

Not Just Holidays. The Social and Symbolic Significance of Summer Returns for Tunisian Descendants

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Abstract

Sayad describes migrants' holidays in their country of origin as a *pathology* that highlights the contradictions of migration (2001), from the guilt of emigration to the mutual accusations between migrants and non-migrants (Sayad, 1999a). Hence, it is interesting to look at summer returns from the perspective of the 'illegitimate children' of migration, that is migrants' descendants (Sayad, 1979a, 1979b), who are characterised by an even more 'ambiguous' positioning between the society of immigration and that of emigration than their parents (Sayad, 1994).

Based on these premises, this paper examines the summer return experiences of 35 migrants' descendants, focusing on their relationship with native peers and families of origin and analysing their representations of their home country. It draws on qualitative interviews conducted in 2020–2021 with Tunisian descendants who grew up in Northern and Southern Italy.

Inspired by Sayad's insights, this paper uses the holidays of migrants' descendants in Tunisia as a means to explore their positioning in symbolic struggles and social hierarchies, both in their country of origin and in Italy. Rejecting the idea of a 'homogeneous' migration (Sayad, 1977), the paper links the diverging holiday experiences of research participants to different ways of 'integrating' into both societies, reaffirming the continuity of the emigration-immigration nexus.

Keywords: Sayad, migrants' descendants, emigration, symbolic hierarchies, Tunisia, Italy

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1. With Sayad, beyond Sayad: migrants' descendants in the emigration context

One of the most profound legacies Abdelmalek Sayad left to migration studies is the conception of migration as a 'total social fact', the understanding of which requires a comprehensive gaze (Témime, 1999) aware of the power relations in which migrants are embedded (Pérez, 2009). Sayad's epistemological posture, based on the unity of emigration and immigration (Sayad, 1999a), allows to transcend the limits imposed by national containers and bring to light their political and mental borders (Raimondi, 2016), developing a critique of ethnocentric visions (Rea, 2021).

Given that migration 'disturbs' the boundaries of citizenship (Zanfrini, 2010), challenging the political and symbolic order of the State, it is the latter's ability to discriminate between the 'nationals' and the 'non-nationals' present in its territory that guarantees its existence (Raimondi, 2016). The pervasiveness of this 'State thought' (Sayad, 1999b) is such that it penetrates the mental structures of social agents and affects their very self-definitions (Calabretta & Ragone, 2024), founding the distinction between nationals and non-nationals on a symbolic, even before legal, level¹. This social hierarchy also draws on 'the position of the migrants' State of origin in the world-system with respect to that of the State of destination' (Avallone, 2018, p. 65)², connecting social orders with international hierarchies.

Within the scope of this reflection, Sayad pays particular attention to the children of migration. Socialised in the country of their parents' immigration but 'with their feet immersed in the previous [generation]' (Sayad, 1994, p. 174), they 'blur the boundaries of the national order and, consequently, the symbolic value and relevance of the criteria on which the hierarchy of these groups and their classification are based' (Sayad, 1999b, p. 13). As their *hybridity* threatens 'the separation that the "State thought" establishes between nationals and non-nationals' (Sayad, 1999b, p. 13), powerful processes of symbolic and social exclusion emerge against them to keep them in a position of domination (Saada,

¹ Acknowledging Sayad's focus on these aspects, De Montlibert defines his work as 'a sociology which evolves from a sociology of materialised and institutionalised domination to a sociology of symbolic domination' (2014, p. 23).

² Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from sources in their original language and have been translated into English by the author.

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2000; Boudou, 2023) and thus re-establish threatened national hierarchies. Examples of such exclusion are the labelling of this generation as *Beurs*³ (Sayad, 1994) and the culturalist postures of educational institutions (Sayad, 2014), to which migrants' descendants respond with renewed political protagonism (Sayad, 2006). Addressing this subject, Sayad distances himself not only from previous authors who saw in the new generation the mere completion of an assimilation process (Park & Burgess, 1921), albeit with possible segmentations or ethnic revivals (Gordon, 1964; Gans, 1979), but also from subsequent approaches, characterised by a fragmentation of readings and the adoption of a nation-State lexicon. To this day, this is the case in many studies on the labour insertion of new generations (Aradhya et al., 2023; Drouhot & Nee, 2019) or on their multiple belongings (Bezcioglu-Goktolga & Yagmur, 2018; Kyei et al., 2022). By contrast, under Sayad's gaze, the political and biographical contradiction of the children of migration fosters a comprehensive analysis of the relations of domination that characterise migration.

For Sayad, this analysis is not limited to the immigration side but starts from the study of the changing social structure in the context of origin (De Montlibert, 2014). In fact, over time, emigration becomes uncontrolled (Sayad, 1977) and transforms the physical absence of emigrants into a 'spiritual' absence (Sayad, 1999a, p. 226). The emigrant becomes a stereotyped figure, regarded by non-migrants with pity for the exploitation experienced abroad, but also with envy for their – illegitimate – success (Sayad, 1979b): 'the (relative) social promotion that emigration ensures (or, more accurately, gives the illusion of) is all the more irritating because it is fundamentally suspect, it is achieved in another social, economic, political, linguistic, in short cultural, order' (Sayad, 1999a, p. 210). In this framework, migrants are reduced to an instrumental function: in the destination country, they are legitimate as long as they work (Sayad, 1999a, p. 306), while in the country of origin, they are legitimate only if they bring more than they demand (Sayad, 1999a, p. 240). However, they are never completely excluded from their country of origin, precisely because of a 'national fundamentalism' (Saada, 2000). Confronted with a deep sense of betrayal (Solano, 2012), the return of migrants and their descendants to the country of origin for their summer holidays is the moment where all the contradictions of migration explode (Sayad, 2001).

In analysing how migration reshapes social hierarchies, symbolic orders and collective representations on the pole of emigration, Sayad focuses almost exclusively on first-generation migrants. Note that even transnational studies –

³ Term coined using *verlan* from the French word 'arabe' and indicating - often in a pejorative sense - French citizens of Maghrebi origin. For a discussion of the term see the translated essay at the beginning of this Issue.

which have reserved significant attention to the children of migration – have not paid particular attention to the participation of migrants' descendants in the social and symbolic orders of the context of origin, with only a few exceptions (Wessendorf, 2013; Bolognani, 2014). Nonetheless, analysing the movements of migrants' descendants in the context of their country of origin is particularly interesting, as they sum up a double 'illegitimacy': as descendants (Sayad, 1979a, 1979b) and as emigrants (Sayad, 1999a, p. 210).

This paper aims to respond to these gaps and seeks to understand how migrant descendants participate during summer returns in the reproduction and reshaping of social and symbolic hierarchies between migrants and non-migrants. In this perspective, the work uses Sayad's concepts to provide new keys to the study of the children of migration and their transnational positioning, going beyond the author's application. Based on a study of the Tunisian community living in Italy, the research questions are as follows: What representations accompany the return of the descendants of migrants to Tunisia? How are relations between emigrant descendants and their non-migrant counterparts structured during these returns? What resources influence these relationships? How do summer return experiences enlighten the overall social trajectory of migrant descendants?

After a methodological paragraph, the paper proceeds with a description of the processes of cultural reproduction involving the young respondents. It then presents the main coordinates within which their returns to Tunisia take shape. From there, the paper discusses the segmentation of these return experiences and the different positioning that respondents express vis-à-vis native Tunisians.

2. Context and methods

This paper draws on 35 open-ended interviews with migrants' descendants of Tunisian origin (14 men and 21 women) residing in the provinces of Ragusa (Sicily) and Modena (Northern Italy). These areas were chosen due to their large and stratified Tunisian presence, dating back to the 1970s in Sicily and the 1980s in Northern Italy. To date, the Tunisian community in Italy, numbering about 200,000 people, appears firmly rooted in the country, as evidenced by the fact that half of Tunisians in Italy have obtained Italian citizenship. The community is also characterised by a capillary and variegated territorial settlement and a significant labour segmentation (Calabretta, 2022). In Sicily, numerous Tunisian migrants work in the agricultural and fishing sectors, often enduring precarious economic and living conditions. In Northern Italy, Tunisians have taken jobs

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mainly in industry and services. Accordingly, this paper selected these two provinces to carry out empirical research.

The interviewees consisted of young people, generally born in the 1990s (the average age is around 25) and mainly in Italy (around 70 per cent of cases) or born in Tunisia and arrived in early childhood. The interviewees were reached through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) during a research fieldwork conducted by the author in 2020 and 2021 in the scope of his Ph.D. research.

The biographical interviews drew inspiration from Sayad. In fact, the author used this data collection technique to reconstruct the entire social trajectory of the interviewees, juxtaposing ‘the meaning that immigrants give to their experience with the objective conditions which form the framework of that experience’ (Saada, 2000, p. 34). In narrating their biographical journey, the respondents could thus find ‘a socially attested existence’ (Sayad 1999a, p. 288) and a new awareness of ‘who, why and how one is who he/she is’ (Sayad, 1993, p. 1326). The interviews were conducted in Italian, the mother tongue of the research participants, having been schooled and socialised in Italy for all (or almost all) of their lives. For this paper, the quoted excerpts were translated into English by the author, who took care to respect the fidelity of the meaning of the interviewees’ words (Bourdieu, 1993). The interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and – based on some predefined concepts – coded with Atlas.ti. A shortcoming of the study lies in the limited availability of ethnographic data. The research planned a summer period in Tunisia to meet the respondents again. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and the political turmoil of summer 2021 shortened this phase of the research.

3. Learning how to be Tunisian in Italy

Sayad states that the question of identity continuity between emigrants and their descendants is ‘eminently political’ (1999a, p. 228). His question, ‘How can we be Algerian or an Algerian emigrant when we were not born in Algeria, were not brought up and did not grow up in Algerian society in Algeria?’ (1999a, p. 228), becomes even more difficult to answer when considering the qualitative differences introduced by family migration. This situation made emigrants ‘parents among others’ and, ultimately, ‘parents of others’ (Sayad, 1999a, p. 134), raising ‘illegitimate children’ (1979a) outside their country. Precisely to guarantee the continuity of identity, migrants’ descendants are subjected to capillary processes of socialisation that range from the linguistic sphere to the religious one, from food to cultural consumption:

We watched Italian TV and also Tunisian TV. My mother used to place me in front of the TV when I was a child. I would choose Italian cartoons and she would also put Tunisian cartoons on so I wouldn't forget Arabic. Always leave an Arabic-Tunisian imprint. (Amar, man, 22 y/o)

The domestic and familial context is thus 'the crucial site for the articulation of ethnic and national identities' (Goulbourne et al., 2010, p. 99). In this context, cultural transmission takes place 'both through the mediation of conscious and explicitly elaborated work and through the mediation of ordinary inculcation, in a practical mode and almost unconscious of its forms and effects' (Sayad, 1994, p. 174).

At home they started speaking Arabic all the time. My father and mother cared about Tunisian culture and religion, so at home we always spoke in Arabic. My father tried to remind me how we are: 'It is true that we live in an Italian culture, that we are in Italy, but we must not forget our origins'. (Khaoula, woman, 27 y/o)

In addition to the domestic context, socialisation as Tunisian 'nationals' in Italy also occurs through attendance at Arabic schools or prayer halls, as well as inclusion in community networks of friendships, expressions of the intra-community bonds of solidarity linked to the 'minority existence' of emigration (Sayad, 1999a, p. 168):

My dad came here with some colleagues. I can think of them as my uncles because there has been a relationship since childhood [...] When we were kids, all the weekends, all the birthdays, all the parties we couldn't do in Tunisia – because when we were little, Ramadan was always in winter – so all the parties you couldn't do there we all did together here. (Sahla, woman, 23 y/o)

A central context in the construction of a sense of cultural and identity belonging to Tunisia is the country itself, visited by these young people during the summer. In the interviewees' accounts, this mobility involves a first phase, generally overlapping with their childhood, in which returns are frequent and prolonged, allowing them to learn the Tunisian language and customs and get to know their extended family. During the second phase, generally coinciding with late adolescence, other mobility desires, school and university commitments and competing expenses decrease the returns to Tunisia:

After school, I had June, July and August, three long months that I spent there with my family. It's nice, especially the weddings. When there was an

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uncle's or a cousin's wedding, the whole week was full of parties... I have good memories of my childhood in Tunisia. Obviously, as I grew up, I spent less time, instead of three months, I spent a month, because then in September I would go back to university. Then there were exams in between and I couldn't spend any more time. (Mariem, woman, 25 y/o)

In this reintegration in Tunisia, in this attempt to 'be present despite absence' (Sayad, 1999a, p. 225), the social context of reference is that of the family network, which becomes equivalent to Tunisia itself.

It's always all in the family. Earlier you were asking about friends. To be honest, I don't have any friends because I didn't go to school or anything there. I have a few neighbour girls, let's say they are my friends, but let's say I don't have time to make friends. (Rim, woman, 25 y/o)

Social investments and conflicts in Tunisia thus take shape within networks that are defined as familiar and which, for this characteristic, are represented as imperishable and natural:

About going to Tunisia, I will always go to Tunisia [...] however, you have to continue to maintain that family relationship. I don't know. In my opinion, family is something important, and whether you want to or not, you cannot deny that you have a family or avoid having a connection with it. (Nadia, woman, 26 y/o)

As they grow, the new generations are socialised into the habits, ways of thinking and attitudes of their parents, and also through their returns to Tunisia and their participation in extended family networks. Therefore, during summer returns, they have the chance to prove that, despite their Italian naturalisation, they are still good Tunisians and good Muslims (Sayad, 1999a, p. 433).

4. A debt to be paid

In emigrants' experiences of returning to Tunisia, the family network becomes the reason for their mobility and the environment within which it is spent (Salih, 2003, p. 74). The family network requires emigrants and their descendants to enshrine its importance through various practices of recognition, starting with the ritual round of greetings:

All the uncles, all the cousins, the whole family tree and you had to go and see a bit of everyone or else they would get upset. For them, it's like a

holiday when a relative from abroad comes to visit them and hang out with them. (Nadia, woman, 26 y/o)

These practices reveal that emigrants are expected to bring something back in terms of material resources and immaterial goods, such as symbolic recognition. Thus, the descendants' participation in Tunisian networks is the outcome of a constant confrontation with their non-migrant counterparts. It is particularly during adolescence that emigrants' descendants and Tunisian peers perceive their differences, linked to their participation in an unequal international system, often feeding the identity turmoil of the children of migration:

There was no feeling of envy; whoever came from outside was a precious friend, there was a sharing, it was nice, we talked about everything. But when you start to grow up, these young people start to realise that they have no future in Tunisia [...] they start to realise that they are young, they are the same age as me, maybe [have] the same potential, but they know they won't achieve anything in that country, whereas I might be able to study, I might have a job, a future. The very fact of coming with your father, having the car, the house, you know those little things that weren't there yet, started to create a detachment, and this is something that made me ask myself: 'If I am rejected in Italy and distrusted in Tunisia, what am I?' (Ghaleb, man, 24 y/o)

As the different positioning of emigrants and non-migrants in a symbolic and social order that crosses borders becomes explicit, they become involved in competitions about 'modes of consumption, the objects of consumption, the price to be paid, the legitimate or illegitimate way of consuming them' (Sayad, 1999a, p. 208). These struggles appear aimed at limiting power differences or maintaining them. In these conflicts, Tunisian networks promote a nationalist discourse, asserting their more direct participation in the group of the Tunisian 'nationals' vis-à-vis those 'colonised by choice', namely the emigrants and their children (Sayad, 1999a, p. 211). For instance, it happens that respondents are explicitly defined as 'non-Tunisian', a label that undermines their ability to express positions and stances (Sayad, 1979a):

When you start talking about certain topics, they say, 'But you didn't live in Tunisia'. (Adam, man, 25 y/o)

As outsiders, these young people receive numerous 'calls to order' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 443) aimed at showing their ignorance of social norms and their need to respect them if they want to (try to) define themselves as 'Tunisian' (Sayad, 1979a). Such calls are particularly visible when they have an impact on women 'and, more specifically, on women's bodies, through costume, body

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hexis, ways of standing, speaking, behaving, especially in public' (Sayad, 1999a, pp. 211–212):

There were also my uncles who, when I dressed like that [low-cut], looked at me in a way: 'What, your father isn't telling you anything that you're dressed like that?' Why does he have to tell me something?! (Khaoula, woman, 27 y/o)

The competition with emigrants thus takes the form of a confrontation on the 'legitimate' rules of Tunisian society and their acknowledgement. Even in groups of boys, gender rules become a ground for competition, as Rafik – uncomfortable with the aggressiveness of Tunisian boys – described:

The fact that they are always aggressive, it happens that they tease you to see your reaction, to feel a little stronger [...] When it's towards others who come from abroad, it changes a lot because that's when envy also begins, they see you as a person who comes from outside, who is not used to it. They know it, they notice it instantly and they see you as weaker, easier to attack. (Rafik, man, 20 y/o)

Finally, such young emigrants are also expected to materially pay the debt of their foreignness, socialising the wealth obtained through their parents' migration and acting as 'emigrant-bankers' (Sayad, 1999a, p. 203):

It often happens that you pay for everyone and sometimes they tell you directly, 'Oh you come from Italy, alright come on tonight you pay, alright'. (Rafik, man, 20 y/o)

Economic taxation is then intertwined with attempts to participate in emigrants' 'legal assets':

I would prefer him [my partner] to be Tunisian but not to live in Tunisia, to be from abroad. I'll give you an example: I get engaged to a Tunisian who lives in Tunisia, then we get married. I have Italian citizenship, I give him the documents, and he's capable of running away. Unfortunately, the sad reality is this. (Ines, woman, 22 y/o)

Another means of paying the emigration debt is the purchase of gifts for Tunisian relatives and friends. These gifts are often consumer goods linked to an idea of Italian wealth and elegance that reinforces a transnational order in which emigrants enjoy symbolic prominence (Sayad, 1979a):

A cousin of mine used to ask me for my perfume, so the years I went there I would buy some perfume and bring it to her, or she would ask for make-up or clothes, brand-name clothes, or things like that. Throughout the years, we always brought gifts and so on, but we were always judged. Then you gradually feel that it's like they're taking advantage of you. (Abir, woman, 20 y/o)

Therefore, in their summer returns to Tunisia, migrants' descendants are at the centre of symbolic conflicts and social expectations that reflect the existing social hierarchies between groups. 'Perpetual suspects' (Sayad, 1999b, p. 13) in Italy as in Tunisia, they are called upon to prove their nationality and re-balance the inter-personal inequalities between emigrants and non-migrants resulting from their international positioning. These dynamics appear as a set of shared conditions, a *generational* trait fuelling the social existence of this generation (Sayad, 1994, p. 161). In the articulated and varied response of migrant descendants to the pressures of the context of origin, it is possible to observe different ways of participating, contesting and reproducing the transnational hierarchies, giving us a more comprehensive understanding of these youth social trajectories.

5. Different immigrations, different emigrations

5.1. *Rejecting and being rejected*

Some of the research participants seem to reduce their relations with their context of origin and its social networks over time. They are often young people with a strong cultural consonance with the Italian context, who participate in many relationships with Italian natives and launch themselves towards upward social mobility in this social space (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 63). In this framework, the periodic return to Tunisia loses appeal compared to more pleasant uses of their economic and temporal resources:

I used to travel, and I used to do it more during the year with another friend of mine, also Tunisian. Then, in the summer, if I had exams, I would accumulate the classes I had missed during the winter, I would catch up and not go down to Tunisia. (Rania, woman, 24 y/o)

This dynamic nurtures a gradual narrowing of social relations in Tunisia, the supporting axis of transnationality (Calabretta, 2024). Without anchorage to a group of kin-friends, summer returns become tedious and distant from young people's desires for tourist entertainment (Vietti, 2012, p. 107). Moreover, the

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reduced interactions with Tunisian counterparts makes it more difficult to interpret their ways of doing and thinking (Cassarino, 2004, p. 261), leading to a feeling of estrangement from the context of origin:

Some people don't want to go often because they don't have friends and so they think, 'What am I going to do there for three months without friends, without going out?' [...] Some don't accept the different mentality, maybe they say: 'I want to drink, I want to smoke so I don't feel comfortable there, they don't accept my modernity', and so they don't go. I know many Tunisians who haven't gone in 10 or 11 years. (Mariem, woman, 25 y/o)

Limited participation in the Tunisian social fabric leads to a peculiar attitude towards the demands of non-migrants. For instance, this group of migrants' descendants meets with impatience the request to socialise their wealth or redefines it as a moment that enshrines their economic and symbolic prestige vis-à-vis the Tunisian natives (Salih, 2003, p. 75) represented as 'backwards' (Bolognani, 2014, p. 115):

You're touched, but really, they look at Italy as if it were a paradise on earth, but it's normal... and so we used to bring fruit juices, even those in glass bottles, which I've never seen there, sometimes even clothes I don't know, there were weddings, and we brought a dress to a cousin to use. I introduced them to pesto. We would bring the food and they would be fascinated; it even makes you smile. (Zarif, man, 19 y/o)

The idea of being in a position of superiority, as well as the lack of shared habits and values with non-migrants, leads these descendants to reject the calls to order by native Tunisians, confirming the latter's prejudice about being *de-cultured* regarding Tunisia because they are *acculturated* to a foreign culture (Sayad, 1999a, p. 228). This dynamic leads to conflicts:

One time a cousin of mine tried to say something to me. I looked right at him, I laughed, and I said: 'Who are you? What do you want to say? That I can't go out, I can't do something?!' In fact, from that moment on they understood that, unfortunately, as I live here, there is a difference, so they really shouldn't even dare [to impose on me something]. (Shada, woman, 24 y/o)

In a self-perpetuating circle, incommunicability with increasingly narrow and distant social networks grows, and social grounds for asserting their symbolic superiority decrease. Therefore, for these descendants, summer returns become increasingly burdensome family obligations, and the option of

breaking off transnational relations and leaving the context of origin once and for all becomes concrete:

I said, 'What am I doing here? This is not my environment; these are not the people I should be with'. I don't want to denigrate, but literally it's not my natural habitat, I felt literally lost. I was on my mobile phone for hours and hours looking at news about Italy [...] there was this mentality I didn't like, very patriarchal, very... even the father who has to be the head of the family, the husband who yells at the wife when he gets angry, I said, 'No, wait, it mustn't exist'. [...] Then there was this summer with the Covid and so we didn't leave... no, I haven't come back yet. Then the connection with my cousins went to zero. (Zarif, man, 19 y/o)

Unlike their parents, whose social and affective ties incline them to invest significantly in maintaining transnational relations, for this group of young people, the 'accusation' made towards emigrants hardly ever transcends into 'self-accusation' or guilt (Sayad, 1999a, p. 247), or at least not to the point of submitting to the demands of an emigration context perceived as distant and underdeveloped.

5.2 Keeping their place

In contrast, there are young people who have a solid relationship with Tunisia, whose experiences consists of frequent returns, ongoing communication and maintenance of relationships. Part of this group mainly comprise young people who grew up in Sicily, often in families of agricultural workers and in modest social conditions, making the prospect of intergenerational advancement less clear (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 63)⁴. Several of them spent part of their childhood in Tunisia, enrolled in schools by their parents to instil in them Tunisian customs and values, often with the expectation that the family would return to the country in the near future:

Almost everyone in my generation did that. I did four or five years of primary school. In winter, I would stay with my aunt or grandmother, and in summer, I would come here. My parents would come to pick me up [...] When you live in a place, it's normal that you accumulate memories, that you get attached, it's normal. I liked the food and the freedom there. I was very close

⁴ The fact that this configuration of relations is prevalent in the Sicilian context seems linked to various factors, such as the close geographical proximity and the density of migratory networks that connect the two sides of the Sicilian channel since the 1970s.

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to my grandmother; if I wanted to eat something she would make it for me, all the typical things. In fact, I am very attached to Tunisian food, to traditions. I care more about it than my brothers who grew up here. (Zouhair, man, 34 y/o)

In Italy, these emigrants' descendants also tend to hang out in community networks with which they share habits and ways of thinking. Hence, their summer returns to Tunisia are not parental obligations but a desire of the young people themselves, eager to reintegrate in a social environment they feel affection and nostalgia:

It makes me happy [to go] because I finally get to see my loved ones. In fact, sometimes when something happens in the months that we are not there, I feel sorry. Or anyway, whether it's for good or bad reasons that I'm not there, the whole family is sorry and sometimes I say, 'Mommy, it's bad. Why am I not with all the relatives?' (Rim, woman, 25 y/o)

The social relations that these young people maintain in Tunisia are thus characterised by complex practices of 'caring about' (Goulbourne et al., 2010, p. 83). In some cases – as for Omnia, these practices – can reach considerable depth:

[My aunt's house] is like my house. You can come in and do what you like. I also have a wardrobe with my clothes, a bed for me to sleep in; it's like I'm a daughter to them [...] Especially after my mum died, I developed a more attached relationship with my aunt. We talk every day. We tell each other what we cooked, what we did or if there's something I... I call her, I just vent, and that's it. (Omnia, woman, 29 y/o)

Frequent returns, shared experiences and memories, the breadth of Tunisian social networks and the closeness of material conditions (from which the impossibility in asserting clear-cut social hierarchies) lead to a sense of shared belonging with their Tunisian networks of origin. In doing so, they lose any fear of exploitation for demands to socialise their wealth:

Two weeks before we left, we took a separate suitcase that was just for gifts and we made a list of all our cousins on my father's side and my mother's side. We were like, 'This one is 6 years old and we have to buy him trousers, shirt and shoes'. Then on top of that we brought food, chocolates, sweets and all that stuff. The day after our arrival, we brought out this suitcase and they were all waiting for us because they knew we had to bring something. (Yosra, woman, 20 y/o)

Yosra also illustrates how this constructed sharing of habitus prevents these young people from perceiving themselves as *outsiders* during their returns, nor in need of calls to order, knowing very well how to interpret Tunisian social rules:

I loved going to Tunisia. I used to get promoted and do everything my parents told me just to go to Tunisia in the summer. There were years when I was excited about the idea of going there and couldn't wait. In the beginning, it was really all about the trip... you went by boat, the sea, and everyone there is the same as you, they have the same mentality. Maybe if a Tunisian here in Italy does something stupid in the street, to us it seems normal, to you it seems strange... But, as soon as we get down there, we find that we are the same. (Yosra, woman, 20 y/o)

Not very different from their parents, these young people who grew up in Italy 'claim to still be "emigrants", i.e. to still belong to *their* society, *their* country, *their* nation' (Sayad, 1999a, p. 227). At the same time, non-migrant networks in Tunisia 'claim that they are still *their* emigrants, and therefore still part of themselves' (Sayad, 1999a, p. 227). In this way, these young people seem to experience a strong continuity with their parents' generation, sharing with them the ability and desire to reintegrate into the context of origin. These dynamics acquire even more sense when considering their trajectories in the Italian context, marked by significant social and symbolic exclusion.

5.3. Being above and within

The last group is made up of those who, despite holding a higher social and symbolic position than their Tunisian counterparts, manage to maintain solid relationships with them. This specific position is linked to their families' considerable resources, especially social capital (both in Tunisia and Italy), and sometimes economic capital. This situation also socialises these young people to a desire for upward social mobility, conveyed in a bicultural perspective (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 63). An example is Ines, a university student in Modena who comes from a family of wealthy landowners in the Mahdia area. She envisions pursuing transnational investment and mobility projects in her future:

I study educational sciences, and one day... maybe when I'm older, I'd like to try to live in Tunisia, at least for a year, to see what it's really like [...] To think about building something, yes, I mean, I'd like to, I'd like it so much

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[...] For example, I have my uncle who used to live here in Verona and then he built a factory [in Tunisia] where he produces olive oil. (Ines, woman, 22 y/o)

Maintained embeddedness in Tunisian networks and the availability of economic resources make returns to Tunisia quite frequent. This condition helps these young people nurture broad social networks, developing ties free of parental intermediation (Baldassar, 2011) and attuning to local customs and representations. This creates a sense of ease in subsequent returns:

I also helped my maternal cousins bond with my paternal cousins. I brought them all together and now we have a whole group of all the cousins; we always go out together, we are always close [...] Anyway, when we arrived [in Tunisia] and saw each other, it was as if we had never left each other. It's a continuous connection; even if we are far apart, it is as if we are all together; we are far away, but we all live together in the same body. (Hamid, man, 24 y/o)

The construction of social networks with peers allows these emigrants' descendants to escape the boredom of their parents' routine and explore Tunisia independently. In this sense, this group not only integrates easily into Tunisian social networks but also seems capable of imposing practices and representations, such as involving Tunisian peers in touristic activities:

For example, if my cousin and I have to go somewhere, to visit some villages, we organise with the family so we can all go together. We don't go and leave them on their own, we try to take them with us. Then if they don't want to come, we'll go ourselves, we'll organise with our cousins, with other friends, and we'll all go together. (Hamid, man, 24 y/o)

Within the framework of a desired tourist experience of Tunisia, summer returns also take on a sense of discovery of one's cultural and identity roots (Denieuil et al., 2019, p. 181). This is sometimes presented in exotic terms that nail Tunisia to an image of backwardness and traditionalism, if not 'orientalism' (Said, 1978):

I generally like Arab, traditional places. For example, the blue, yellow, green doors, the narrow streets, the mosques when it's prayer time and they recite the Koran, I like that a lot. Then, in Mahdia, there's a traditional bar that I like going to because it's the real Tunisia, let's say. It's not modern, it's not something you see all the time; it's really traditional. (Ines, woman, 22 y/o)

Furthermore, regarding the issue of socialising the wealth gained through emigration, this group of young people does not seem averse to the idea of repaying their debt, as long as this is done according to their values and interests, reinforcing their prestige as emigrants. Thus, they develop entrepreneurial ideas to *help* Tunisia, which – presented in a philanthropic framework – reaffirms their superiority over non-migrants Tunisians:

Let's say that at the moment I would like to finish my studies here and then I would like to leave for Tunisia and start my project, my work there. Also, because my village is small and not very developed, I want to create some projects there, to give women work, to evolve the mentality a little, to show that it's not obligatory to stay at home and raise children, but that it's also important to be independent and have another life. (Abir, woman, 20 y/o)

Thus, this third group brings together young people who actively, albeit often unconsciously, cement the unequal hierarchies that cross transnational space. By combining social skills that allow them to reintegrate into their context of origin – with the exercise of symbolic prestige – they convey the image of emigrants who are envied and admired by Tunisian peers, and who, through their practices in the context of origin, are able to accumulate further symbolic resources.

6. Conclusions

This study focused on the experiences of emigrants' descendants returning to their context of origin for the summer. This is the period when the 'supposed reintegration into a society to which one claims to always belong' (Témime, 1999) unfolds, making it a key juncture in the construction of relationships between migrants and non-migrants and in the overall representation of migration.

This study aimed to apply Sayad's framework to a subject he only briefly explored – that of migrants' descendants in the context of origin – producing interesting insights that confirm the heuristic power of the author's interpretative framework. Firstly, the deep intertwining between migration and 'State thought' is evident. Emigrants and their descendants do not return to their country of origin in a neutral manner; instead, they bring with them the representation of the country of immigration and its position in the international order, in a constant interplay between international and local hierarchies. Additionally, non-migrants use national thinking as a weapon at their disposal when

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they attempt to demand the repayment of emigrants' 'illegitimate' advancement. As Sayad notes, 'all the criticisms directed at emigrants take the form of "nationalist" discourse, subject to the categories that oppose "national" and "non-national"' (1999a, p. 210).

This national characterisation of the social relations between emigrants and non-migrants becomes even more complex when it involves descendants who – having grown up and been socialised abroad – bear the mark of their foreign origins. For these descendants, the ability and willingness to respond to the demands of Tunisian networks and maintain solid relations with them is proof of their ability to be (at least partially) Tunisian 'nationals', with implications for their self-definition. However, as seen in cases of those who progressively distance themselves from their context of origin, the hybridity of this generation exposes them to more intense 'national' scrutiny, while providing them the ability to move across multiple national terrains with a freedom unknown to their parents.

Another critical insight that emerged from this work, in line with Sayad's elaborations, is the unity of the immigratory and emigratory aspects (Pérez, 2009). The relationships of the research participants with Tunisia – and their capacity and willingness to respond to the requests of non-migrants – are inextricably linked to the positions, expectations and resources they have developed in Italy. In particular, situations emerge where the impossibility of securing respect and recognition from Tunisian peers leads to a break in relations, where close social proximity between the two groups fosters shared experiences and reinforces relations, and where the symbolic prestige of emigrants' descendants is reasserted within Tunisian networks, reflecting the unequal relationship between Italy and Tunisia at the international level. Hence, if understanding the vicissitudes of migrants in Italy requires reconstructing their trajectories starting from their Tunisian roots (Petrillo, 2010), then we cannot disregard learning about their children's biographical experiences in Italy to understand their movements in Tunisia.

The unity of biographical paths through the immigration-emigration nexus prioritizes the wholeness of the individual over the artificial fragmentations and methodological nationalism of the State (Témime, 1999). Moreover, collecting biographical narratives and bringing them together into 'exemplary' or ideal-typical paths enable us to understand how the conditions of departure and arrival differentiate these trajectories, producing a plural narrative of migration and breaking 'the too easily accepted representation of a homogeneous, undifferentiated immigration, subject to the same actions and the same mechanisms' (Sayad, 1977, p. 60).

In conclusion, Sayad's epistemological and methodological approach, resulting in 'a sociology of the effects of symbolic domination' (De Montlibert,

2014, p. 31), retains its critical and demystifying character (Pérez, 2009), especially in addressing nationalist biases (Boudou, 2023). In this sense, the author's concepts seem ductile and open to empirical applications that extend beyond Sayad's research. This approach inspires differentiated and in-depth analyses of migration and social phenomena, offering a new, more theoretically grounded strand of research on migrants' descendants.

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