handicapped by love for the dominant, bourgeois customs of my own European society – into which I had not been effectively initiated until I went to grammarschool. As an adolescent I had had the same problems of disorientation and despair vis-à-vis Dutch society that I now had amidst these Khumiri peasants. Having just turned twenty-one, I was experiencing an accelerated second puberty, and it was even more painful than the first time around.

If there was a lack of distance between me and my hosts, this was primarily due, not to Khumiri notions of privacy differing from European ones, but to my own personality, and aggravated by the professional expectations to which I considered myself to be subjected. I only realised much later that my self-imposed cramped defencelessness in the field was to a large extent due to my taking too literally the advice given by the supervisors. It was neither them nor my informants who made exorbitant demands, it was me. I saw my fieldwork as a Spartan learning strategy for humility, patience, improvisation and living with insecurity, defencelessness, and

lack of privacy. I felt I was continually dancing to the tune of my interpreter and informants, and yet still doing everything wrong. And for the first time in my life I experienced the extreme loss of ego that was henceforth to be the characteristic state of my personality in subsequent fieldwork: deprived (even more than when at home) of a sense of self-protecting boundaries around me, I learned extremely fast and without inhibitions, delivered myself wholesale to the host society without holding back any thought of self-interest (sleep, privacy, cherished beliefs), and thus learned the local culture and language at an incredible speed – but at an extreme cost.

Nothing went smoothly. My feverish attempts to discover and adhere to certain rules of interaction did not, at this stage, arise from respect or admiration for the society in which I found myself. I merely wanted to get rid of that paralysing insecurity and sense of rejection and outsidership. Every word I uttered and every gesture I made, for weeks, was consciously perceived by me as falling far short of local expectations and norms; the embarrassing stammer of my childhood came back, and I was so conscious of my every movement that my gestures became broken, like a robot's. And for weeks my every word and every gesture would be consciously aimed not so much at getting information (which gradually seemed to become less of an obsession to me) but above all at making myself acceptable in the eyes of my interpreter, informants and the team in charge of the training-project. I derived absolutely no satisfaction from my contacts in the village. I was just playing at dealing with people, but it was a terribly difficult and disagreeable game to me, and I constantly had the desperate feeling of being incapable of ever achieving any real contact with what was, after all, my immediate environment for the duration of the fieldwork. This absence of intimacy and spontaneity was all the more distressing because, except for the few minutes each day when I washed or when nature called, I was always surrounded by people. Even at night there was still the bodily presence of Hasnawi, one metre away, snoring or calling out in a nightmare, instead of my girlfriend.

For several days I experienced almost total distress. I had completely lost my sense of motivation; my research data seemed utterly worthless and meaningless. By now I knew by heart the standard commonplace phrases in which the local people described their religion:

‘We ask the saint and the saint asks Rabbi [God]’

‘the *baraka* [the divine grace emanated by the various shrines named after one and the same saint] is the same but we visit them all’, etc.

But I felt I had no insight into the system. My interview technique and my experience with analysing conceptual systems were as yet far too inadequate to draw out what was not exactly unconscious, but rarely or never needed to be put into words in normal, day-to-day life, even among the most intelligent informants. Instead of being an engaging interlocutor, I was at a loss to bring up new interesting topics at crucial moments in the conversations. And as soon as an interview seemed to be going the right way, I nevertheless irritated people (including my interpreter) through my lack of understanding of the basic social codes of their society, and my

diffidence and inability to use their cultural idiom. Citing examples from daily life in Khumiriya, interspersing one's conversation with kinship terms, the name of God and the Prophet, profusely wishing people good health – I did not yet know how to make use of all that. However detrimental it was to the progress of my research, I was really completely tongue-tied at times, literally unable to utter a single word in whatever language, and (like at the time when I was a six-year old boy) reduced to a ridiculous stammer. My ears were ringing with the loud voices in that still almost unintelligible Arabic dialect, and I often could not see a thing in the dark huts, let alone recognise faces or take notes.

I just wandered aimlessly around the village with Hasnawi. Occasionally my depression was quite apparent even to my informants. The heavy rains and the mail that failed to arrive greatly contributed to my despair. More than once I toyed with the thought of dropping the whole affair and flying back home at the first opportunity; I had never been in an airplane though. Who wanted to be an anthropologist anyway – juvenily, I still believed that my first career priority was to be a literary writer, who (gold-digger fashion) would devote his entire adult life to erecting an eternal written monument of genius to his unhappy childhood. At those instances little but the shame of being a failure in the eyes of my friends and loved ones back home kept me from running away. Next came daydreams about horrible illnesses, real or faked if necessary, that could only be cured in a well-equipped Dutch hospital and that would therefore swiftly and without loss of face release me from my ordeal. Any falling back on the supervisors was out of the question at that point in time, as the South Asianist had just gone back home and the North Africanist had not yet returned from Holland.

The turning-point of this crisis remains in my memory as the most important moment of my fieldwork. We had slept badly as usual because of the enormous quantities of strong tea we were forced to drink – a possible physiological factor in my distress. After breakfast I listlessly followed Hasnawi's suggestion to make an interview in Mayziya that morning, where the eldest informants of my research area lived. The forested stretch of land between the two villages afforded ample opportunity for reflection. At first I was once again seized with the panic of the previous days, but after a few hundred steps I all of a sudden decided, with a clarity of mind that I had not been capable of since my arrival in the village, to keep a stiff upper lip from now on and to make the best of the sizable investment of time, energy, frustration and money that my participation in the research project had already cost me and others. Why this sudden determination? It was not the first time that I made a cost/benefit analysis of the stressful fieldwork situation I found myself in, but so far such an analysis had not been able to lift my depression, on the contrary. Maybe the gentle spring rain reminded me of Holland and made me feel at home. I had trudged up the slope to Mayziya before, but this time leaving the strip of forest behind and setting foot on the open fields of this other village meant shedding all fear. Behind me spread the valley of Sidi Mhammad in all its glory. Across the valley, the mountain range that sealed it off towards the West seemed to have

receded further away and was no longer threatening. I felt relaxed when we reached the farmyards of Mayziya. The interview was pleasant and interesting. I stopped stammering. Food was served and we took the youngest son back home with us to give him some Band Aid for his cousin who had been butted by a ram while we were there.

A few days later the supervisor of the project appeared in my yard, wearing a parka and a woollen cap as if we were not in Africa. He had braved the sharp-edged, newly cut stones of the metalled roads, recently built by the unemployment relief work organisation, in his small Citroën Dyane car, in order to deliver my mail and take out time for the long, intense and immensely stimulating scientific discussions that – repeated once every two weeks from that point on – were to be the backbone of my first fieldwork. The link with my own world had been re-established. I also could not have wished for a better guide to the North African world than Douwe Jongmans. Against the background of his vast cultural knowledge of the region and of the subcontinent as a whole, he grabbed hold of the specific raw data I provided hesitantly, and juggled them *virtuoso* so as to prompt me to formulate provisional theories and generalisations, while, in that yard with a view of the shrine of Sidi Mhammad and the distant Mediterranean, Hasnawi and my landlord looked on whispering in awe.

## **1.6. From field data to theory, and back**

The main problem of fieldwork, from the point of view of scientific knowledge production, is the enormous distance that exists between the observations and statements the researcher is confronted with, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the generalisations he has to build on the basis of those raw data – generalisations that moreover, abstracting from the concrete ethnographic data, have to be relevant in the light of some fundamental theory or other. And while these problems of operationalisation, relevance and synthesis are already tough enough in the case of an extended field project of several years' duration, they are virtually insurmountable in the case of a research training project of only a few months, without thorough theoretical or regional preparation and with no time to let everything sink in and take an analytical distance.

By now, though, the Khumiri material was no longer totally new and strange to me. I was particularly struck by the many similarities between Khumiri popular religion and the Roman Catholicism with which I had been brought up. In many respects the basic concept of North African religion, *baraka*, corresponds with the Catholic concept of 'divine grace'. Many details of the cult of saints (the burning of candles in niches in little white chapels, incense, prayer postures, the eating of consecrated cakes) and some features of the religious brotherhoods seemed very familiar to me. In part this can be attributed to a common cultural origin: both Islam and Christianity originate from the same Mediterranean cultural area; Khumiri popular religion is partly rooted in religious modes that are widespread throughout

the Mediterranean and much older than these world religions (so that *baraka* corresponds with the Hebrew *barūk*), and the inhabitants of North Africa and Southern Europe have belonged to the same or closely related political units for much of the past two thousand years. This parallelism had both advantageous and disadvantageous implications for the research. Because of my background I was perhaps able to penetrate more quickly into some aspects of Khumiri religion than would have been possible without my experience with a kindred religion. It is quite likely though that I let myself be unduly influenced by my background, especially in defining the conceptual content and in interpreting the phenomena I encountered in a wider social context.<sup>1</sup>

I had no doubts that at some time, later, behind my faraway desk, I would be able to write a decent report about my research. But that was by no means my most important incentive for working hard. When I was not engaging with people, I was defenceless against the social and sexual frustrations of the fieldwork situation. Which was one of the reasons why I hardly ever got around to working out data or (in line with local custom which we had been advised to adopt) taking naps in the afternoon: I just could not bear to.

And after a few weeks again, the data collection, and my interaction in Khumiri society, became more than a means to control my panic. As I dug deeper into the world of my informants, I finally started to enjoy every new step that brought me closer to an understanding of increasingly complicated situations and ideas. In the field, with the living material almost too close for comfort around me, and in the fruitful contact with experienced researchers, I figured I was beginning to comprehend what after all I had already been studying for several years: human interaction, its complicated manifestations and interrelationships, the tension between expectations and evaluation from various sides, the place of relatively fixed factors such as norms, collective representations and material objects, conscious choices and such restrictions of choice as were, unconsciously, imposed upon the informants by their social environment. I was still a long way off from problems of power, social change, the interplay between heterogeneous semantic, social and economic systems within one field of interaction, corporeality, self-reflection and interculturality—later to become the predominant themes of my scholarly work – but I nevertheless was starting to feel like an anthropologist. It was the decade when transactionalism was introduced into anthropology, and in keeping with the times I was fashionably disillusioned, in the field, with a social science that in the main seemed to aim at abstractions about enormous aggregates of people, kin groups, clans, ethnic groups, classes, genders (and that applied these abstractions with a tendency to reification), but that appeared to have no finely differentiated concepts which were of use in the field for the more or less inchoate, ephemeral micro-phenomena at the individual human interaction level. Yet these micro-phenomena

---

<sup>1</sup> The imposition of Christian theological models in the ethnography of African religion and thought is a recognised distortion of African religion studies; cf. Okot p'Bitek 1970.

appeared to me to be anthropology's main source of material, and the very essence of the informants' lives.

Nonetheless, I could not avoid working towards macro abstractions and in this the existing Grand Theory proved to be much more of a support (thanks to the research plan I had drawn up back in Holland and the discussions with the supervisor) than I was willing to admit. Studying theories of religion (especially those of Émile Durkheim) had put me on the track of a number of fundamental problems regarding societal integration and the relationship between religious and non-religious organisational structures; and had given me a new perspective on a problem that had occupied me as a literary writer ever since adolescence: the relationship between symbol and that which it refers to. Although Durkheim hitched his splendid generalisations (according to which each society essentially worships itself in its religion) somewhat unfortunately on to the distant and, in those days, ill-understood societies of Australian Aborigines, there was nevertheless a direct connection between those generalisations and the Mediterranean popular religion I was studying: through Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites* (1889) that had been Durkheim's main influence when writing his *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse* (1912).<sup>1</sup> Despite the limitations imposed by Durkheim's idealism, transposed back into the Mediterranean region the relevance of those basic tenets became more and more clear to me in the field, and this was very encouraging. Saints indeed proved to be direct symbols of the kin groups and neighbourhoods that venerated them; groups identified and differentiated themselves from others by erecting their own shrines; the ascent and decline of shrines coincided with the political and demographic rise and fall of local groups; and I was even gradually able to decode legends about saints as more or less historical statements about the settlement history of various kin groups.

The eagerness with which I occasionally imagined seeing confirmations of Durkheim's theories around me as embodied in the ideas and interactions of my informants, was also of course due to the pressure under which I lived. I needed to come back with substantial results, and time was running out. I flattered myself with the thought that the concrete, highly quantifiable material I was collecting would be solid enough to go beyond whatever chimerical notions might have crept into my vision of Khumiri religion, and to end up with scientific hypotheses, occasionally with empirical underpinning and all. I especially relied upon my elaborate card index system of data, conjectures, hypotheses and ideas. Toward the end of the fieldwork I used this body of data to formulate a limited number of concrete questions for a questionnaire survey among all adult women of Sidi Mhammad and Mayziya. I proudly worked towards what I then still envisioned as my scientific ideal: a conclusive statistical analysis of miscellaneous forms of local religious behaviour – so that I would ultimately be able to predict with certainty, for every female inhabitant of Sidi Mhammad, which four or five of the many dozens of local shrines

---

<sup>1</sup> Robertson Smith 1927; Durkheim 1912.

she visited, and why; or so that I could explain, by reference to such factors as affluence, political power, order of birth and family tradition, why, and which, thirty per cent of the local men were to be recruited as ecstatic dancers, *i.e.* members of the local Islamic brotherhoods.<sup>1</sup>

Now, of course, I can see that with this emphasis on statistics and model building I opted for the mere surface of religious phenomena; but it was a strategically correct choice because I lacked both time and training for more in-depth research into the symbolic and deep-psychological aspects of the cult of saints.

Moreover, I was merely in the process of seeking entrance into the anthropological profession, and was not yet in a position to challenge its scientific misconceptions. While myself undergoing considerable violence (from the part of the village population, the project organisation, and the interpreter) during my professional initiation, I saw no option but to naïvely inflict, from my part, the violence of appropriation and representation upon the host society, – a likely target, since it was the most vulnerable of the three categories of oppressors during my first fieldwork. The professional violence I underwent subconsciously reactivated such violence as I had been exposed to in my childhood. When the initial crisis had subsided and my fieldwork was clearly going to be a success, I yet became tormented by terrible nightmares in which a dark human shape threatened me; the local Qur’anic teacher and diviner (*madhab*) consulted his magical book and told me it was not a saint but a troubling ancestor. A keen awareness of the violence of fieldwork was to remain part of my professional identity, generating (as exposure to violent situations may do) libidinous fascination for and self-effacing dedication in fieldwork, but also profound fear and repugnance, and by and large it was a major source of my lasting professional ambiguity as an anthropologist. When twenty years later (twenty years of recurrent nightmares about Hasnawi) I wrote a novel on Khumiriya, Hasnawi after much soul-searching on my part came out rather gloriously; but when again fifteen years later I arranged once more a meeting with him, I was so tense that I sprained my back on the way to his village, and for days could only walk bent double, with a stick I had picked up by the Tunisian roadside.

### 1.7. Relations with the villagers

After our initial clash Hasnawi and I occasionally still had our problems. He had definite ideas as to the desired procedure of things, based on his experience with previous project participants, and I could not always bring myself to conform. But I was now more quickly aware of any hitches, and from the growing insight into Khumiri society afforded to me (through my interpreter!), I was able to glean strategies to obviate such friction. I got to know something about the complex, semi-

---

<sup>1</sup> For the realisation of this scientific ideal, cf. van Binsbergen 1985b. Of course, the whole thrust of this book is that I no longer subscribe to such an ideal. For my other publications based on the Khumiri research, cf. van Binsbergen, 1980a, 1980b, 1988a, and forthcoming (c); van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a.

conscious methods by which people in Khumiriya (as in every society) can satisfactorily comply with the demands that close relationships impose on them and can nonetheless keep pursuing their individual goals.

But not only was I becoming more aware of the roles played by my interpreter, his expectations regarding me (that I had initially completely disappointed), and the social resources at my disposal to manipulate this field of forces, I also began to realise what tremendous sacrifices he was making for my sake. I really came to value him a lot, in spite of his incessant whining (about what an exemplary life he led, how wicked some other people were – especially other interpreters, how much I owed him), his sometimes really inexplicable moodiness, his irritating, noisy bustling about early in the morning and his modest forms of blackmail. He gradually managed to get me somewhat accustomed to the local rural rhythm of life in which the time around noon, and the evening, are not meant for work. Once I had emphatically accepted this principle he put up with the fact that the social musical evenings which we found arranged for us almost on daily basis, invariably turned into ‘work’ for us – and Hasnawi perhaps made his greatest contribution to the research on those evenings, while putting in double overtime as both an interpreter and a singer-musician. He kept giving me ever more detailed advice about how I could protect myself from the continuous assaults on my health by natural and supernatural forces and beings. And also on my part, my continually vocalised concern for his health (part of the local cultural idiom I had finally picked up) was no longer just pretended civility.

Hasnawi had considerable influence on the course of the research, even besides his increasingly exemplary role during the interviews and musical evenings. Just like me, he was haunted by the fear of failure. Although he did not have to pass any academic examinations, he was scared to lose his well-paid job as an interpreter and to fail in the eyes of his environment. We constantly had to work, and he thought real work exclusively meant conducting interviews. If I stayed home in the daytime to work out notes he became restless and insufferable, so we quickly set out for the village once again. I often felt forced to comply with his wishes, even when they did not seem conducive to an efficient and comprehensive gathering of material. But I could ill-afford a second crisis with my interpreter even less than a day lost. However, often his suggestions turned out to be valuable. In this, too, my opportunism gradually gave way to trust. While I learned to rely more on Hasnawi, he started taking a lot more pleasure in his work. After a while we really worked together ‘like brothers’, as the indigenous ideology stipulated.

The definitive sign of accomplishment in our relationship was when he (greatly weakened in the last weeks of our work just as I was because of bad water, lack of fresh vegetables, and the nocturnal religious and musical séances) did not any longer blame his ailments on the hard work I made him do, but on the Evil Eye that certain of our informants in a neighbouring village had cast upon him, ‘out of jealousy about his highly honourable position as an interpreter’!

But all my good will, or the advice of the supervisors, or Hasnawi's devotion, would not have accomplished anything if my informants had not been so incredibly helpful and hospitable. Once I had got rid of my initial tension and fear, I insisted on being one of them for the duration of the project. They rewarded me with a wealth of data of course, and that was exciting and instructive. But even more important during those last few weeks was that I felt at home in the village, having gratifying relationships with dozens of people whose ideas and way of life no longer were quite so alien to me anymore and who in many ways even had become dear to me. I could also carry on simple conversations now without my interpreter's help. The villagers' facial expressions and gestures conveyed something to me, and sometimes I was even able to catch their humour. Much to my surprise I now and then adopted their imagery, even their prejudices.

But up till the very last days, my heart sank each time when I walked the few kilometres from the motor road to Sidi Mhammad after a short visit to 'Ayn Draham for supplies and for the regular vitamin-B shots that kept me going.

It was a great pleasure to be allowed to take part in the leisure time activities of my informants, especially since the music that was a regular feature at those gatherings greatly appealed to me. For me, as a researcher of the local religion, pleasure was combined with business, as love-songs were lightheartedly alternated with sacred songs, some in honour of the Prophet, others to accompany the ecstatic dances in honour of the local saints. I was thus able to take a relative view of at least one of my Durkheimian premises. For at variance with the theory, my informants by no means treated the supernatural with the utmost respect that Durkheim presents as the basis of societal order. If Sidi Mhammad was *jadna* ('our grandfather') he was treated, seldom with awe, but mostly with the jocular, affectionate intimacy which characterises the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren in many societies. If there was any dancing, I had to dance along with the villagers and was given directions as to how it was done. What more effective way is there to get to understand the ecstatic dances' bird symbolism, of which most local people were no longer aware, and which I have now reason to believe were thousands of years old.<sup>1</sup> At first these dances took place at people's homes, in front of a small group of men, but at the spring festival of Sidi Mhammad I had to dance for half an hour, in honour of Him, with the best dancers from the vicinity, while two hundred onlookers watched approvingly. By that time I had completely overcome my initial stage fright and I played my role of researcher and of temporary Khumiri with gusto.

At a party I had a cordial letter to my girlfriend dictated to me by the village elders, with the prediction that I would be so 'strong' after all the sexual abstinence imposed by the fieldwork that a son would be born to us soon after my arrival, at the intercession of their and my 'grandad' Sidi Mhammad. Much to my happiness it turned out to be a daughter, but she did get a Tunisian name. She visited the shrine while still in the womb and there undoubtedly was filled with *baraka*. At another

---

<sup>1</sup> Van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

party I was joined in mock-marriage with the youngest daughter of Uncle Salah: the climax of merry deliberations about an effective way to present my girlfriend in Holland with the *fait accompli* of a Khumiri co-wife, and meanwhile provide my Khumiri father-in-law with three Dutch girls who would have to be less 'closed' than his own middle-aged wife.

I eagerly, at first over-eagerly, ate and drank everything that was offered to me. During the fieldwork preparations in Europe much attention had been paid to the social implications of food and food sharing as part of our fieldwork strategies. We were made well aware of the 'Miss Ophelia complex' – named after the White lady from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*<sup>1</sup> who has the best of intentions towards the 'darkies' but shies at any normal physical contact. I was convinced that with that food and drink I also, almost tangibly, ingested the culture of, and relationships with, the Khumiri people. I was usually grateful for their hospitality and lightheartedly took the risk of a infection with tuberculosis or any of the other terrible diseases that some of the villagers suffered from; my tropical injections, and Sidi Mhammad, would protect me. Through my unreserved eating behaviour I indeed prepossessed people in my favour. And not to forget: a good part of the food was consecrated to a local saint, and by eating it I entered into a relationship with this supernatural being that has apparently been propitious for my work and later life. In fact, with my wife I have continued to consecrate meals of *kouskous* and *halāl* (ritually pure) meat to Sidi Mhammad in my home once every few months for more than thirty years now, with appreciably salutary effects.

Besides all the large and small feasts, we were almost daily invited to have dinner somewhere. The obligation of hospitality called for an elaborate meal, with expensive meat, and consequently I often had the feeling that the kindness shown to me by my hosts had 'eaten up' their whole week's budget. By organising a few feasts myself I was fortunately able to do something in return. It was not only neighbourly love, however, that weighed upon me. In the form of dinner invitations to Hasnawi and me, all sorts of rivalry was being fought out, over our heads, between my informants (belonging to different families, kin groups, factions, neighbourhoods, village, clans, sheikhdoms); and more than once this got us into problems. Although these invitations resulted in fruitful situations for casual interviews and observations, they were not always opportune, either because we wanted to do something else; or because the intimate, almost sacred bond that sharing a meal creates in Khumiriya, seemed undesirable to us with regard to the particular person who was inviting us; or because we already had had to stuff down a large meal elsewhere only an hour before. Refusing food and drink that is offered to you is, however, socially impossible in this region, and the host mercilessly takes care that his guest consumes huge quantities. So we often overate ourselves, an unusual but great sacrifice for the sake of scientific knowledge. When I returned to Holland I was overweight for the first (but not the last) time in my life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Beecher-Stowe 1981.

It was particularly satisfying to me when my landlord on one of the last days of my stay in the village, and in the presence of others at that, refused the tea I offered him. This vicious attack – transgression of the same code that had forced me to consume all those tons of food and hectolitres of boiled tea – I was going to riposte! It turned into a big argument that I participated in with concealed irony and in which my landlord remained just as sympathetic in my eyes as he had gradually become. Hasnawi and I became ‘the winning party’, according to the local rules of the game, by crushing our opponent under a shower of gifts. I presented the landlord with all the fieldwork equipment that he had (unjustifiably) feared he would not get when I left, and that was why he started the whole row in the first place.

## 1.8. Towards understanding

Three weeks before my departure I had progressed to the point where I could pierce through the local commonplaces about religion and was somewhat able to reach what lay beneath the surface.

The method I had followed in the first weeks – its shortcomings had definitely been a factor in my initial distress – consisted in trying to elicit statements about indigenous concepts from my informants. This I did by asking as vaguely and elliptically formulated questions as possible, jotting down the statements thus provoked as best I could. However, I scarcely absorbed mentally these concepts until near the end – before that time they did not become my intellectual property but remained mere data filed for further use. In this way their content slipped from me right there and then: I did not bother to really try to understand and use the Khumiri world view during the interviews, but hoped to distil a correct and coherent system from all those (seemingly) conflicting statements by comparing them with each other once I had returned to Holland. It was like mindlessly collecting words and phrases among an exotic group of native speakers in order to learn their language or reconstruct its structure after coming back home, instead of trying to master that language on the spot and from the inside, in continuous contact with the speakers. It was a superficial and unreliable method that caused irritation: much to their despair, informants were urged, for the first time in their life, to give abstract general definitions of their religious concepts, and they were baffled when, during a subsequent interview, it appeared that I still did not understand anything at all. My insistent but incoherent questioning gave them the impression (partly correct, I am ashamed to admit now) that I never listened to them carefully, and thought they were lying or holding back information.

With the help of the project supervisor Douwe Jongmans I finally came to a better approach. When confronted with a context sketching a concrete and potentially real-life, albeit hypothetical, situation, informants usually were capable of giving an indication of the limits of their conceptions – what was still considered *baraka* and what was not, for instance – even though they were unable to define a concept in a positive and abstract sense. Confronted with hypothetical cases that

were recognisable to them (these cases were invented between the project leader and myself), they proved able to pursue an abstract line of thought – even though they could not spontaneously describe to me the connections between various concepts and activities. From among the unspecific local commonplace statements on religious behaviour that I by then knew by heart, I deduced statements about concrete situations. The informants turned out to be able to assess these statements without difficulty, either as being correct and inherent to the system, or as incorrect, nonsensical or offensive, and in this way my insight into the system was gradually being tested and adjusted, which enabled me to penetrate into evermore complicated interrelated structures.

Hasnawi and I pursued our best informants for days with questions about the specific forms of *baraka* that various fictitious sacrifices to different local saints, in all sorts of floridly imagined situations of ritual obligations and misfortune, would yield to us, in various hypothetical roles as pater familias, village elder, female leader, poor widow, a woman recently married into a family, a childless woman of forty, etc. And at long last, with affirmative nods of mutual understanding, the informants gave us concrete answers instead of the hermetic and tautological commonplaces of the first weeks.

The method worked, especially because Hasnawi and I were by now so well-attuned to each other that we could make people feel at ease during increasingly consistent, pleasant, and well-prepared interviews. Working with an interpreter was hardly a handicap any longer. The connections that I had previously been probing for with the aid of purposely vague questions now became clear to me, and my informants were visibly relieved that I finally appeared to gain a measure of understanding and insight, and that I showed this, not only by producing statements about their religion which they could increasingly recognise as relevant and correct, but also by publicly adopting the observable practices of this religion with rapidly increasing competence.

Although the relatively simple tracing of concrete facts from the present and the past continued all through the last phase of my research, I then focused on the values and concepts behind the facts. The result was fairly satisfactory, considering my lack of experience and the limited amount of time at my disposal.

## **1.9. Beyond objectifying knowledge**

The fervour with which I had initially searched for ways of getting to grips with my interpreter and informants in order to alleviate my distress and defencelessness, equalled the disgust I felt when towards the end of my stay I had mastered some of those ways and was actually at times capable of effectively manipulating people towards the realisation of my research goals. I felt like a hypocrite when my sweet-mouthed talk proved effective to get Hasnawi going again, even though he was justifiably exhausted, or when my invocations of God and the Prophet's blessings proved good for a further extension of an already lengthy interview with informants

anxious to return to their more productive activities. But time pressed – if I was to become an anthropologist I could not afford to return from the field empty-handed.

The villagers began to reveal things they apparently would rather have kept secret. Thus they enabled me to complete my most important case histories, such as that of Khadusha, the daughter of Mansur, a penniless ecstatic dancer who lived out his life as a share-cropper with the sheikh's family into which his sister had married. Owing to a ritual transgression, the daughter was believed to have come into conflict with the local saint Sidi Mhammad (who naturally was still as invisible and dead as ever), which in her case expressed itself in acute paralytic seizures. I already suspected that all this was a reflection of a kinship conflict between her family of origin and the family into which she had married in Khadayriya, two valleys away. She was alleged to have thoughtlessly killed a cock in honour of a local saint in Khadayriya, although she had at first dedicated the same cock to Sidi Mhammad. This Khadayri saint was probably Sidi Salima, who in a major myth of origin was depicted as initially Sidi Mhammad's master, until he had to admit his servant's superiority as a saint.<sup>1</sup> We had heard the rumour about Khadusha's predicament, but wanted to get this important piece of information straight from the horse's mouth. Several courtesy visits had only yielded evasive answers. Finally, we took the son of Mansur's sister – Jilani, a boy of my age – into our confidence. When he accompanied us on our umpteenth courtesy call he made such a quasi-accidental, but irrevocable, slip of the tongue that Mansur could no longer escape the net of clever questions that Hasnawi now gleefully pulled over him.

Till then I had conscientiously, and at the first indication, respected the limits that the villagers set to the flow of information. But it was evident that in their own dealings with each other they overstepped and manipulated these limits all the time, and I began to learn the rules that went with this game. After all, most of the information I wanted to get was, far from being secret, common knowledge among the villagers themselves. Contrary to accepted wisdom with regard to social research in Islamic societies, my most important informants, as a male researcher, were women, and I could count literally all female inhabitants of both villages (Sidi Mhammad and Mayziya) among my informants.

Although, after more than thirty years, I can still recall in detail the landscape of Sidi Mhammad, the names of the people, their faces and their social and kinship relations to one another, I have since had much more intense and prolonged experiences of other fieldwork in other cultures with a more conscious, personal and radical commitment on my part. In Sidi Mhammad, I hardly overstepped any other limits than the existentially least important ones: I could manipulate people with culturally specific words and gestures for goals that were alien to them (the pursuit of scientific knowledge, my own career), and thus I gained my own personal access to local public knowledge. Conspiring with Hasnawi and being elated with the scientific results, I did not realise how meagre the yield was from a human point of

---

<sup>1</sup> Van Binsbergen 1980a.

view. After my initial struggle to find a way into Khumiri culture, at such moments I was already dangerously close to the exit again. And in the distance that my effective social manipulation brought about, my hosts' material poverty and the medical needs that had previously escaped my notice (or which I had not deemed of any importance as long as I had still felt I was at their mercy), were suddenly driven home to me. The scales fell from my eyes, as in the Garden of Eden after the Fall of Man, and I saw 'my informants' in their 'true colours': with their frayed blue overalls issued to them by the unemployment relief work organisation, without shoes, with empty storage tables in their huts, coughing, slouching along – people who were willing to shed all dignity as soon as the possibility of working as an immigrant worker in Holland was mentioned. With culturally specific gestures and phrases I finally had a hold over them: I could produce the social mimicry of being one of them; but whereas for them the horizon of their aspirations and achievements coincided with the imposing mountain ranges sealing the valley of Sidi Mhammad, my own ulterior motives propelled me beyond their small and poor world, to global academic production, to ultimately an academic income equal to the sum total of that of all householders in the entire valley, to North Atlantic middle-class patterns of expenditure and security. But what was the more authentic phase in our contact? Initially, when I was still stumbling along in hopelessly ineffective communication, or towards the end, when I could use their own social devices for the benefit of a form of global knowledge production they had never invited in the first place?

Anthropology is more than just a sublimated form of sleuthing or espionage. The increasingly effective collaboration with Hasnawi, the very specific nature of verbal communication in North Africa – where every sentence is, even more than elsewhere, a maze of multiple meanings and references, and above all of contradictions and gradations of the truth – and also my position of dependency as a trainee-researcher in this particular case, drove me across boundaries that I have since approached differently in my later research. When, in subsequent fieldwork elsewhere in Africa, I kept being drawn to those boundaries and often managed to cross them, my primary concern was a much more wide-ranging longing for personal contact (more specifically: longing for acceptance of myself as a person by the initially all-powerful, because locally culturally competent, other), rather than mere scientific curiosity. Not the clever mimicry of an acquired local idiom, but an absolutely vulnerable attitude on my part, abandoning scientific instrumentality, became the condition for such boundary-crossing. The researcher emerged, not as the Faustian manipulator, but as the receptive collaborator of his informants in the production of such intersubjective intercultural knowledge as could be mediated to the global domain of international anthropology.

I was still a long way off from that attitude during my first fieldwork. I was too young, too frightened of the possibility of academic failure, too obsessed with knowledge for knowledge's sake, and had not yet reflected upon the obvious conflict between scientific and human priorities – in my personal life, as well as in my dealings with people from another culture. And besides, the preparatory phase and

the supervision of the research-training project had emphasised the strategic rather than the existential aspects of the anthropological intercultural encounter. Apart from being touched by the harmonious Khumiri vision of nature, life and fertility – and (in the chastest, most brotherly, most respectful possible way) by the disturbingly glorious incarnation of that vision: Najma *bint* (daughter of) Hassuna, married into Sidi Mhammad from Hamraya, only a few years older than I was but already (like my own mother) the radiant mother of four children – apart from these human elements slipping in despite my cramped scientific self, I did not get much beyond manipulation during my first fieldwork. And yet, that last night in Sidi Mhammad, after the ritual slaughter of my calf as a sacrifice to the local saint, after the last musical evening, when towards midnight I stumbled along the familiar cacti hedges to the car that was waiting for me, suddenly old Aunt Umborka (Mansur's sister and Jilani's mother) darted out of the shadows. She had been waiting for me, far away from the festive commotion, in order secretly to give me a motherly farewell kiss, and this time not the formal kiss on the hand that is the customary way people in Khumiriya greet each other, but a big smack right on my mouth.

Thus my first fieldwork ended in real contact. When I began to analyse the material I had collected, the instrumental, manipulative side continued to dominate, and by quantifying and abstracting the field data I managed to fulfil in my report the scientific ambitions I had at that time. And yet, in the following decades, the existential side of my first extensive intercultural encounter kept seeking an outlet in my life. Perhaps this tension explains why I have continued to cling to the ethnographic data and to the memories from Khumiriya in a much stronger manner than would be warranted by the length of my stay or the significance of the data that I brought back home. My two-volume English manuscript on Khumiri society and religion is still (but, Sidi Mhammad willing, not for long) sitting on a shelf, unpublished for lack of patience to finish its final editing and bibliographical updating, and for being distracted by an avalanche of later projects that show the maturity, not the infancy, of my scholarship. My eldest child had to be named Najma (Nezjma) as a promise that my first existential celebration of otherness across cultural (and simultaneously gender) boundaries might yet grow up and become articulate. And the title of the novel that Khumiriya has finally yielded to me, *Opening up a Belly* (1988),<sup>1</sup> does not only refer to the bloody sacrifices I had to witness and stage, and to the occult information that also in Khumiriya is read from the entrails of sacrificial animals (the anthropologist obtains his insights in a similar way), but also to a birth – as if upon second thoughts the cliché-like comparison of fieldwork with initiation, and of initiation with rebirth<sup>2</sup> really holds true in this case.

---

<sup>1</sup> Van Binsbergen 1988a.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. van Gennep 1909.