COMMUNITY PROFILE
Jlioula, Tunisia

THE OLIVE TREE IN TUNISIA

“The olive tree is an ancient species, dating from well before the Christian era (2,000 BC), well before it was introduced to North Africa by the Romans. The medical profession continues to find new benefits associated with olive products, above and beyond those traditionally associated with lowering cholesterol and preventing arteriosclerosis. According to local lore, the olive is also effective against intestinal parasites, has a laxative function, has a sedative effect, and is antiseptic as well as diuretic.

As far as other uses for olives and olive wood are concerned, its oil is used in natural soaps, and its beautifully grained wood is much appreciated by wood workers and artisans of all types. Considered divine, since it’s mentioned in the Koran, the olive tree is also a universal symbol of peace and freedom.

When I was a child, my mother would put a small olive twig in her hair for the scent. Olive oil is also used to perfume, massage, and keep the scalp and skin healthy, and is especially comforting to little boys who are ill or tired.

In the Kairouanese production, the best oils are “Oueslati” (from “Oueslatia”), and “El hor” (“the authentic, from “El Ala”), produced from olive groves going back to Roman times. The oil called “Enndhouh” (i.e., “the clearest”) is manually pressed, using neither olive mill nor centrifuge, and is becoming increasingly popular due to its reputed medicinal and culinary qualities.

In 2004 the olive harvest was 57,000 tons (which results in ca. 11,500 liters of oil). In 2003 the harvest amounted to 280,000 ton, which represents 40-50% of national production. The 2003 harvest was 150,000 tons, 50,000 tons of which are destined for the local market (the olive tree gives fruit every other year). The rest is exported to the USA and Europe; the largest part, however, transits through Italy where it is rebottled, relabeled and re-exported.

The olive tree produces only between its 8th and 100th year of age. Older than that, it is decorative and gives shade. The circumference of an olive tree can be as high as seven meters; a tree expands 40–50 cm each one hundred years. To determine the age of an olive tree (like with other tree species), dendrochronology is used (i.e., the enumeration of the number of layers or circles within the trunk).

Finally, the governorate (governorship) of Kairouan numbers 5,470,000 olive trees 4,500,000 of which are productive; and 108 oil mills, 47 super mills, 29 traditional mills, and 27 continuous conveyer mills.”

Strategic positioning study of the olive oil processing branch

“The study contains a diagnosis of the olive oil processing branch, which is comprised of 1 440 olive oil processing units, 60 private sector exporters, 12 extraction units for olive pits, and 24 olive oil packaging units. Tunisia exports annually on average 112,000 tons of olive oil, representing 70% of overall olive oil production, and is ranked number 4 among exporting olive oil countries after Spain, Italy and Greece.

In the context of the benchmarking of 10 criteria specific to the branch, the sector in Tunisia is compared to those in 3 different countries: Spain, Italy and Greece.”

Jlioula

Ain-Jloula is an administrative sub-district (imed) rural municipality 35 km / 20 miles west of Kairouan city. It totals a population of about 3,000 people. Its parietal (rock) paintings dating back ca. 10’000 ago in the nearby Jebel Ouesslat mountain attest of a Primitive life.

A former, prosperous important Roman city (2nd-7th centuries A.D.) until the arrival of the Arabs in the first half of the 7th century A.D., Jloula witnessed the climax of its development towards the 13th century A.D. It is located between mountains, thus enjoying ecological and economic privileges of both heritage and nature. Its population lives mainly from agriculture without being tenants of the land for most of them.

Olive growing: the farmer used to exploit millennium olive trees. After Independence, the mountainous terrain was invested following soil-protection works and an awareness-campaign for almonds and olive trees by the agricultural authorities.

The number of olive trees is estimated at 20,000 in Jloula (8,000 of which are in Magra) half of which is multi-centenary. They are 5 m high, maximum. The ‘Oueslati’ olive tree species (25% of trees) is of medium size (3 to 4 grams), gives better quality olives and oil and more oil because the area is semi-arid, the soil is rocky, and the species has many pharmaceutical values: coughing, abdominal pains (massages), dermatological,

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contains less cholesterol, etc). But ‘El gueem’ species followed by the Sahli species predominate.

Farmers cultivate olives harvested in Family. Some use traditional manual small presses (the ‘gargeb’ or roller, producing best quality-oil) for small-scale production for domestic consumption; the rest is entrusted to modern presses (2 presses in Jloula). Half of the production pressing is ‘subcontracted’ at nearby Mansourah-Kesra and in Kairouan oil mills. The yield in oil from the olive is about 20%. 3

ARCHEOLOGY AND ECO-TOURISM

The Rock Art of Jebel Oueslat
Jebel Oueslat, the extension of which is Ain-Jloula village, is a large and imposing mountain range covering approximately 135,000 hectares and dominating the Oueslatia and Merguellil plains to the east, the Kairouan plain to the west, and the Haffouz valley to the south.

Although of difficult access and poor in water, the Jebel Oueslat has always known occupation. Prehistoric man's presence has been traced back to the most ancient times, at least 5,000 years before our times (Neolithic era).

This range contains an impressive quantity of dwellings dating from that era as well as a number of petroglyphs (parietal paintings) situated on the walls of caves and caverns. It represents, as far as we know to date, the richest area of rock art in Tunisia.

There is a plethora of different styles and themes to be found. Through these paintings and/or petroglyphs, prehistoric man demonstrates the earlier existence of flora and fauna that has today disappeared in Tunisia.

Thus the white rhinoceros, the great ancient buffalo, the antelope, the giraffe, the hyena, and the ostrich once lived in our part of the world. Domesticated animals are also represented, some in fenced off pastures, such as cattle, goats, and sheep, the latter guarded by a well-known local domesticated dog –the ‘Sloughi’.

Invaluable details about prehistoric man's daily life at Jebel Oueslat are thereby revealed. Other examples include the hunt (hunting scenes of Ain Khanfous) and family life (Dar Mellah). Other figures also appear, probably connected to spiritual life and perhaps to the artist's conception of the origins of the world.

Unfortunately, prehistoric cave paintings (rock art and petroglyphs) are extremely vulnerable and are currently undergoing a progressive and irreversible degradation. The region of Jebel Ouesslat could be at one and the same time an exceptional ecological (fauna and flora) and archeological park.

Speaking about Tunisia as a cradle of civilizations, a history going back 3,000 years has always been evoked, whereas our country is still overflowing with undiscovered treasures from the past. Human presence has been traced to 5,000 years ago, well documented in the Oueslatia region.

It should be remembered that only 13 sites of rock art are mentioned on UNESCO's list of that type of archeological treasure. They are found in Algeria, Australia, Libya, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Norway. There is no mention of sites in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the USA, or Canada.

The caves of Djebel Ousslat could very possibly one day be classified fourth in Africa, after those of South Africa (Ukhahlamba/Drakensberg), Algeria (Tassili n’Ajjer), and Libya (Acacus).

It is hoped that the Oueslatia region (which Jloula is part of) will in the very near future become a prime destination for eco-tourism of that type. Its distinctive and precious art cannot be recreated, and is rapidly disappearing due to the course of nature. It is imperative to find ways of protecting these petroglyphs in a form as close as possible to their original state.

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