

# Behind the Date Palm in New Caledonia

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1. The cemetery of the patron saint Sidi Moulay on the road from Nessadiou to Bourail (Photo: M. Ouenoughi, Jan. 2000).

The presence of date palms in New Caledonia reflects the sad history of men.

2. Great grandson climbing the date palm of his great-grandfather, the deportee Mamâar of the Ouled Zekri tribe (Photo: M. Ouennoughi, Feb. 2003).



To understand the origin of the date palms that are found in several areas of New Caledonia, we have to go back in history, to the origin of the Arab-Berber community; beyond the tree and its edible fruits, a whole culture is revealed to us, which has been preserved, indeed recreated, by the will of uprooted men who found in it the strength to survive.

The French colonization in Algeria was marked by a series of insurrections, harshly repressed – those of southern Oran in 1864, the territory occupied at that time by two large, related Algerian and Moroccan Berber tribes, those of Kabylia in 1871, of El Amri in 1876 and of Aurès in 1879. New revolts took place in 1881–1882 and spread into southern Tunisia. The insurgents were sentenced to deportation. Between 1873 and 1878, 1200 Algerians and

several Tunisians were deported in this way to New Caledonia; other convoys arrived there up to 1894 with new prisoners from the Maghreb.

The French prisoners (political – mainly the “Communards” – and common law prisoners) sentenced for more than seven years were condemned to perpetual exile. The most deserving were freed on good behavior and obtained tracts of land on the penitentiary area. They were able to cultivate the land and found families; they became colonists. The right to the acquisition of land was granted only afterwards to Algerian prisoners. As Collinet (1978) emphasized, they would have to wait until 1885 for Algerians to become provisional landowners. They had to cultivate their land and in this way prove to the penitentiary administration that they could ensure their subsistence.



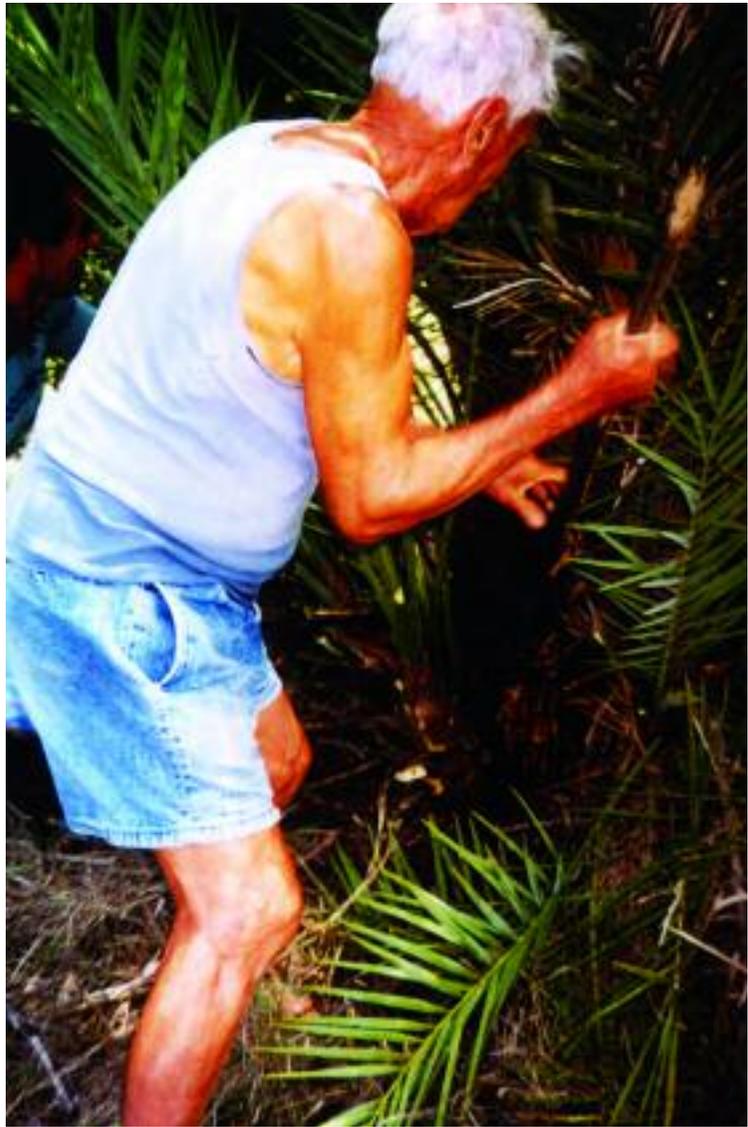
3. Date palms planted by the deportee Ben Toumi (Photo: L. Delozanne, Feb. 2003).

The region of Bourail (163°09'44"E; 21°33'41"S) was selected for the establishment of an agricultural penitentiary that was founded in 1867. The first concessions were ceded in 1870. In 1877, there were 197; in 1885, there were 337. The freed men became more numerous and a decree in 1884 extended the penitentiary area to 17,363 hectares, including parts of Gouaro, Nessadiou, Néra, Boghen, Téné, Pouhéo and Ny valleys. The freed Algerians settled mainly in the fertile valleys of Nessiadou and Boghen. This region is semi-arid (Nicomède 1886) with a climate characterized by a hot season with an average temperature of 26°C from November to May, and a dry temperate season for the rest of the year with much fog and an average temperature of 22°C.

Bourail became a little bit of Algeria. In 1895, 500 Algerians were censused there. Today, a crescent moon on the coat of arms of the municipality recalls the many Algerians who contributed to its foundation. The old Algerians came there to die, surrounded by their community, which explains the concentration in the cemetery of 218 graves of Muslims who died between 1871 and 1979. The deportee Miloud Ben Abdallah donated a piece of land, in homage to the patron saint Sidi Moulay, for the creation of the cemetery of Nessadiou.

At the same time, as a part of a colonial policy of land occupation, women sentenced in metropolitan France could escape prison by accepting deportation to New Caledonia to found a family there. Arriving in Bourail, they married freed deportees, French and Algerian,

4. Mr. Ben Toumi, descendant of the Patriarch Ben Toumi, picking out shoots in the Voh valley (Photo: M. Ouennoughi, Feb. 2003).



who had obtained a tract of land. Couples, in spite of their mixed Algerian and French origin, reconstituted a community around traditional practices. The descendants of the second generation explain that the deportees transmitted their know-how to their French wives who took care of the vegetable gardens and cooked traditional dishes. Hard wheat was used to make unleavened cake (*kesra*) or bread (*khobz*). They also prepared cakes with pounded dates. Today, there exists a large group of descendants of Berber-Caledonian origin. They refer to the deportees as “Old Arabs,” which signifies the deep regard in which they held them. The association of “Arabs and Friends of Arabs” was created on the death of the last deportee, Rouiana Ali Ben Salah (1869–1979), who was a farmer born in

Douar Hammania in Constantine Province, Algeria. The mission of this association is to keep Arab-Berber culture alive in New Caledonia. It constitutes a sort of village assembly or council along the principles of the *djemâa* of the Maghreb peoples; in particular it is responsible for the renovation of the cemetery of Nessadiou.

#### The date palm in daily life

The Old Arabs said that the date palms should not be destroyed because they marked their passing. They practiced their religion and gathered around places of worship, marked by the presence of date palms. The cemetery was one of them (Fig. 1). The palm tree is still present in the life of the inhabitants of Bourail even though its economic importance is hardly

significant. Today, there are no weddings without palm leaves; these are used to decorate the places where the ceremonies are celebrated. The names given to girls are related to the date palm. Thus, the first names Nakhlà and Tamara are frequently heard in the valley of Nessadiou. *Nakhlà*, of Arab origin, is the name given to the female palm tree before the production of ripe dates. The word *tamar*, of Hebrew origin (Munier 1975), is also found in the oases of South-east Algeria and in Kabylia in the form of *tmar* and refers to the ripe date. Both first names recall the origins of the deportees in the oases; both symbolized abundance, prosperity and fecundity.

If the younger generation has lost all knowledge of the date palm and its traditional culture, the older still remembers. Their stories transmit precious information on the know-how of the Old Arabs. They tell us that the old ones planted the date pits according to the lunar month in relation to the period of Ramadan; this cycle announced the rains. This practice derives from the custom found in certain Saharan oases. Thus, in the oases in Ziban, for example, the fast ends with a date, and the pit was planted immediately. In both cases, the planting of the pits is accompanied by invocations.

According to their descendants, the Old Arabs also built traditional Saharan-type wells that made it possible to supplement a dry spell by irrigation. Traces of subterranean galleries to draw water from the water table can be still found, along with clay channels (*seggia*). The well belonging to Ben Yamina family was equipped with a similar type of seesaw pump found in the Maghreb (*chadouf*); the seesaw was made of the trunk of the date palm. The oldest members of the family saw how their fathers – who were originally farmers and also often blacksmiths and traders – applied their knowledge brought directly from the Sahara. At the forge, they re-created the traditional tools for date palm cultivation, as those illustrated by Brac de la Perrière (1995) for North Africa – the *mendjels* (saw-toothed sickle), the *meshas* (short-handled hoes) and *djebbar* pliers to separate the shoots of the mother-plant. These tools originating from rural homes have been assembled in the Museum of Bourail.

The cultivation of the date palm did not spread in those regions of New Caledonia as might have been expected. In effect, it required a good deal of labor from the men of the households. However, men were mobilized in

1918 by the nickel mines at Thio, and there was also much loss of life during the world wars.

### The varieties of dates found in New Caledonia and their origins

What do the varieties of dates in New Caledonia teach us? To what extent can they contribute to re-creating the history of plant introduction? In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dates constituted the staple food for many inhabitants of the Maghreb. Many varieties can be found there, most of which were important only locally but some of them had become and still are known nationally (*khars*, *tafezouine*, *takerboucht*) or internationally (*deglet nour*, *medjool*). Dried varieties such as the *mech degla* of Ziban or the *degla beida* of Oued Rhir kept very well and provided nomadic peoples, in particular, with a food resource rich in calories and mineral salts. The pits were fed to animals as well (Dubost 1989). Saharans today consider that an annual stock of 50 kilograms of dates is required per person. It is not surprising then, one way or another, that the convicts kept stores of these fruits all around them during their long exile. A survey conducted in an oasis (El Ghraous) in Ziban among the old men of the Bouazyd families revealed that small bags of *deglet noor* dates had been given by their relatives to those sentenced to ensure their survival.

These facts have remained alive in the collective memory of the Arabo-Berber community of New Caledonia that resulted from the deportation. It is thought that the patriarchs planted the pits they brought from North Africa to mark their clan or their tribal affiliation. In Pouembout region, which neighbors Bourail, oral tradition named a variety *zekri* in memory of the political deportation of Mamâar of the Ouled Zekri who belonged to an insurgent tribe in Ziban (Fig. 2). In the same way, several varieties of dates, common among the people of Nessadiou, Boghen and Voh, refer to the deportee Ben Toumi – an important person of Ibadite origin from the North African region of Mزاب – who had employed Algerian farmers from Nessadiou and Boghen to develop crops associated with date palms (Figs. 3 & 4). One variety is closely related to that known as *okhet degla* from its red, short oval dates. *Okhet degla* is reported from southern Tunisia in Degache Oasis, where the date farmers kept it as a heritage. Other varieties found in New Caledonia such as the variety *loulou* are considered to be of Berber origin.

The historical procedure developed by Ouennoughi (2004) revealed the relationships between the varieties of dates found in New Caledonia and their origins in the Maghreb and the Sahara. It offers a pertinent framework to be explored with molecular markers in order to improve our knowledge of palm fruit transport in the recent history.

#### **Guardian of memories**

The North Africans deported to New Caledonia recreated a social fabric that reflects the memory of their Berber and Kabylia origins. They imported date pits, to which they attached the cultural values of the oases. They planted them in respect for their traditions. In this way, the cultivation of the date palm was introduced according to the traditional methods of multiplication of shoots and of irrigation. This know-how was progressively lost with the passing of time. If only traces remain in the accounts of the first and second generations, in the tools conserved in the museums, in the headstones in the cemeteries, the memory is still alive, there, behind the date palms.

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