ABSTRACT

LA DÉCHIRURE INÉVITABLE: THE STATE OF THE COLONIZED INTELLECTUAL IN ALBERT MEMMI’S LA STATUE DE SEL

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This thesis is an attempt to gain a more complete perspective about the plight of the poor, colonized Jewish intellectuals in twentieth century French North Africa, the obstacles they were presented with, and the few options that were available to them, through a literary and cultural analysis of Albert Memmi’s strongly autobiographical novel La statue de sel. It is also an attempt to utilize Memmi’s extraordinarily even-handed and sober analysis of the colonial situation in Portrait du colonisé, Précedé de Portrait du colonisateur to achieve a balanced understanding of the French colonial system in Tunisia that is absent from the majority of literature on the subject.
LA DÉCHIRURE INÉVITABLE: THE STATE OF THE COLONIZED INTELLECTUAL IN ALBERT MEMMI’S LA STATUE DE SEL

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Dedication

To my mother, Elizabeth K. Bingle, who first inspired me to pursue my studies in French, and who has tirelessly encouraged me throughout all my endeavors.

And to Steve Loomis, the first French instructor I ever had, and the man who has convinced me, and countless others, of the value and importance of the French language and literary tradition.
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Introduction

The rich tradition of francophone literature, long considered one of the finest in the world, can claim as its own the work of a great number of authors from France’s former colonies in North Africa. However, few if any of them would be as qualified to concurrently address the traditions and problems of the Maghreb, the Jewish community, and the French colonial community as Albert Memmi. The experiences he has had, and the position to which he has risen within the academic community are almost unprecedented. Drawing from these experiences, and benefiting from the attention that must be paid to a scholar of such repute, Memmi has been able to communicate to a very large readership in an elegant and precise manner, an exceedingly important story. Born in Tunis in 1920 into a poor, working-class Jewish family that spoke an Arab dialect, the young Albert came of age during one of the most traumatic periods of the twentieth century. As a poor Jew, native to Tunisia, who was educated in the French system, Memmi possesses the ability to produce work that provides the reader with an opportunity to examine more carefully the varying aspects of his identity, and the complex ways in which they interrelate with each other. However, Memmi’s unique history and the attention he has dedicated to the abuses of the French colonial system and to the idea of a formation of a new post-colonial identity call into question his very membership in a literary community that is defined by the colonial experience.

Memmi’s first novel, *La statue de sel*, is semi-autobiographical, and many of the details of his life parallel those of the protagonist. It is not, however, an autobiography in the strictest sense of the word. It is fictional, the names were created by the author, and although, as Guy Dugas explains in *Albert Memmi: écrivain de la déchirure*, there are many situations in the novel that Memmi experienced himself, there are many that he did not.¹ *La statue de sel* at first seems straightforward, as its strong autobiographical character becomes clear to any reader who is familiar with the life of the author. However, this novel is not simply a fictional account of Memmi’s own life, but a detailed description of the

harrowing itinerary of a poor Jewish intellectual attempting to navigate through, and find
his way within, a complex and hostile colonial system.

Memmi and his protagonist Alexandre occupy a unique space within the cultural
framework of pre-Second World War Tunis, and an understanding of this particular
situation is useful to an analysis of his work. As Dugas explains, in Albert Memmi: du
malheur d’être juif au bonheur sépharade, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the
Jewish community in Tunisia had been already been accorded a unique status within
Tunisian society for some time. During the Islamization of North Africa the Jewish
community benefitted from a protection pact or dhimma, which guaranteed them religious
freedom in exchange for the acceptance of certain legal restrictions, such as the interdiction
of mixed marriages, and specific taxes. However, despite their religious freedom, the Jews
of North Africa led an impoverished existence, as a result of their lack of access to the
political arena and their limitation to certain professions. Their unique status and shared
ancestry led them to congregate in ghettos called h’ara, or mellah. However, their status varied across time and space: “Il n’y a pas une histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord, mais autant d’histoires et de communautés soumises, chronologiquement et spatialement, à des maîtres différents.”

Memmi as well as his protagonist Alexandre may have roots in the community of
Jews known as the Touensa, whose ancestry is native to Tunisia and whose native language
is an Arabic dialect. However, because both Memmi’s father, and the father of Alexandre
are Italian Jews of Sephardic origin, they may also have roots in the community known as
the Grana. As Dugas explains, as a whole, the Touensa were economically disadvantaged
with respect to the Grana, who constituted a type of Jewish aristocracy. Although the Grana
brought a great deal of culture to the Touensa community, their presence also sowed
considerable division. According to Haim Saadoun, the Grana, who vigorously maintained
their ties to Italy (particularly Livorno) and who were known as “Livournais”, were better
off than their native Tunisian counterparts. As Saadoun explains:

israélite universelle, 2001. p. 20-23
3 Ibid., p. 20-21.
The Grana lived in the European quarters, not in the Jewish quarter (Harat al-Yahud), and when possible sent their children to be educated in Italy. In Tunisia they enjoyed preferred legal status, for they remained Italian citizens with special rights, while the Touans were still dhimmi.4

Dugas contends that although one cannot be sure of the Memmi family’s exact origins, they are probably predominantly Touensa. As he states: “Or, si la généalogie obscure de sa famille constitue un constant sujet d’interrogation pour Albert et si l’on compte des Memmi parmi les Grana, il est probable que les familles Memmi et Sarfati sont toutes deux d’origine touensa.”5 However, he cannot be absolutely certain. This uncertainty serves to emphasize Memmi’s as well as Alexandre and his family’s lonely place in the world in which they live.

Nelson explains in Tunisia: a Country Study that, prior to the Congress of Berlin in 1878, there already existed “a well-established colony of Italian settlers in the country.”6 However, at the Congress, the French were able to secure “a free hand” in Tunisia, effectively eliminating any substantial and official Italian influence in the colony. Consequently, the Italians, who felt that they had been cheated out of their investment in Tunisia, maintained a small, but concerted effort to continue a cultural and economic presence there.7

Unfortunately for the French, and for the Alliance Israélite Universelle, where both Memmi and his young protagonist attended primary and secondary school, the more wealthy Grana enrolled their children primarily in Italian schools, leaving the Alliance with “(les élèves) les plus misérables”.8 The young Alexandre is one of these poor students, although his brilliance in school separates him from the other “misérables”. Despite his success in school, his family remains poor. His father is a saddler, just as Memmi’s father was, and his family lives just outside the Hara.9 Furthermore, as Saadoun explains: “Those

6 Nelson, Harold D. Tunisia: a Country Study. p. 31
7 Ibid., p. 43
8 Dugas, Guy. Albert Memmi : du malheur d’être juif au bonheur sépharade, p. 23
9 Dugas, Guy. Albert Memmi: écrivain de la déchirure, p. 13
AIU schools were not only a framework for learning, but also a challenge to the Jewish community, because they offered instruction in French, a secular curriculum, and new opportunities for social and economic improvement.”

The rift created by the existence of the AIU schools does not go unaddressed in Memmi’s work.

In choosing a fictional genre, rather a non-fictional one, Memmi loses some of the formidable credibility that accompanies a “true story”; however, he avoids the limitations of autobiography. In creating the names of the characters, and the events that take place, while basing them on his own acquaintances and experiences, he is able to communicate his message more efficiently and effectively. Although Memmi’s best-known works are non-fictional, his fiction provides a unique insight that is not present in his non-fiction. In avoiding what Philippe Lejeune describes as “le pacte autobiographique”, in which the author enters into an assumed pact with the reader, which in some ways obligates him to tell the truth, and forbids him to embellish his story in order to communicate more effectively, Memmi allows himself to dig deeper into the problems of the colonial society in which he was raised, and to present some possible responses to these problems more clearly and concisely.

Because he is not obligated to provide an exact record of what happened in his own life, Memmi takes advantage of flexibility that the fictional genre provides for him. Because *La statue de sel* is a novel, Memmi is able to frame the narrative in a very simple and effective way. Alexandre is introduced to the reader while he is taking his final examination after the end of the war (it is in fact the older Alexandre who narrates the story). Therefore, it is immediately clear that he has arrived at an advanced level of achievement that few from his background were able to do. This particular circumstance indicates to the reader that this is to be the story of a journey: how Alexandre has arrived where he is. However, at the beginning of the novel, the reader is not privy to the events that have lead to Alexandre’s eventual arrival in the examination room. Throughout the novel the reader is presented with different moments from Alexandre’s life that drive him

10 Simon. *Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*. p. 446
to where he is at the initial moment of narration. This particular type of anachronistic narrative framing is quite common. As Genette states: “our Western literary tradition, in contrast (to folklore narratives), was inaugurated by a characteristic effect of anachrony.”12 Although Albert Memmi’s novel may not fall squarely into the category of Western literature, it is indebted to that tradition, just as Memmi himself, who was educated in the French system, shares in the Western historical and social tradition. Throughout the narrative there are two concepts that very strongly influence Alexandre’s decisions and manipulate the trajectory of his life. The first of these concepts is shame. A particular conception of shame with a distinctly physiological basis, that is analyzed and explained most clearly by affect theorist Silvan Tomkins, relates very well to Alexandre’s situation. The subject, in this case the colonized intellectual, is led to expect something. When what is expected is not received, the subject feels ashamed of his unfulfilled expectation. Tomkins argues that the feeling of shame is a neurological response that is nearly identical in all human beings. The colonized were told that they would have the opportunity to succeed, and to overcome their inferior status as colonized people. When they were confronted with the reality of the impossibility of this idea, they felt ashamed to have believed such a thing. This feeling of shame, perpetuated by the continual failing of the colonized people to move beyond their meager social status, created within their ranks a continually more pessimistic and defeatist outlook, which contributed to the maintenance of the status quo. This helped the colonial system to perpetuate itself within the colonized community. A generation of colonized people, feeling ashamed for having believed in their ability to become successful within the French colonial framework, informs the next generation that it is foolish to believe in such a thing, and the following generation, taking their parents’ advice, resign themselves to their inferior situation relative to the colonizers.

The work of psychologist Michael Lewis builds upon, and lends more structure to, Tomkins’ basic argument. Lewis explains shame as a self-conscious emotional state, brought about through reflection. As he explains: “...self-conscious emotions require a self

to produce the state and then to experience it.” He continues to explain that to experience this state, a self requires objective self-awareness: “...to be in a state of shame I must compare my action against some standard, either my own or someone else’s.”

Within the French colonial framework, it is this unattainable standard of equality that produces a constant feeling of shame among the colonized people. The manifestation of shame in La Statue de Sel may be analyzed by combining Tomkins’ uncontrollable neurological conception of shame with Lewis’ conception of shame as a failure to live up to a particular standard.

The second response, that of alienation and self-hatred, is perpetuated by what Memmi describes in Portrait du colonisé as “le mythe colonial”. In one chapter of this work, entitled “Portrait mythique du colonisé”, Memmi describes at length the construction and maintenance of a damaging colonial myth, and its effect on the colonial community as a whole. This myth, put in place by the colonizers in their attempt to control the indigenous population, as well as justify this control, was to at least a limited extent, accepted by the colonized peoples themselves. In Portrait du colonisé Memmi describes how these oppressed people, unconsciously or compelled by necessity, were complicit in the continuation of a number of myths and untruths that, when combined, formed a framework of oppression that maintained, often violently, their subordinate status. Although this myth manifested itself throughout colonial society and took many forms, Memmi quite appropriately chooses first to describe the accusation of laziness. As he states at the beginning of his chapter on “Le portrait mythique du colonisé” “Il est aisé de voir à quel point cette caractérisation (de paresse) est commode.” He goes on to explain the significance of this particular stereotype. “Elle occupe une bonne place dans la dialectique: ennoblement du colonisateur – abaissement du colonisé. En outre, elle est économiquement fructueuse.”

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14 Ibid., p. 29
16 Ibid., p. 101
17 Ibid., p. 101
because the economic aspect of colonization is a crucial one. However, he differs from many others in that he does not believe that it is necessarily the most important one. In his preface to the original edition of *Portrait du colonisé*, Jean-Paul Sartre makes repeated references to the economic exploitation of the colonized.\(^{18}\) It seems clear that he believed that the single most important aspect of the colonial experience was the economic exploitation of the indigenous “sous-prolétariat”. Indeed, Memmi states in his preface to the 1966 edition of the same volume: “Ainsi, l’on m’a reproché de ne pas avoir entièrement bâti mes Portraits sur une structure économique.”\(^{19}\) By contrast, he continues to explain that for him, the concept that best explains the relations between colonized and colonizer is “privilège”. He states:

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La notion de privilège, je l’ai pourtant assez répété, est au cœur de la relation coloniale. Privilège économique sans nul doute; et je saisir l’occasion pour le réaffirmer fortement: l’aspect économique est pour moi fondamental...Mais le privilège colonial n’est pas uniquement économique.\(^{20}\)
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For Memmi there are also important psychological and cultural aspects that have a significant effect on colonial relations. While discussing the arguments of Sartre and those who share Sartre’s Marxist perspective he states:

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Mais, dira-t-on encore : en dernière analyse, tous ces phénomènes ne reviennent-ils pas à un aspect économique plus ou moins caché ; ou encore, l’aspect économique n’est-il pas le facteur premier, moteur, de la colonialisation ? Peut-être ; ce n’est même pas sûr.\(^{21}\)
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For Memmi there is more at stake than simply economic gain.

As he continues to explain the importance of the accusation of laziness, he writes: “Le portrait mythique du colonisé comprendra donc une incroyable paresse. Celui du colonisateur, le goût vertueux d’action.”\(^{22}\) Laziness is one among many different

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19 Ibid., p. 16
20 Ibid., p. 16
21 Ibid., p. 17
22 Ibid., p. 101
accusations and characterizations that contributed to the greater mystification of the colonial situation. Memmi chose this particular example, because, as he makes clear in Portrait du colonisé, “Rien ne pourrait mieux légitimer le privilège du colonisateur que son travail...” and, consequently, “…rien ne pourrait mieux justifier le dénuement du colonisé que son oisiveté.” By accusing the colonized of being lazy, the colonizers justify their repression of the colonized. By contrast the colonizers claim that they possess a stronger work ethic and a more dynamic culture than the colonized people, and so are entitled to occupy the colonized territories and control the indigenous inhabitants.

This damaging accusation and its general application to the colonized contribute effectively to the process of mystification. In the following passage Memmi describes why this mystification is particularly suspect:

Ce qui est suspect, c’est que l’accusation ne vise pas seulement le manœuvre agricole ou l’habitant des bidonvilles, mais aussi le professeur, l’ingénieur ou le médecin qui fournissent les mêmes heures de travail que leurs collègues colonisateurs, enfin tous les individus du groupement colonisé.

As Memmi continues to explain, when colonized people are confronted with ubiquitous negative images of themselves, it is entirely predictable that they will eventually succumb to these images and begin to consider them to be true: “Souhaité, répandu par le colonisateur, ce portrait mythique et dégradant finit, dans une certaine mesure, par être accepté et vécu par le colonisé. Il gagne ainsi une certaine réalité et contribue au portrait réel du colonisé.” It is here that the mythical aspect of colonization takes on, as Memmi states, a “certain measure” of reality. In order for the colonial myth to exist, and, consequently, for the colonial system to survive, this myth has to be adopted by both the colonized and the colonizers. Memmi explains: “…il ne suffit pas que le colonisé soit objectivement esclave, il est nécessaire qu’il s’accepte tel.” However, this generalization

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23 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 101
24 Ibid., p. 101
25 Ibid., p. 103
26 Ibid., p. 108
27 Ibid., p. 109
cannot be true always and for all the colonized. Memmi’s choice of this particular colonial stereotype is not coincidental, for he himself represents its refutation. His personal and professional success and his body of work represent this.

This colonial mythology exists in an uneasy and unstable relationship with the French “mission civilisatrice”. At the time of active colonization in Tunisia, beginning in April 1881, and continuing until after the First World War, the proponents of the French value system, having advocated for individual liberty and the right to self-determination in metropolitan France for nearly a century, encountered a serious predicament when presented with the reality of colonial empire. Unable to resist the temptations of economic prosperity represented by this possibility, France and the western world in general were forced to conjure up a suitable excuse for the subjugation of indigenous peoples. The version of the excuse employed by the French Republic was the “mission civilisatrice”. The colonized were told that France was there to help them, and that the lofty ideals espoused by the republic applied not only to the French, but to them as well. They were led to believe that if they subscribed to French values, and committed themselves to working within the French system, they would be regarded as equal to the French. However, this was never truly the case. Although the colonized were ostensibly provided with a number of opportunities for advancement, they lacked the economic capital, and, more importantly, what Pierre Bourdieu would describe as the “cultural capital”, necessary to succeed in, and become members of, the society of the colonizer.\textsuperscript{28} As Memmi so elegantly describes in \emph{La statue de sel, Portrait du colonisé} and \emph{Portrait d’un juif}, this falsehood created a terrible dilemma in the minds and lives of the colonized people who believed in it. This dilemma manifested itself particularly forcefully in a relatively small group of colonized people, of which Memmi and his protagonist Alexandre were members. This group, comprised of well-educated young people of very limited economic means, was presented, whether through good fortune or the merits of their work, with the opportunity to choose between their own cultural values and those of France. However, both choices were fraught with agonizing difficulty. The contradiction between the ideology of the \emph{mission civilisatrice} and

the harsh accusations of the powerful myth of the colonized is what rendered this decision so difficult and ultimately made the “right choice” impossible. Whatever choice they made, Alexandre and those like him (including Memmi himself) would never be capable of removing themselves entirely from the limitations placed upon them by the colonial situation. It was nearly impossible for them to reject the French value system, because they were, after many years of having participated in it, heavily invested in it. They often knew no other way of doing things. Furthermore, if they attempted to fully embrace the French system, and to abandon their traditions, they would still encounter the prejudice and discrimination of the colonial system. This contradiction and the impossible choice associated with it give rise to a constant feeling of alienation that is perceptible throughout the novel, and that drives Alexandre’s actions and decisions. Even if the colonized choose to revolt, their consciousness remains, to a great extent, the product of the colonial system. Simply leaving the territory does not fully cleanse them of the effects of colonialism; they are destined to carry it with them.

Because the colonizers present themselves as the lofty ideal to be attained by the colonized, the latter may develop a love for the oppressor. In his section L’amour du colonisateur et la haine de soi, Memmi explains: “La première tentative du colonisé est de changer de condition en changeant de peau.”\(^{29}\) The colonized eventually realize that this will never be possible. However, this does not occur until after the colonized have destroyed themselves, for if the colonized believe strongly in the “mythe”, they can only be convinced of its fallacy when they realize that it is destroying them. As Memmi continues to explain: “Le colonisé ne cherche pas seulement à s’enrichir des vertus du colonisateur. Au nom de ce qu’il souhaite devenir, il s’acharne à s’appauvrir, à s’arracher de lui-même.”\(^{30}\) It is this distancing from one’s own culture and identity, in order to move closer to an unattainable goal, that creates an agonizing sense of alienation in the colonized, leaving them without a real identity. Rather than embrace their own true identity, the colonized, in their search for a path to assimilation, acquire what Gendzier describes as a “double-

\(^{29}\) Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 137  
\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 138
consciousness”\textsuperscript{31}. As a result the colonized become alienated from both their indigenous community and that of the colonizer, of which they were never truly a part.

Memmi briefly entertains the idea of the possibility of assimilation in a colonial society. However, he firmly concludes: “Dans les conditions contemporaines de la colonisation, assimilation et colonisation sont contradictoires.”\textsuperscript{32} Furthermore, he contends that the impossibility of assimilation is part and parcel of the French system of colonization. He states: “Tout est mis en œuvre, enfin, pour que le colonisé ne puisse franchir le pas; qu’il comprenne et admette que cette voie est une impasse et l’assimilation impossible.”\textsuperscript{33} Here, however, he contradicts himself slightly (perhaps in order to point out a contradiction in the French colonial system): for if the colonial myth is to exist, the colonized must not come to understand the impossibility of their endeavors. Despite this contradiction, it remains clear that the encouragement and prohibition of assimilation are two important pillars that facilitate the functioning of the colonial system.

Although Memmi dismisses the possibility of assimilation in colonial society because it is contrary to the colonial system itself, he does, however, offer what he believes to be two effective responses to the colonial system. The first, and more violent of the two, is “la révolte”. At the beginning of his discussion of revolt Memmi notes that rather than be shocked when we discover the possibility or discovery of revolution, we should be surprised that it does not occur much more frequently, given the intolerable conditions of colonized people, and the repression they are forced to endure. He continues to explain that this repression may indeed have produced the effect desired by the colonizer. He states: "Nous avons noté aussi l’hésitation du colonisé lui-même, l’insuffisance et l’ambiguïté d’une agressivité de vaincu qui, malgré soi, admire son vainqueur, l’espoir longtemps tenace que la toute-puissance du colonisateur accoucherait d’une toute-bonté.”\textsuperscript{34} He goes on to explain that because of the extreme condition of the colonized, an extreme solution is necessary: “Sa condition est absolue, et réclame une solution absolue,

\textsuperscript{32} Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 143
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 141
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 143
une rupture, et non un compromis.” Memmi describes revolt as a type of “reconquête de
soi”36. In revolt, the colonized not only have the opportunity to take back the territory that was taken from them, but the opportunity to take back and regain control of themselves. However, as time has passes, the colonized change. The clock cannot effectively be turned back. The hybrid community to which they belong, and that has created this intense feeling of alienation for them, cannot be completely reformed in the image that the colonized might desire. The territory and society that, in their revolt, the colonized are vying for, has been irrevocably altered by the colonial system, just as Memmi and those like him have been changed. For example, despite vigorous, and largely effective, efforts in favor of using Arabic in Tunisia, the Tunisians have been compelled to continue using French language in commercial and administrative areas. However, as Memmi mentions, the colonized are also able to use many of the lessons they have learned throughout the colonial period to better facilitate their revolt.

Sadly, one lesson that the colonized have learned all too well from the colonizers is that of racism. However, as Memmi states,

Le racisme colonisé n’est en somme ni biologique ne métaphysique, mais social et historique. Il n’est pas basé sur la croyance à l’infériorité du groupe détesté, mais sur la conviction, et dans une grande mesure sur un constat, qu’il est définitivement agresseur et nuisible.37

It is thus that the colonized employ, although in a different way, the despicable technique of the colonizers to win a space for themselves in their own land. However, Memmi makes quite clear that, although the racism of the colonized has different origins and motivations, it is still deplorable. As he states: “Tout racisme et toute xénophobie sont des mystifications de soi-même et des agressions absurdes et injustes des autres. Y compris ceux du colonisé.” (italics mine) 38 However, Memmi boldly asserts that despite their negative aspects, the racism and xenophobia of the colonized could also precede something more positive. He

35 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 144
36 Ibid., p. 144
37 Ibid., p. 147
38 Ibid., p. 146
states: “...si la xénophobie et le racisme de colonisé contiennent, assurément, un immense ressentiment et une évidente négativité, ils peuvent être le prélude d’un mouvement positif : la reprise en main du colonisé par lui-même.”

Memmi continues to explain that, although revolt may be the first, and more dramatic step in the attempt of the colonized to rise out of the morass of oppression in which they have toiled for so long, revolution alone cannot produce the result that the colonized desires. The next step is what Memmi describes as “l’affirmation de soi”. The negative and reprehensible reaction of racism and xenophobia may occur before, or as, the colonized begin to reconceive of themselves as independent from the colonizers. Up to this point, the colonized have been repressed for so long, that they no longer know who they are. The native language and culture of the colonized have been marginalized in favor of those of the colonizer, and in order to make a successful transition to prosperous autonomy, the colonized must affirm their own identity. According to Memmi, this step is necessary in order to move past revolution and towards a truly successful society. In Portrait du colonisé Memmi is extremely enthusiastic about the prospect of a rebirth of the colonized self, one that no longer defines itself as colonized and in contrast to the more powerful colonizer, but as its own separate being, one that has great value and potential. The language of the colonized is of particular importance to Memmi. “Est-il bien sûr, d’ailleurs, que ce langage, aujourd’hui balbutiant, ne puisse s’ouvrir et s’enrichir ? Déjà, grâce à lui, il découvre des trésors oubliés...” For Memmi language is a key aspect of the “affirmation de soi”, but there are others, including religion: “Il [le colonisé] découvre d’ailleurs que le fait religieux n’est pas seulement une tentative de communication avec l’invisible, mais un extraordinaire lieu de communication pour le groupe entier.”

However, he also cautions that the return to religion has the potential to reignite dangerous myths, perhaps akin to the myth of the colonized in their destructive force.

Despite the risks, Memmi suggests that the colonized community could use religion and language to break down and reconstruct its society. Memmi himself does not possess

39 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 147
40 Ibid., p. 150
41 Ibid., p. 148
the capacity to take part in this particular reconstruction. He is separated from the majority Muslim population in Tunisia by his Jewishness and is too absorbed in the culture of the colonizer. In one particular passage he suggests the possibility of the interdiction of the “commodités supplémentaires” of the language of the colonizer, and speculates about the creation of new vocabulary to replace them. The former colonies of the Maghreb have indeed taken up this challenge, but only to limited effect. In many arenas, political and otherwise, knowledge of the French language is still extremely useful, if not essential.

However, Memmi detects a certain “ambiguïté” in the self-affirmation of the colonized. The myth of the colonized can continue to exist in inverted form through their self-affirmation, despite their newfound self-confidence. The colonized still define themselves with respect to the colonizers. Here Memmi suggests that even after its rejection by the colonized, the myth continues to assert itself. “Pour voir la guérison complète du colonisé, il faut que cesse totalement son aliénation : il faut attendre la disparition complète de la colonisation, c’est-à-dire période de révolte comprise.” The effects of colonization are perhaps too severe to be overcome by those who have been affected by them, and may continue over several generations after formal independence has been won.

As a result of the limitations put upon the colonized and the impossibility of assimilation into the community of the colonizers, a strong sense of self-hatred may develop in the colonized person. This is particularly poignant for colonized intellectuals, as we shall see in the novel. French thought plays an active role in Alexandre’s revolt. Without the acquisition of French liberal thought through the school system, Alexandre would never think the way he does, he would not feel the intense schism within himself, and the choice between his native culture and his acquired French culture would not seem so impossible.

Like his protagonist, Albert Memmi represents an exception to the colonial rule: he succeeded despite his disadvantageous situation. However, he is not exempt from the

42 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 150
43 Ibid., p. 150
44 Ibid., p. 155
burden of this dilemma, nor is his alter-ego in La statue de sel: Alexandre, although given a generous community scholarship to attend the local lycée, is faced with a difficult financial decision. As his father’s asthmatic symptoms become more and more severe, Alexandre finds himself under a great deal of pressure to quit school and get a job so that he can ease his family’s financial difficulties. Although his studies held the promise of a generous salary in the future, he feels pressure, because of his family’s impoverished situation, to contribute more immediately to his family’s finances in order to ease the immediate suffering of his mother, father and siblings. He describes instances of how some of his less fortunate classmates (such as his friend Bissor) have already, or will in the future, drop out of school. He eventually makes the decision to stay in school, but not without feeling ashamed for not helping his family. Alexandre is placed in an impossible situation. Although he agreed to allow Alexandre to continue his studies, Alexandre’s father still endeavors to make him feel bad about not helping out at the store and earning money, and hence contributing to his continued ill health. “J’entendais bien que si toute sa vie il allait continuer à souffrir, à tousser et à s’humilier, ce serait de ma faute.”45 The young men in his situation were told that if they achieved educational success they would rise in society. However, for a great many of them, a strong work ethic and an intelligent mind were not enough. They gave up their studies and the promise of a better life, not because they wanted to, but because they had to begin earning money immediately in order to support themselves and their families. Although these young men often had no choice but to quit school and begin work, the fact that they did not continue their education and elevate their social status contributed to the colonial myth that they were too lazy, or too unintelligent to do so. Even if the cause for this particular dilemma is purely economic, its existence nevertheless reinforces the colonial stereotype, of the lazy, colonized native. This is one example of how “...le colonisateur institue le colonisé en être paresseux.”46 The reality behind a colonized individual’s particular economic situation here - his difficulty in

46 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur. p. 103
obtaining an education - is not acknowledged by the colonizer: “Il [le colonisateur] décide que la paresse est constitutive de l’essence du colonisé.”47

Colonized intellectuals (in-formation) who were poor could be forced to choose between their own personal advancement in French society and the possible ruin of their families, just as they were forced to choose between the French values that were taught to them in school, and the values of their native cultures that were taught to them at home and in their communities. The young Alexandre is presented with this problem at nearly every important point in his life. As he continues with his education and drifts farther away from his parents and siblings, both intellectually and ideologically, he also drifts away from his cultural roots, until he reaches the point where he feels completely alienated from them. Shame permeates La statue de sel. The protagonist, Alexandre, experiences shame as a result of three distinct but not exclusive conditions: poverty, his colonized status, and his Jewishness. Throughout my thesis, I will focus on the theme of shame in the novel. La statue de sel is divided into three parts, each of which represents a particular period in Alexandre’s life. In part I Alexandre is still quite young, and his awareness and understanding of the world in which he lives are just beginning to take shape. Throughout the novel he steadily becomes aware of his and his family’s impoverished situation, his status as a Jew, the traditions of his native Tunisia and the particularities of the relatively small community in which he lives. But at the end of part I, as Alexandre prepares to go to lycée, he remains largely ignorant of the world outside his community. In part II, as he begins lycée, Alexandre is both introduced to the realities of the rest of colonial society, and to the French values to which he will eventually subscribe. As the novel passes to the third and final part, Alexandre chooses to remain in school and to study philosophy. Part three begins with a physical manifestation of the passage to manhood, when Alexandre visits a prostitute and has sexual intercourse for the first time. His entry into manhood and full awareness of his situation continue as the Second World War erupts and he is violently confronted with his difference from others (both within and outside his own community) and with the futility of his belief in the French system. Each part of the novel focuses on a distinct stage of his life. As he grows into a man, and becomes more conscious of his

47 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 103
position and himself, he interprets his experiences in a different way. In continually reformulating his interpretations of these experiences, he finds a path for himself.

**Part I: L’impasse**

The first section of Memmi’s work is entitled “L’impasse”. This is a very appropriate title because these first eight chapters of the novel in which Alexandre is significantly, but not completely, isolated from the colonial world that surrounds him. The title could also refer to the inability of the protagonist to choose a path that leads to something positive. “L’impasse,” more specifically, refers to l’impasse Tarfoune, a small blind alley, just outside the Jewish ghetto in Tunis, where he and his family lived during his childhood. The location of their residence just outside the ghetto could be seen as negatively foreshadowing the young protagonist’s future desires to move up in society, and further away from the ghetto. This isolation produced innocence: “Je veux m’en souvenir: ma vie connut des jours d’innocence où il me suffisait de fermer les yeux pour ne pas voir.” As his story progresses, and the young Alexandre matures into a man, his innocence will steadily, and sometimes quite traumatically, be stripped away by a series of shameful moments that define his life and inform his decisions. As he matures, he will be, in a sense, haunted by his ability to block out the difficulties and inequalities that surround him. The narrator seems nostalgic, but also expresses a certain measure of contempt for his innocence, as this quote suggests. He appears to be equating innocence with willful ignorance, in a judgement that may spring from self-hatred and alienation. In this first chapter, Memmi also takes the opportunity to describe in detail the small apartment where Alexandre and his family live, and their poverty, which becomes a steady theme throughout the work and will be a source of many of the narrator’s shameful experiences.

The first of these occurs almost immediately, setting the tone for the entire work. As a young boy, Alexandre felt challenged by the goats that passed outside his door at l’impasse Tarfoune, which at that time were much larger than him. One day he is left alone with them for the first time, and against the wishes of his mother, he ventures out to meet the challenge he feels the goats are issuing him. He proceeds to tug vigorously on the mane

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48 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 17
of one particularly large female goat, and to his surprise, it does not wail, but instead violently throws him to the ground. This first instance of shame could serve as a metaphor for the entire work. The young Alexandre, who is confident in his newfound independence, thinks he can subdue the goat, but is harshly rebuked and made keenly aware of his own limitations. He will continue to confront them throughout the work, and the shame he feels during these confrontations will influence his decisions and be a great source of anxiety.

Because this first setback is a natural, rather than societal, experience, it can effectively be compared to all of Alexandre’s subsequent shameful experiences, regardless of his age, wisdom or awareness of his own situation within society. His experience with the goats is a “pure” or “original” shame that represents the naturalization of the shame and colonial violence he will feel throughout his lifetime, but is not dependent upon, or a result of, any particular colonial idea or situation.

At the beginning of the novel Alexandre is very young, and his identity and sense of place in the world are not yet formed. Although aware of his Jewish identity, he does not yet grasp its significance and the effect it will have on his life, nor is he aware of his status as a colonized person. However, in the third chapter, “Les vieux vêtements,” Alexandre is made aware of his poverty, a condition that he shares with many of the colonized. He becomes angry with his mother for donating his old clothes to a poor boy named Fraji. When he becomes indignant and demands to know why his mother has given away something that belongs to him, she explains that Fraji’s family is poor. When he derides the boy a few days later, his mother punishes him. She also explains that they too wear the clothes of their more wealthy relatives. His real punishment is his newfound awareness of his own poverty. At the end of the chapter he describes how the shame he caused the boy has become his as well. His new conception of his position within society has made him increasingly uncomfortable with himself.

Je réalisai pleinement la souffrance de Fraji, la honte que j’avais versée sur lui, devant Chouchane et les autres. C’était ma souffrance et ma honte ; me pesait sur les épaules le même mépris, j’avais ses cheveux collants de crasse et ses yeux en phares d’auto, je me sentais Fraji.

Depuis, lentement, m’a gagné cette gêne vestimentaire, caractéristique du pauvre honteux. Je ne me sentais bien dans aucun costume: mal habillé, je me croyais remarqué de
tout le monde, dans un costume neuf, je craignais qu’on ne se moquât de mes vains efforts.

This particular passage is an excellent physical representation of the contagiousness of shame. Alexandre feels shame when he witnesses how ashamed he has made the boy feel. He states: “Mon orgueil et ma juste colère tombèrent subitement, je sentis mon œsophage bouché.” The shame is not merely contagious at the moment of ridicule, but continues to plague Alexandre throughout the novel. This event is an important step in the progression of his awareness of his own situation. In stating “je me sentais Frajî” the protagonist expresses this awareness: “Frajî” is nearly a homophone for the French “fragile”. Furthermore, Memmi’s own father’s name was Fradji. In associating weakness and poverty with a name almost identical to his father’s, Memmi is not only suggesting that Alexandre felt “fragile” and ashamed of his poverty, but that Memmi himself felt, at the time, a considerable amount of shame as a result of his father’s inability to support his family. At this moment, Alexandre is able to accurately situate himself within the socio-economic hierarchy of his community. Unlike his more wealthy relatives, Alexandre is poor, but he is not as poor as the other boy. He is now aware of one of his own limitations, and his outlook has been fundamentally altered because of it.

In the chapter entitled “Les deux sous” Alexandre has an experience at school that defines for him not only his own limitations, but also the stark difference between his situation and that of others. While at school he and his classmates bought chocolate bars from vendors outside the school gates. When Nestlé began a promotion for which the grand prize was a new bicycle, all the boys began to amass the cards that were necessary to complete an album and win the prize. One day, when they discovered that the promotion would soon be coming to an end, the more wealthy boys began to buy as many bars as they could. Alexandre had finally been able to save the two sous necessary for one bar, but Saul, a wealthier friend of his, insisted that Alexandre lend him his two sous so that he could have another opportunity to win the bicycle. Feeling honored that Saul needed to borrow

49 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 42
50 Ibid., p. 39
two sous from him, Alexandre agreed. When the chocolate bar Saul purchased failed to yield the necessary card, Saul threw the entire bar on the ground. Later on, Saul, in his callousness, forgot to pay Alexandre back the two sous that he had gone hungry in order to save for a chocolate bar. Memmi’s earlier description of the almost orgasmic delight Alexandre experiences on the rare occasions that he is able to eat a chocolate bar further illustrates the violence of Saul’s disregard.

Alexandre, at first proud to have lent two sous to such a wealthy boy, is subsequently ashamed for having expected Saul to pay him back. Shame is again associated with a new self-awareness, of his position within the larger Jewish community in Tunis. He has also become aware of the different point of view that the wealthy people in his community have. Although he knew about Saul’s family’s wealth, Alexandre was not fully aware of the differences this disparity created between them. Saul shared a common Jewish heritage with Alexandre, but his life, his priorities and his concerns were fundamentally different from Alexandre’s.

The shameful moments Alexandre experiences as a result of his poverty are particularly difficult because, as Lewis mentions during his discussion of shame in everyday life, “We rarely think of the poor and unfortunate as being shamed by their condition...” 51 Saul’s unawareness of, or indifference to, Alexandre’s shameful experience only compounds the shame Alexandre feels for expecting Saul to understand his impoverished condition.

Alexandre begins the following chapter, la colonie, with a discussion of his father, and their relationship. He begins by explaining that when he was quite young, he, like nearly all small boys, had great admiration for his father. However, he goes on to explain: “Au fond, il n’y eut jamais de familiarité entre nous... “ 52 He even expresses some regret with regard to his inability to rid himself of the admiration he had for his father: “...et jamais je n’ai pu me débarrasser de mon respect envers lui, quelles que fussent mes déceptions.” 53 However, he never fully elaborates upon his reason for this. In fact, just a

52 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel,* p. 56
53 Ibid., p. 56

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few lines earlier, he describes the familiarity between himself and his father: “Un de nos merveilleux samedis, je trottais près de lui, mon petit poing enfoui dans sa paume énorme, dont je sentais les cals et les cicatrices.”54 The language he uses here conveys a strong sense of familiarity. He describes the Saturdays they spent together as “merveilleux”, and uses the more joyful “trottais” rather than “marchais”. The insistence of Alexandre the narrator upon a lack of familiarity between him and his father is curious, and could perhaps represent a desire to distance himself from, or block out, this previous familiarity. He is perhaps trying to “fermer les yeux” with respect to these memories.

To regret the inability to stop admiring one’s father at first seems bizarre; however, Alexandre would eventually become far more educated than his father, and the lessons he would learn in school about how to define success and self-worth would most certainly create a considerable amount of shame about his father’s ignorance. It is perhaps this sense of shame that would lead Alexandre to wish to be rid of the burden of respect for his father. Also, as the chapter continues it becomes clear that Alexandre’s father, as patriarch of the family, may very well represent Alexandre’s Jewish identity as well. The shame and disappointment that Alexandre feels about his father could reflect his feelings about being Jewish.

As the chapter continues, Alexandre explains that while at the Alliance school, he was presented with the opportunity to attend a “colonie de vacances”, a military summer camp. At the outset, most of the children are quite excited about the possibility of getting away from the city. However, the instructor soon explains to the children that the “colonie” would only be available to those children whose families were not able to afford a proper vacation, and Alexandre again feels ashamed as a result of his impoverished situation. He explains that even though he wished to raise his hand, “(il) se figea.”55 Although fleeting, this event is particularly significant. The power that Alexandre’s feeling of shame has over him is impressive. Because he is ashamed of his poverty, he feels that he cannot volunteer for the trip to the “colonie”. Alexandre’s temporary physical paralysis could symbolize the cultural and economic paralysis resulting from the realities of colonization.

54 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 55
55 Ibid., p. 57
However, after the instructor’s public announcement of the opportunity to go to the “colonie”, he makes it possible for the students to request to go in private. Now, not faced with the public shame of his poverty, Alexandre decides to go. However, he encounters stiff resistance upon presenting the idea to his mother, who is insulted by the prospect. She tells him he is selfish, and states that “Nulle part on n’est mieux que chez soi.” Here Alexandre encounters the more traditional thinking of his mother, and is frustrated with it. For him this is a simple trip to the countryside, but for her it constitute a refutation of the family. In yet another indication that he has moved further away from the traditions of his family, he describes her somewhat pejoratively as a “bédroine”. They would have to wait for his father to return and resolve the dispute, and Alexandre explains: “Nous attendîmes le soir, nous boudant réciproquement, ma mère aussi enfant que moi.” Here again, Alexandre, as narrator, expresses resentment for the traditional ways of his family (particularly his mother’s side), and for the uneducated status of his mother. Prior to his departure for the “colonie”, his feeling of shame deepens when he witnesses, perhaps for the first time, his parents’ uneasiness around those who are not like them. He explains: “Je les vis, pour la première fois, gauches et honteux d’eux-mêmes, tout leur prestige abandonné à l’impasse.” Once Alexandre begins to move past this impasse, the limitations of his parents, as well as his own limitations, become apparent. As he witnesses his parents’ behavior and becomes more aware of their meager stature within society as a whole, Alexandre feels ashamed, both for them, and for himself.

Just as Alexandre is confronted again with the shame of his own poverty, and now the awkward shame of seeing his parents’ inadequacies exposed for the first time, he embarks upon a seemingly innocuous journey that will expose him to his own alterity and put him face to face with anti-Semitism for the first time. Even as he is standing with his parents waiting for the bus to arrive, Alexandre makes mention of the European boys that would be travelling with him, and how different they are. It is here that he first acknowledges his difference with respect to the other boys, but this is only a precursor to

56 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 58
57 Ibid., p. 58
58 Ibid., p. 59
the experiences he will have at the summer camp. From the very beginning, his description of the “colonie” evokes the Nazi camps.

Le trajet fut très pénible. Debout cinq heures durant, cinquante respirations mêlées, étouffant sous la bâche peinte, dans une semi-obscurité, jetés brutalement les uns contre les autres à chaque cahot, les trépidations du châssis nous communiquaient à la plante des pieds un chatouillement qui me révulsait l’estomac.59

While describing his arrival at the “colonie”, Alexandre also takes a moment to explain how he conceived of himself before and after his departure for the “colonie”.

J’avais dix ans ai-je dit, et j’étais garçon unique. Il y avait bien Kalla [sa sœur] mais dans nos familles [les familles patriarcales de la communauté juive] le garçon, surtout unique, est un véritable privilégié...À la colonie, le sentiment de mon unicité fut douloureusement ébranlé dès le premier jour.60

This is a very important moment in the formation of his consciousness. He has become more aware of the world around him, and is now able to situate himself more accurately within the world in which he lives. This realization is traumatic, and will create problems for Alexandre.

Along with being forced to acknowledge a new conception of himself, at the “colonie”, Alexandre will also be confronted with how others view him. Until the age of ten, Alexandre has led a relatively sheltered life, as is evidenced most poignantly in his discussion of the period during which he and his parents were waiting for the bus. Up to this point in his life nearly all of his social experiences have been with other Jews. He lives in a Jewish neighborhood, and attends school at the Alliance Israélite. He has not yet experienced anti-Semitism.

While at the camp, many of the boys receive care packages, sent to them by their parents. One boy, named Mimouni, who receives no money from home, and whose father was a street vendor who sold various sugary treats to passers-by, begins to mimic his father by selling the excess candies in his care package to his fellow campers. When the

59 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 59
60 Ibid., p. 60
soldiers become aware of his endeavors, one soldier in particular becomes very upset, and attributes Mimouni’s breach of the rules to his Jewishness. “Le sergent, hurlant, nous révéla pourquoi Mimouni avait eu cette idée ignominieuse: Mimouni était juif et les juifs ont un penchant irrésistible au commerce.”61 Henceforth, Alexandre will hold in contempt any Jews who take part in commercial activity. Alexandre’s view of himself is again changed, and he exhibits a sense of self-hatred. Furthermore, he has now lost his sense of uniqueness, and has been lumped together with all others like him.

Alexandre’s first real experience with anti-Semitism is perhaps rendered even more profound as a result of its particular nature. Although still malevolent, whether overtly or covertly, this particular type of anti-Semitism is not only a declaration of inferiority, but of difference. By making stating that all Jews, regardless of origin or status, have a penchant for commerce, the soldier implies that they are members of a different society altogether, one that is, as a whole, inferior to the Western colonial society. For a young boy who is only just beginning to understand the world outside his community, this realization constitutes a strong blow to his worldview.

As this painful vacation continues, Alexandre and Mimouni decide to participate in the weekly excursion to the Catholic chapel for mass. At first excited to be doing something new and out of the ordinary, Alexandre begins to feel ashamed upon entering the chapel. The riches displayed in the chapel contrast starkly with the meager trappings of his local synagogue, and he begins again to feel ashamed of his poverty. His shame is only compounded, when the time comes to kneel and he is the only boy not willing to do so. The Christian boys, insulted by his unwillingness, beat him savagely, in a manner reminiscent of the stoic sufferings of Christ. He also feels ashamed for having, as he conceives it, betrayed his faith by attending mass. As a result of the anti-Semitism he has observed and experienced, he has been made to feel ashamed of his own faith and way of life. However, at he same time, he will never be fully able to join the world of the colonizers. As Memmi states in *Portrait d’un juif*: “Mais j’ai vite découvert que la réalité française est inextricablement mêlée, libérale et catholique, cléricale et anticléricale à la fois.”62 The

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61 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 62
mass that Alexandre attends is not merely a religious ceremony. Because Catholicism is the
cult of the established order, that of the colonizer, it represents its power.

As a result of his offenses in the Church, Alexandre, already an outsider because of
his Jewish heritage, is relentlessly berated and insulted during the days following the
Sunday mass. As he explains: “Au retour, je fus désigné à la vindicte de la colonie, et un
temps durant, pour assouvir la colère commune, je fus bousculé, injurié, battu.” Memmi’s
choice of words here bears analyzing. Here, Alexandre, a representative of the Jewish
community, is being singled out and persecuted as a result of his fidelity to his Jewish
heritage. He has become the target for the anger of the entire “colonie”. It seems that this
particular passage represents not only Alexandre’s individual experiences as a young
Jewish boy at a military “colonie de vacances”, but also the experiences of the entire Jewish
community in Tunisia and in other colonies. Just as Alexandre has been singled out for
ridicule at the “colonie”, the Jewish communities in all the colonies have been made a target
for anger and ridicule. The anger of the Christian boys toward Alexandre, and the anti-
Semitism of the French soldiers, are representations of the repression of the colonial
system vis-à-vis Jews in colonized territories. The harrowing experiences Alexandre has at
the “colonie” also closely resemble his experiences in a Nazi camp, where he will be singled
out for ridicule and punishment, and where he will experience an even more overt and
systematic version of the anti-Semitism he experiences as a young boy.

After the trouble at the church, Alexandre, being forced to endure the beatings and
ridicule of his fellow campers, comes to the decision that he must escape the “colonie”.
However, when he appeals to his father for help, he discovers that despite his father’s
efforts, he is powerless to deliver him from the “colonie”. Alexandre then decides that he
would rather die than continue his existence there, and refuses to eat. His despair is so
great that he contemplates suicide for the first time. A large ditch, which physically bars
him from escaping, fascinates him and he eventually falls ill with what one of the French
soldiers calls “une fièvre coloniale”. However, rather than alleviating his suffering,
Alexandre’s forced starvation only pushes his pain and solitude to another level, because he
is transferred by the soldiers to a place far away from the camp. There, in an infirmary in

63 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 67
the mountains converted from an old Arab fort, he experiences the intense pain of solitude, and his only company is a wailing, poor old mad man, locked up to keep him safe and out of trouble.

Memmi’s use of symbolism is powerful and clear. Alexandre wants to escape from his situation, but cannot: he must stay on at the camp, and endure his suffering until the end of his vacation. Alexandre explains, at the beginning of the chapter, that it was at this point that his hatred for his father began to form. The powerlessness of his father to free him from the military camp, and his frustration with it, represent the inability of the Jewish and colonized communities to free themselves from persecution. Here again we see Alexandre’s father as a placeholder for both his religion, and his impoverished situation as a colonized person; both of which he resents. This particular moment is a turning point for Alexandre. He has, up until this point, admired his father without reservations, but his whole-hearted admiration ceases to exist when his father is unable to help him. However, he still maintains a measure of respect for his father, and one could infer, for his faith and his Jewish identity, because without them, he would cease to exist as himself.

Alexandre’s hunger at the colonie might symbolize his impoverished situation, except that he inflicts it on himself. It could also foreshadow the hunger he endures when he volunteers (out of shame) to go to the Nazi camp. Just as his self-starvation at the “colonie” proves fruitless, so will his efforts to make a difference, and to improve the lives of his Jewish brethren by joining them in the camp.

The “fièvre coloniale” that Alexandre acquires is also significant. Why does the sergeant refer to his fever in this particular way, and why is it the sergeant that does so. It seems as though the sergeant, concerned and possessing no explanation for why the young Alexandre is running a fever, blames it on Alexandre’s colonized status, rather than take responsibility for what has happened to the boy. This symbolizes how the colonizers make excuses for their repression of indigenous peoples by attributing the unfortunate situation of the latter to some inherent flaw or exterior force. This absolves the colonizers of any responsibility, and leaves them free to continue their activities, uninhibited by any moral or ethical restrictions.

The ditch that Alexandre sees and becomes fascinated with is another symbol. He first explains that during his “retraites solitaires” he had seen a large ditch in the ground
that at first served only as a reminder of his imprisonment, but now, as he has just begun to contemplate suicide, he is fascinated by it, and even tries to blindly stumble into the ditch. This long ditch is quite obviously reminiscent of the long, deep mass graves of the Nazis. Strangely, just as Alexandre no longer sees the ditch as a stout barrier to his escape, the victims of the Shoah, who may have also contemplated suicide, may have seen the ditches that would become their graves as an avenue for their escape from pain and suffering.

Alexandre, abandoned in a failing Arab structure, is forsaken by his colonial “masters”, and left alone, to be tormented by the cries of the poor mad man. Memmi seems to imply that the Jewish community in Tunisia is subject to much the same fate. Although promised access to the French system, they are nonetheless forsaken, denied this access, and left to survive in an Arab system and culture made weak by the colonial system and hostile to the Jews. The mad man is described as “pauvre”, which might merely refer to the man’s unfortunate state. However, the fact that he terrorizes Alexandre could very well symbolize how Alexandre’s own impoverished situation terrorizes him. Alexandre’s inability to cope with the mad man is indicative of his inability to cope with his poverty.

The account of Alexandre’s Bar Mitzvah, entitled “La première communion” represents another crucial turning point in his life. Alexandre’s family, having decided to move into a new flat in his uncle’s newly acquired apartment building, decides to schedule their move to coincide with Alexandre’s Bar Mitzvah celebration. This movement away from the “Impasse” just as Alexandre is becoming a man could perhaps represent Memmi’s own movement away from his roots and towards French ideals. However, Alexandre soon discovers that his mother is pregnant. He has no wish to share his coming-of-age ceremony with anyone else (particularly because it has already been overshadowed by the celebration for their new dwelling) and he hopes that the baby will be a girl. Unfortunately for Alexandre, his mother gives birth to a boy and a girl, and he is forced to share his ceremony with the circumcision ceremony for his new brother. His intense displeasure with this event further reinforces his move further away from the traditions of his family and his native culture.

A Bar Mitzvah always represents a turning point in the life of a young man, but this particular instance does so on many levels. As a result of the intransigence of both Alexandre’s father and his uncle Aroun, the family is forced to settle for a less than ideal
situation. Alexandre’s father resents his wife’s side of the family because of what he considers to be their backwards, tribal nature, and his wife’s insistence that their family spend most of the time with her relatives and not his own. He is too proud to apply for a flat in the new building of Aroun, his brother-in-law. When he finally applies, partly out the fear of being perceived as the only family not able to afford a flat, there are no more standard apartments left, and the family has to settle for two laundry rooms on the terrace, which they convert into an apartment where as Alexandre states, “...nous gelions l’hiver et cuisions l’été”.

This event and related ones constitute a number of shameful experiences that change Alexandre’s perception of the world and give the reader a great deal of insight into the progression of his consciousness. As a result of his western education and his adolescent ignorance, Alexandre finds his family to be, at this particular moment in his life, a relatively constant source of shame. The situation regarding the new apartment building is a case in point. Alexandre resents the familial rivalry between his father and his uncle, and makes it clear that he views their behavior as petty. He has also come to view the tribal nature of his family’s relations in a negative way, as he states in his description of his family’s rush to move into the new building: “Tous ses frères et sœurs demandèrent à y habiter, ce qui l’ennuya fort, mais je m’en aperçus rapidement, nous vivions en tribu; il ne put refuser.”

There is contempt in this description. Although still a boy, or rather, just becoming a man, Alexandre was far more educated, and had been exposed much more extensively to western ways of thinking. The strong bonds between his immediate and extended family as well as their habits and way of life had become a source of shame for him.

One particular episode, which occurs shortly after the celebration of his Bar Mitzvah, illustrates Alexandre’s refusal of a particular traditional superstition and represents his desire to break with tradition in a more tangible way. In the days prior to the Bar Mitzvah, housewarming and birth celebration, Alexandre learns that his parents had had a child before him, a boy with webbed fingers. His mother explains to him that she knew that his brother was to die in infancy when a neighbor informed her that she had

64 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 76
65 Ibid., p. 75
heard an owl hoot near their home. Perhaps angered by the discovery that he was not in fact the first-born son, in a state of “humiliated fury” Alexandre forcefully rejects the superstition that his mother believes so strongly, and informs her that children die not as a result of a malevolent bird of prey, but for lack of proper care. This, of course, angers his mother who, in a fury of her own, informs him that she will pull him out of school if his instructors continue to teach him to be disrespectful to his parents.

It is precisely this type of “humiliated fury”, which results from the shame associated with the devaluing of an entire indigenous value structure, and the inaccessibility of the colonial value structure that does have significance within the colonized society (in this case that of the French), that leads to revolt. As Memmi states in *Portrait du colonisé*:

Il [le colonisé] a été arraché de son passé et stoppé dans son avenir, ses traditions agonisent et il perd l’espoir d’acquérir une nouvelle culture, il n’a ni langue, ni drapeau, ni technique, ni existence nationale ni internationale, ni droits, ni devoirs : *il ne possède rien, n’est plus rien et n’espère plus rien.*

Given his potential success, Alexandre may seem to be an exception to this general rule, but in most ways he is not. Although he may possess the ability to rise out of his impoverished situation, he is beginning to realize that he will never be able to fully acquire a new culture. No matter how much he advances, the color of his skin, his mannerisms, his accent, etc, will forever deny him access to the world of the colonizer. It is easy to see why Alexandre eventually decides to remove himself fully from the colonial situation, in order to give himself an opportunity to make a fresh start, and to free himself from these colonial binds.

Furthermore, the “humiliated fury” exhibited by Alexandre and his mother represents two very different parts of the same colonized whole. They feel humiliation, but in different, almost opposite ways. Alexandre’s mother becomes upset with him because of his disregard for the traditions of his ancestors, and she forcefully expresses her displeasure with the way in which the French educational system has caused her son to

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66 Lewis, Michael. *Shame: The Exposed Self*, p. 3 (Michael Lewis attributes this term to Helen Block Lewis)

disregard them as well. However, Alexandre’s mother’s refusal to discard her beliefs, which Alexandre views as superstitious, is extremely frustrating for him, because, although his mother is the one who refuses to change, her refusal, as his mother, and hence, as someone who has been integral in his formation as a man, represents his inability to fully integrate into the culture of the colonizer. He will always be a native Tunisian, he will always be a Jew, and he will always be from a poor background. He will never be able to escape these realities.

In her article entitled “Psychology and colonialism”, Irene Gendzier discusses the nature of this particular type of confrontation, as well as Frantz Fanon’s responses to it. She discusses how, in his book entitled Toward the African Revolution, Fanon discusses at length, how Western technology, including medicine, were not free from political or, perhaps more importantly in the case of Alexandre and his mother, cultural association.68 This particular analysis could also be applied to Alexandre and his mother. Alexandre’s mother is rejecting his argument in the same way that, as Gendzier explains, those in post-independence Algeria continued to seek out traditional medical care, rather than go to a Western-style clinic. As Gendzier states: “One can rationalize the presence of a continuing neocolonialism to justify the explanation (as to why people continue to seek out this type of treatment).”69 However, there most certainly have to be reasons other than the presence of neocolonialism, or this case colonialism, that would describe this attitude. Alexandre’s mother, who, as he explains very early in the novel, is uneducated and illiterate, would be unlikely to think in terms of colonization, or even to consider herself a colonized person in the same way that Alexandre conceptualizes himself. For her this confrontation is about her offspring’s abandonment of the cultural norms she holds in high regard, not about the struggle between the colonized and the colonizer.

As Alexandre becomes a man, the events surrounding the ceremony honoring his manhood and the shame he feels as a result of these events distances him further from his traditional roots and moves him closer to the new western ideals that he has adopted. In informing him of her first child, Alexandre’s mother pushes him away from their familial

69 Ibid., p. 513
community. In response, He firmly establishes his position outside the “tribe”. Alexandre has become a man, and as a man, he has chosen the west over the traditions of his family.

The title of the chapter is indicative of this choice. Memmi has chosen to call it “La première communion” rather than “Bar Mitzvah”. Rather than a true Jewish right of passage, this chapter represents Alexandre’s decision to choose to subscribe to western ideals, and more particularly those of France, a Catholic country. This is his “première communion”, his first step in the direction of French thought and away from the traditions with which he was raised. It is here that Alexandre adopts what Lewis might call the French “standard”. He feels shame because he does not, and in fact cannot live up to the standard he has chosen.

A passage from Memmi’s Portrait d’un juif renders his choice of title even more impressive and provides considerable insight regarding this choice.

Pour me saisir dans mon existence concrète, la meilleure démarche aurait été, semblait-il, de décrire les aspects positifs de cette existence : traditions et institutions, habitudes collectives et valeurs...Mais je me suis vite aperçu que l’existence juive est aussi remarquable par ses limitations et ses manques que par ses traits positifs.70

At this turning point in his life, Alexandre has begun to define himself in a negative way. As he moves away from his traditional culture, he begins to define himself by what he is not. He does not yet belong to the community of the colonizers, but he is no longer a full member of his own community. Although Alexandre may not yet be aware, he will never achieve the standard that he has set for himself, or rather, the standard that has been set for him.

Although Memmi chose a religious ceremony as the title of this chapter, his description of the French reality in Portrait d’un juif would seem to indicate quite clearly that the significance of “La première communion” is more than simply religious. As stated above, according to Memmi, the Catholic religion and the colonizing power of France cannot be fully separated. His choice of a Christian religious symbol and Alexandre’s

70 Memmi, Albert. Portrait d’un juif, p. 217
shameful experience during his bar mitzvah provide a definition of Alexandre by what he is not.

Curiously, at the same time that Alexandre has made the decision to reject his community, and embrace another, he is chosen to be a representative of the very community he has chosen to reject. When the time came for Alexandre, who, as is evident in the previous chapters, is a very gifted student, to graduate from collège and to continue his studies at lycée, he is faced with a problem. His family, too poor to finance his education, is unable to send him to lycée. However, by a stroke of fortune, the Jewish community of Tunis chose to award him a scholarship.

At this point, Alexandre is yet again presented with a dilemma. Although troubled by the prospect of not having his oldest son to help out in his shop and increase the family income, but perhaps bolstered by a desire for his son to have the opportunity to receive the education that he did not, his father agrees to allow Alexandre to take the scholarship and attend lycée. At the beginning of the chapter he explains how his life differed from those of the middle-class students. “La voie est droite pour les jeunes bourgeois : le petit lycée, le grand lycée, puis l’université, ou l’affaire paternelle. S’ils bifurquent en route, ils l’ont bien voulu. Je ne savais rien de mon avenir au-delà du certificat d’études.” 71 Here, Alexandre again faces a shameful situation, although in this instance, his shame is almost exclusively a result of his and his family’s poverty, for the “bourgeois” boys he describes in the passage above are also members of the colonized Jewish community. Although it is certainly not exclusively his fault, or that of his family, Alexandre’s poverty weighs heavily on him precisely because there are members of the Jewish community in Tunis who do not share in his impoverished condition. However, rather than beating him into submission, his feeling of shame drives him to succeed, although certainly not without difficulty.

Alexandre is again put in a situation in which the right choice seems not to exist. Turning down the scholarship would permit him to escape from the guilt of not helping his father, but it would also mean giving up his dreams, and abandoning his belief that he can become part of the society of the colonizer. If he accepts the position, he will be forced to face his guilt. Although Alexandre happily accepts the position and very much looks

71 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 91
forward to attending lycée, he is now indebted to the impoverished community against
which he feels so much resentment, and that has caused him so much shame, and
humiliation. In one way, he has found a way out, and is escaping his community, but in
another way, he is linked to it more strongly than ever by this indebtedness.

This debt exists in a very tangible way upon his visit to the “pharmacien” M.
Bismuth. His principal, M. Louzel, informs Alexandre that M. Bismuth, a well known
druggist, and the son of an old rabbi is to be his sponsor, and, as M. Bismuth was a former
recipient of the Alliance scholarship, he will be funding Alexandre’s studies. Although M.
Bismuth was not available when Alexandre first attempted to visit him, when he finally has
the opportunity to pay a visit to the pharmacien, he is very impressed by the pharmacy, and
the life that M. Bismuth has created for himself. However, M. Bismuth himself turns out to
be a fragile man. Despite his wealth, he seems to be in ill health, and the location of his
office, and the end of a long dark corridor, is suggestive of quarantine. In the awkward
discussion Alexandre has with him, the druggist bluntly explains to him: “Il est essentiel de
gagner largement sa vie.”72 His harsh advice to Alexandre forces him to hold his dreams of
becoming a doctor at bay, and to begin to think of other options, as he is now compelled to
feel obligated to earn as much as possible, both in order to give back to his family what they
will have lost as a result of his not working for his father, and also to give back to his
community what it has given to him. Here again shame enters into Alexandre’s decision-
making process. He feels ashamed and troubled to have expected that he would be able to
pursue whichever career path he desired, and this shame forces him to contemplate,
perhaps for the first time, a career outside of medicine.

The name Memmi has chosen for Alexandre’s sponsor also merits considerable
attention. Bismuth, a chemical element, is a heavy, brittle, crystalline, trivalent poor metal,
which has a pink tinge, and resembles arsenic and antimony. It is also the most naturally
diamagnetic of all the elements.73 It seems that this name, like many of the names in La
statue de sel, was carefully chosen and has great significance. M. Bismuth is heavy as well
as brittle. Alexandre explains that upon meeting M. Bismuth he notices that the pharmacist

72 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 101
73 www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bismuth
has difficulty keeping his hands from shaking, and he walks with a severe limp, which is perhaps a result of his neglect for his own health while in the pursuit of monetary gain (something with which Alexandre has already expressed his displeasure). He also notes M. Bismuth’s “cheveux rares, bien tirés sur une calvitie...”\textsuperscript{74} (perhaps a reference to the color of the element). However, the most important property of Bismuth, with respect to the exploration of the significance of the character, is its diamagnetism. Diamagnetism is the property of an object that causes it to create a magnetic field in opposition of an externally applied magnetic field, thus causing a repulsive effect.\textsuperscript{75} In other words, Bismuth is the most repulsive of all the elements. Did Memmi choose such an unusual name to slyly indicate to the reader that M. Bismuth is to be considered repulsive, and if so, why is he so repulsive to Memmi?

He represents, for Alexandre, the force of his limitations, as well as his state of mind. In his insistence upon earning as much money as possible, he exacerbates the shameful feelings associated with Alexandre’s poverty, and also reinforces the comments that Alexandre’s father had recently made to the same effect. Alexandre is young, and M. Bismuth is old, but M. Bismuth represents what Alexandre could, or perhaps must, become. Although much older, M. Bismuth has much in common with Alexandre, and his isolation in a small room in the back of the pharmacy conveys a sense of intense loneliness and isolation which Alexandre wishes to avoid, but that he is even now beginning to face more and more. M. Bismuth’s status as the offspring of an old rabbi is also significant. He represents exactly what Alexandre is trying to escape, the old traditions and his Jewish heritage more generally, which he sees as a force that is obstructing his progress. As he moves towards success, Alexandre moves away from his community, which, although he despises it, he clings to as the only source of companionship and membership in his life. M. Bismuth is repulsive because he is the embodiment of all his fears.

\textsuperscript{74} Memmi, Albert. \textit{La statue de sel}, p.100
\textsuperscript{75} \url{www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diamagnetism}
Part II: Le nom

At the end of part I Alexandre is on the way to becoming a man, and is beginning to establish his own unique world-view, one not dominated by his family and the larger community in which he lives. However, as he remains a boy, he has not yet fully situated himself within the larger social framework of colonized society. His forays outside of his neighborhood, and the Jewish community in Tunis have, to this point, been minimal, and the most significant of them, “la colonie” proved to be an extremely traumatic and negative experience. However, his experiences have given him insight into his possibilities, and more importantly his limitations. As Alexandre approaches and experiences adolescence, the many problems alluded to by Memmi in the first part of his novel will begin to take shape in more complex ways, presenting even more difficult decisions for Alexandre.

Memmi begins his chapter entitled “La ville” with an extensive discussion of the Alexandre’s full name: Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche. As the narrator states at the very beginning, his name is a bit odd, yet it describes him perfectly. He explains that his parents had chosen the name Alexandre because it exemplified, for them, a proper western name (perhaps evoking Alexander the Great, and the origins of western learning and power), one that held for their son the hope of success and entry into the society of the colonizer. Alexandre explains: “Il leur semblait traduire l’image qu’ils avaient de l’Europe.”76 The name Mordekhai, or colloquially “Mridakh”, paradoxically, the name of a celebrated Maccabee, as well as that of his grandfather, whom he describes as “(un) débile vieillard, qui jamais n’oublia les terreurs du ghetto”77, is of particular significance to Alexandre’s character, and his experiences. The contrast of the historical Mordekhai - a hero of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Dynasty, whose victory would lead to the establishment of an independent Jewish monarchy in the Holy Land - with a scared old man of the same name, whose life has been beaten into submission by the fear of anti-Semitic terror, brings into relief the two sides that perpetually tug at Alexandre: his strength and potential for success and the severe limitations put on that success by the colonial situation in which he lives. However, although the name Mordekhai is meant to conjure up a sense

76 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 107
77 Ibid., p. 107
of pride in its bearer, instead, as a result of its obviously Jewish origin and the ridicule this produces for Alexandre, it provokes in him a strong sense of resentment for himself and for his heritage. As he states: "Mais d'abord, on se refuse, et l'on se déteste..."78

His family name is also troublesome for Alexandre, as it brings forth confusion regarding the true origins of his family. As Alexandre explains, the name Benillouche comes from Ben-Illouche, meaning the son of the lamb in the berber-arabic dialect. Alexandre wonders: “De quelle tribu montagnarde mes ancêtres sont-ils sortis? Qui suis-je enfin?”79 Clearly, the certainty of Alexandre’s real origins is in doubt. This situation robs him of a sense of identity that those who are members of the society of the colonizer, or even those of Arab origin, possess, and places him, from the outset, in a situation that will continue to challenge him. In asking himself “Qui suis-je?”, he is attempting to determine where he fits within the larger colonial context, and it has already been determined that discovering this will be extremely difficult if not impossible.

Alexandre searches extensively for clues to the origin of his family and discovers many things, but to no avail. Just as Memmi’s family origins are unclear, according to Dugas, so are Alexandre’s origins. Eventually, despite his hope for the contrary, he is forced to resign himself to the only existence of which he can be sure. He states: “Toujours je me retrouverai Alexandre Mordekhaï, Alexandre Benillouche, indigène dans un pays de colonisation, juif dans un monde antisémite, Africain dans un monde où triomphe l’Europe.”80 With respect to this particular statement his name is paradoxical and echoes Alexandre’s situation. He is African, but he carries with him the name of the colonizer. Even his name restricts him.

After discussing his attempts to discover his ancestral origins, Alexandre digresses as he begins to discuss the only place with which he can claim a real link, the city of Tunis. However, unfortunately, this is not a link that Alexandre admires or wishes to cultivate, because, as he states in the following passage, he believes that the city, like him, has no true identity, and hence no real sense of purpose or direction.

78 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 108
79 Ibid., p. 109
80 Ibid., p. 109
Un homme voyage, s'étonne, se diversifie, devient un inconnu pour ses parents et même pour ses amis ; mais au cœur il garde un noyau dur : son appartenance certaine à quelque village anonyme. Vaincu, aveugle, par l'imagination il se réfère à cette borne ; ses mains, ses pieds en connaissent les contours, ses nerfs miraculeusement s'y accordent. Moi, je suis un bâtard de ma ville natale. O ville prostituée, au cœur fragmentaire, qui ne t'a eue pour esclave ? Quand je sus un peu d'histoire, j'en eue le vertige ; Phéniciens, Romains, Vandales, Byzantins, Berbères, Arabes, Espagnols, Turcs, Italiens, Français... 81

This passage invokes an intense sense of loneliness that cannot be ignored, and exemplifies Alexandre’s struggle to obtain a new and better identity for himself. It is here that he realizes that the only origins he has are those of a city, which although ancient, has no real identity of its own. Just as the city of Tunis has been through so many difficult trials and has been subjugated by so many different civilizations, and has been defined by them, so have his Jewish ancestors, and now him. Here, the very city in which he lives and has come of age becomes a metaphor for him and his experiences. He is ashamed of his city, and its lack of identity, and he scorns it brutally.

However, despite Alexandre’s vivid and terrible description of the city at the beginning of the chapter, it is not until later that he becomes better acquainted with the city and learns to hate it. His guide to the city of Tunis outside his neighborhood is Bissor, a strong, ruddy Jewish boy from the ghetto, and the only student at the lycée who is poorer than Alexandre. Before he gets to know the city more intimately, Alexandre expresses his usual contempt for his father’s ideas. He believes that his father’s terror and fear of pogroms is a result of his ignorance. However, upon hearing this from Alexandre, Bissor contradicts him immediately, and explains to him that he believes Alexandre’s father to be completely justified in his fears, and that his own father was killed, when his shop was raided in a pogrom. Bissor says to Alexandre very directly: “Ton père a raison, tu ne sais pas encore.” 82 From this point on, by way of Bissor, Alexandre will discover the true nature of his city.

81 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 110
82 Ibid., p. 112
Alexandre continues to describe the city. He at first focuses on the differences between all the different groups that had come to settle in Tunis by describing their respective areas of the city, marveling at the magnificent but frequently sordid diversity of his city, and he does not forget to mention, at the end of his description, those representatives of the colonial powers (of all nations) that had installed themselves in the most prestigious and prominent parts of the city. He mentions the French “rentiers” last, perhaps because they, in a sense, represent the most audacious of the aggressors in their attempt to pervert the landscape of Alexandre’s city just as they had already perverted its identity and culture. He states: “...voici les maisonnettes des rentiers français, tout couverts de tuiles rouges et jardins plantés de choux, tout comme dans la chanson.”83 Their futile attempt to change Tunis into a French town mirrors Alexandre’s valiant, yet futile attempt to assimilate to the culture of the rentiers. Here, the reader is again reminded of the impossibility of the colonial situation, this time from the viewpoint of the colonizer. No matter how hard the colonizers try to remake the colony in the image of the “mother” country, they will never succeed. As Memmi describes in Portrait du colonisé, the colonizers have already stripped the colonial territories of their own identity, however, they will not be able to impose their identity on them. The colonizers will always be strangers.

However, later in the chapter Alexandre determines that he too is a stranger in his own land. As he is discovering the city with Bissor, they go to a show at a crowded movie theater, packed with people of all backgrounds. As they wait for the show to start, the Sicilians, crass working-class immigrants, notice that Bissor and Alexandre are Jewish and throw matches at them. A fight ensues, in which Bissor badly beats one of the Sicilians. The two boys are roughly escorted out and Alexandre is painfully reminded that although he is a native Tunisian, so native in fact that his origins are difficult to trace, he faces persecution from those who have only recently come to his town. He is the bastard son of his city, born of her, but unable to claim any privilege whatsoever. Furthermore, what privilege would he seek to benefit from? As Alexandre states, the city itself is a prostitute,

83Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 111
existing only to serve others, and unable to exist apart from them. Whether to the Romans, the French, the Italians or the oil companies (which Alexandre mentions separately, alongside the various powers), his city is a servant, and hence has no pedigree to bestow.

Alexandre compares the French lycée Carnot, where he is beginning his studies, to the city itself: extremely diverse, but offering no place for him. The first alienating aspect that he mentions with respect to his experiences at lycée is language. Alexandre again finds himself in an impossible situation. His language skills, although technically strong, are marred by his “ghetto” accent: his classmates, the majority of whom come from middle and upper-class backgrounds, mock him, and he again finds himself in a state of profound alienation.

This particular passage resumes where Memmi leaves off in his more general account of the importance of language in Portrait du colonisé, in which he emphasizes the importance of language and the crucial role it plays in the self-affirmation of the colonized.84 However, when it comes to language, Alexandre, as well as Memmi, is still left out. Even if the colonized do choose to embrace their own language and to find their own identity through the use of their native language, Alexandre is not a full member of the colonized society in Tunisia. In Portrait du colonisé Memmi speaks more generally about the condition of the colonized individual, but in La statue de sel he addresses a much more specific set of circumstances: his own. Alexandre does not have the capacity to find the “trésors oubliés” that can be discovered through the use and embracing of one’s native language, because he does not really have a native language. His mother tongue, a type of Judeo-Arabic dialect native to Tunisia, differs from that of the colonizers and from that of the majority of the colonized Arabs. Furthermore, he has also abandoned his mother tongue in favor of that of the colonizer. However, as Alexandre explains: “Je ne parlais comme personne malheureusement.”85 His classmates, who were brought up in middle-class households, scolded him for his inability to properly pronounce the French nasal vowels that are so difficult for non-native speakers to produce, and tease him about his inability to pronounce his “r’s” in the Parisian fashion. He even considers making an excuse for his

84 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur. p. 149-150
85 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 120
unusual pronunciation. He thinks of perhaps telling his classmates that his family does not speak French at home, and that his mother does not even speak her own “patois” properly, but he thinks better of it. They would never understand, never sympathize with him, for they could never understand him or his condition, even if they desired to. He now finds himself even more alienated than he was at the Alliance school.

It is at lycée that Alexandre first realizes that his choice to alienate himself from his family, rather than allowing him to enter into the society of the colonizer, or even that of the middle-class colonized, has only made him more alone. As Memmi explains: “A cheval sur deux civilisations, j’allais également me trouver à cheval sur deux classes et à vouloir s’asseoir sur deux chaises, on n’est assis nulle part.”86 Alexandre, through his hard work and belief in the colonial system, has guaranteed that he will never belong to any group. He will be constantly restless. He does in fact attempt to bridge the two civilizations. In a presentation in front of the class he inadvertently reverts to the use of slang while passionately attempting to explain his point of view in the best way possible. Although his analysis proves satisfactory, he is again reminded of how his mother tongue is considered useless and insignificant, regardless of its communicative properties.

Later, Alexandre is encouraged when, after being asked by his instructor, he, the poor African, succeeds in identifying the verse in *Andromaque* that is most typical of Racine. He is spurred on by his success and his ability to identify this very special verse that the other students, who have been speaking the French language all their lives, are not able to identify. Along with being one of the most studied theatrical works in France, *Andromaque* is also a story of impossibility. The lovers who desire each other can no more be together than Alexandre can belong to the society in which he so desperately desires membership. Paradoxically this success will again lead him to despair and alienation. Although he initially cries tears of joy as a result of his success, it leads him to study even harder, at which point he finds himself capable of relating to Rousseau. However, his newfound ability only confirms his state of solitude. As he reads alone in his room, he is the only member of his family who is able to understand and relate to the French philosopher. He is

86 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 123
alone again, and his studies have again failed to fulfill his need for community. His tears of joy have turned to tears of pain and solitude.

The chapter about Alexandre’s first experiences at the lycée ends with him alone in his room at his family’s house. It is quite appropriate in that the house into which his family has moved is very much like the city in which he lives and the school he attends. His parent’s apartment at the “passage” was not originally meant to be an apartment, but was converted into a flat out of a laundry room and thus has no real “identity” as a home: it has become a home out of necessity, but was never meant to be what it is, and is severely flawed. The city of Tunis and the lycée are flawed in much the same way. They are scarred and changed as a result of the social conditions in which they were formed. His newfound knowledge is isolating him even further from everything in his life. He has also been been changed by his colonial situation. He belongs nowhere, not even at home with his family.

The narrator ended the previous chapter with a discussion of the growing divide between himself and his family, and seamlessly continues with a chapter entitled “A la maison.” It is the first of three chapters that are dominated by Alexandre’s home-life and the challenges it presents him. After school, he is forced to come home to a house full of younger children who neither understand nor appreciate his troubles, and a mother and father who cannot bring themselves to appreciate him because of the burden they carry because of his success. The Benillouche’s home, which Memmi has constructed as a microcosm of Alexandre’s life and experiences, as well as the colonial situation in its entirety, is directly addressed in this chapter. Alexandre’s struggles do not end with his exit from school each day. The situation and attitudes of his family only prolong his daily struggle, attacking him this time from the other direction. After dealing with the uncomfortable situation of being from a poor background in a mostly middle-class lycée, Alexandre wishes to come home and be a good and dutiful son, but, as he explains, this was not possible. The bitterness and resentment his family felt for him as a result of his success, and the guilt they make him feel, produce a feeling of resentment towards them. His years of study and the resulting lack of extra income put an increasing strain on his relationship with his family, as they continue to make him feel guilty for what he is doing. Able to do little about his situation, he retreats into his schoolwork, putting all of his faith in it. He is left with no choice but to fully embrace the system.
Aurais-je osé raconter de telles naïvetés si je n’avais cessé de croire que l’intelligence et le travail suffisent à assurer le bonheur ou même la valeur d’un homme ? Alors je le pensais fermement, je voulais le croire de toute mon âme. Je ne pouvais vaincre et m’affirmer, me disculper que dans ces luttes scolaires.87

Alexandre has committed his soul to the pursuit of academics and to the avenue he believes that they must offer him. At this point, he is left with little choice. Although, as is suggested by the narrator, this belief is incorrect, Alexandre and others like him do not have an option. Although he can no longer relate to his family or, in any substantial way, to his classmates at the lycée, he can relate to his work. This is why he has to believe in it. He has nothing else.

Later in the chapter the narrator recounts an instance in which Alexandre’s father comes home from work, tired and discouraged, only to later succumb to one of his asthmatic fits, which are becoming more and more frequent and violent. This is perhaps the first time that the reader is presented with the idea that Alexandre’s father is perhaps dying. He is dying, along with Alexandre’s love of his family and his sense of identity, and the chapter concludes with Alexandre running away from the house and from his father’s condition, but not without remembering to take his books with him. Here the young Alexandre makes a choice.

The following chapter, “La mort de l’oncle Joseph” begins with the story of the death of Alexandre’s uncle, the oldest on his father’s side. So the narrative moves from the specter of his father’s death to the real death of his uncle, who had been like a father to his father, but with whom their immediate family had little contact as a result of the rupture caused by the marriage of his father to his mother. Here again, Alexandre places the utmost importance on his work at school, and scoffs at the extreme importance his father and the rest of his family put upon the funeral rights of a man he barely knows. In fact, the older Alexandre, while narrating, expresses some contempt for the ceremony, perhaps still irritated with the importance accorded to it. The ceremony prevents him from studying for an important oral exam and his anxiety builds throughout the evening. It is at moments

87 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 137
like these in the narrative that one is able perhaps to perceive Albert Memmi the author, who as a young man adhered to the “progressive” principle of “laïcité”.

After the ceremony is finally over he attempts to return to school to study a bit but the study hall is closed and he is unable to do so. He returns home furious, but finds himself unable to unleash his fury on his mourning family, perhaps understanding that the importance of his examination would be entirely lost on them. He is again the victim of profound alienation. He cannot sincerely participate in the family ritual, and his family is unable to understand the importance of his own ritual: the exam. Instead of becoming angry he sits in silence, frozen by his state of alienation.

However, Alexandre, with the help of modern technology, will soon be unable to express his contempt for his family’s ignorance and adherence to tradition, and will find occasion to vent his frustrations. When the family is finally able to install electric lighting in their home, a new, and according to Alexandre, ridiculous problem is presented to the family. The religious authorities had determined that the operation of the light switch was in violation of the Sabbath, and the family begins to employ a Black Muslim neighbor to turn out the lights at the end of the evening, as the Jewish custom forbids them to work with fire on the Sabbath. Alexandre, who has already embraced laïcité, has no use for this inconvenience that is imposed upon the family by what he considers to be a useless sense of superstition. One day, seeing an occasion to prove to his parents the absurdity of the ritual, he turns the light off. However, as might be expected, he does not achieve the desired result. They do not argue with him, or give him the opportunity to make his point, but simply go to sleep, and he is left fighting against himself, as he states: “Je me battais contre n’importe qui, c’est-à-dire contre moi-même.” Curiously, Alexandre mentions at the beginning of the chapter that he “...[croyait] nécessaire de refuser la religion.” However, he uses the imperfect tense, perhaps implying that now, after a number of harrowing experiences, and as a slightly older man, he has come to appreciate at least some of the value of organized religion. Here it is possible to draw a parallel between Memmi and his narrator, for as is mentioned above, Memmi, in Portrait du colonisé, alludes to the

88 Memmi, Albert. La Statue de sel, p. 157
89 Ibid., p. 157
potential that religion holds for repairing or improving the colonial situation. This, as Memmi makes clear, is a distinct break from the French as well as the socialist systems, which, for different reasons, place an emphasis on the elimination of religion from the colonial discourse. As Memmi states in Portrait du colonisé: “A Bandoeng [the site of a conference of third world nations], à l’étonnement gêné des gens de gauche du monde entier, l’un des deux principes fondamentaux de la conférence fut la religion.”90 In his novel Memmi is using his narrator to reach out to his readership, in order to assure them that despite Alexandre’s complete rejection of religion early in life, it does have great value, particularly in that it is one of the aspects of colonial civilization that is not dominated by the colonial powers, and that belongs to the colonized people themselves.

The narrator also describes how his mother was excellent at preparing the lamps and candles for the Sabbath, but upon the arrival of the electric light, these skills, which had up to this point proved so useful, are no longer of any value. However, she continues to cling to the tradition in order to retain some of the influence she had before, and Alexandre’s affront to his mother’s insistence upon the observation of the Sabbath in this way is also an affront to his mother and her self-worth. In contrast with the beginning of the chapter, at the end, the narrator informs the reader: “quelquefois, je regrettais d’avoir ébranlé leur univers traditionnel”,91 solidifying the differences between the narrator and his younger self. Although the young Alexandre could change how he saw the world at the time, the older Alexandre acknowledges that perhaps it would have been best if he had not crushed their traditional world with the force of western ideas. Perhaps it would have been better to leave them alone, because the ideology is lost on them and hence lacks any real usefulness. One can see a parallel here with the colonial system as a whole and the failures of the “mission civilisatrice”.

However, despite Alexandre’s efforts to tear his family away from tradition, they would persistently continue to make use of their traditions and rituals. One day after studying with his friend Henry, Alexandre returns home to an exorcism his mother and aunts are performing for one of his aunts who had become hysterical because of an

90 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur. p. 149
91 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 169
unfortunate marital situation. Although, he would prefer to avoid the party at all costs he is forced to enter the apartment where it is being held in order to get the key to his family’s apartment. When he enters he is disgusted by the primitive music and by a woman, dancing frenetically in front of everyone. He is terrified to discover that the woman is in fact his mother. He later states: “Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, j’avais peur de ma mère, ma mère me devenait opaque.” At this moment, Alexandre ceases to be disgusted and ashamed of the spectacle before him, and instead becomes horrified at his own alienation. He does not even recognize his own mother. He is so far removed from the reality of his family and his community, that he is losing the ability to relate, even to those people and things that are closest to him. Memmi discusses this disgust with the native music:

On a déclaré au colonisé que sa musique, c’est des miaulements de chat ; sa peinture du sirop de sucre. Il répète que sa musique est vulgaire et sa peinture écoinçante. Et si cette musique le remue tout de même, l’émeut plus que les subtils exercices occidentaux, qu’il trouve froids et compliqués, si cette unison de couleurs chantantes et légèrement ivres lui rejouissent l’œil, c’est malgré sa volonté. 

Afterwards he returns to Henry’s house, where Henry is playing western music on his violin, which again prompts feelings of alienation in Alexandre, as he can no more relate to the delicate and cold music of Europe than he can to his mother and family. The chronology of these events is important as well. The study session Alexandre takes part in with Henry before he leaves to go back home is representative of all the effort he has put forth up to this point. He is also studying Latin, the basis for so many European languages, and which represents the height of European dominance in that it was the language of the Roman Empire. However, no matter how much he studies, he only alienates himself further. He can no more become a member of the culture of the colonizers anymore than he can use Latin outside of the classroom. He is studying a dead language that will be of no use to him. Then, after being deeply moved, however negatively, by the music at his home, he comes to Henry’s and is again reminded of his disconnect with the West by his cold

\[92\text{ Memmi, Albert. } \textit{La statue de sel, p. 180}\]
\[93\text{ Memmi, Albert. } \textit{Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur. p. 139}\]
reaction to the music of the violin. Finally, he states, at the end of the chapter: “Ah! Je suis irrémédiablement un barbare!” He is an outsider just as the barbarians were to the Romans, perhaps able to understand the culture of the colonizer, but never able to partake in it as a true member. The discouraging tone of this analogy is justified, for even as victors over the Romans, the barbarians were never capable of maintaining the great civilization that they had overcome. They were only able to destroy it.

However, similar to the lack of passion instilled in him by western music, Alexandre is no more impressed by the rituals of his bourgeois classmates than he is by those of his family. To him, they seem equally foolish, just in a different way. While his family, according to Alexandre, wastes its time with silly mystical religious ceremonies and superstitious beliefs, he believes that the culture his classmates belong to is filled with pointless games and gatherings, serving only to occupy the extra time that people of their economic stature benefit from.

The narrator then describes how Alexandre, over a long period, beginning at the Kouttab (a small Jewish school for young children), before he entered the Alliance school, has come to be presented with the “prix d’honneur de philosophie”, the award given to the best student in the country, which will permit him to continue his studies at university. Although the reader is already aware of Alexandre’s decision to study philosophy rather than medicine, at the close of Part II, Alexandre endeavors to explain how it is that he has come to this decision. Here the reader becomes better acquainted with Poinsot and Marrou, the two instructors at the lycée who have the most influence on Alexandre and his decision to study philosophy: Poinsot, an amiable and infinitely fair Frenchman who teaches philosophy and who comes close to personifying the colonial myth of equality and opportunity, and Marrou, an elegant and feared literature instructor of Berber origins. Both of these characters represent real people in Memmi’s life, and they give Alexandre hope, something that, up until this point, no one has been able to give him. Marrou represents, for Alexandre, the ability of a colonized person to succeed in colonial society. He is a native Tunisian, but has mastered the French language and commands respect even

94 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 184
95 Dugas, Guy, *Albert Memmi: écrivain de la déchirure*, p. 13
from the French students at the lycée. Alexandre emphasizes his strict enforcement of the rules of form that are so important to the French intellectual. His is, in fact, even more insistent on the use of proper form than the French instructors, and although he describes his difficulty with Marrou’s firmness and attention to detail, the narrator seems to understand that these difficulties were a result of the reality of the colonial situation. The colonized always have to do everything better than the colonizers if they wish to succeed in a world in which they do not represent the dominant culture. However, his success, particularly in language, brings upon him the wrath of his colleagues: “C’était, pour ses collègues, un impardonnable scandale spirituel de voir ce métèque mieux manier le français que les ayants droit.”

Alexandre feels he understands Marrou, and tries very hard to connect with him. However, Marrou himself, despite his success both as an instructor and a poet, is deeply alone. The other, more odious, instructors look down on him for the air of superiority they consider him to exude, and the majority of his pupils consider him to be aloof and inconsiderate. Moreover, it is rumored that his wife, who is French, has left him, and nearly all the members of the community chide him behind his back for having the audacity to attempt such an experiment. However, Alexandre explains with respect to Marrou: “Je ne compris que plus tard, trop tard, qu’il n’était jamais sorti de ses problèmes, que sans doute je me briserais aux miens.”

This particular quotation is strangely ambiguous. Is the narrator suggesting that he has already been broken by his problems, or that he believes that if he continues on his current path that they will probably break him? The use of the phrase “sans doute” makes this determination impossible, as it implies a certain ambiguity. However, despite Alexandre’s observations about Marrou’s future problems, for the moment Marrou gives Alexandre the hope that, as a colonized person, he can succeed. Differently, Poinsot gives him hope in the colonizer himself. Poinsot, an idealist, embraces the republican ideology of equality, and possesses a vast knowledge and appreciation of the cultures of the colonized (which Memmi discusses earlier in the volume). He instills in Alexandre a belief in the colonial system that, for the moment, drives him to succeed, but unfortunately, will devastatingly betray him, as is

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96 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 241
97 Ibid., p. 242
foreshadowed in Poinso’s awkward meeting with Alexandre’s mother, in which he states: “Les deux parties de mon être parlaient chacune une langue différente et jamais se comprendraient.”98 No matter how perfect and just the colonizer, or how willing the colonized is to assimilate, they will never be compatible. Despite knowing this, Alexandre explains that, perhaps naively, he chooses to assimilate, and takes Poinso as his model.

**Part III: Le monde**

As Alexandre moves on with his life, and prepares for his studies at university, his world expands again. This time he moves outside of his city and begins to understand more completely the world as a whole, and the interactions that take place within it. To begin the third part of his novel, Memmi makes a very large step, which is perhaps suggestive of the step that Alexandre is about to make. He has already begun this large step by breaking with his father in the previous chapter. In doing so he has cut himself off from the past and can no longer go back. He has essentially barred the way and has forced himself to trudge forward into the world.

To begin his discussion of his entry into the world, he chooses to recount his visit to a prostitute, the woman’s body being something as foreign, strange, frightening and exciting to him as the world itself. His first encounter with a prostitute is particularly telling. He has difficulty overcoming the shame of procuring a condom and is helpless on his own. When he finally solicits the help of Bissor and pays a visit to an accommodating, but woefully dispassionate, prostitute, he is confused and disappointed. His entry into the world of sexual experience is largely anticlimactic, perhaps indicating his future disappointment as he steadily discovers that the world that he believed held so much promise for him was merely an illusion. Once the mystery is unmasked only disappointment remains. Bissor is the perfect companion to introduce him to this particular reality, as he is the one who introduced him to the harsh reality of Tunis, and shattered his illusions about his city.

Soon after, Bissor would himself fall victim to the city, and to the world. He is killed in a pogrom inflicted upon the ghetto by Arab soldiers who were preparing to go to war,

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98 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 247

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and hence, in accordance with tradition and with the acceptance of the French authorities, were permitted to act with impunity. Bissor’s death makes painfully clear the grim reality Alexandre is to face. Memmi has Bissor die in order to make Alexandre aware that even the strongest are vulnerable, and that nothing is safe or certain. In the end, Bissor and Alexandre’s father are right. The world is not what he thought it was, or wanted it to be. However, despite the tragedy of this event, it is narrated quite calmly, almost as if one should have been expecting it. As the threat of violent anti-Semitism grows, Alexandre becomes more and more aware of its existence. He explains: “L’antisémitisme était une caractéristique des autres : ils étaient antisémites comme ils avaient une manière de parler ou de s’habiller.”  

He goes on to explain that he did not feel that he himself or his actions were responsible for the provocation of anti-Semitic sentiment. However, as he matures he begins to understand that his status as a Jew provokes anti-Semitism around him, even though he has done nothing. He is thus imprisoned in his Jewishness just as he is imprisoned by his colonial status. In school he is constantly reminded by the many instructors who were not nearly as enlightened as Poinso, that there exists within the European consciousness a strong reactionary force and that he, as a Jew, cannot belong to it. He is now not only prevented from taking membership in the society of the colonizers, but is also forbidden from sharing their views. In a fairly strong rebuke of the faith he had previously placed in the French system and in the ideal represented by his instructor Poinso, he states:

Les philosophes européens construisent les systèmes moraux les plus rigoureux et vertueux et les hommes politiques, élèves de ces mêmes professeurs, fomentent des assassinats comme moyen du gouvernement. Au prix de quelles luttes j’avais choisi l’Occident et refusé l’Orient en moi !

It is perhaps not a coincidence that just as Alexandre is realizing the futility of his faith in the west, the Second World War, which would again remind the world of the vulnerability of the belief system of the world’s most revered nations, is about to begin. Upon receiving

99 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel,* p. 275
100 Ibid., p. 290
the news of the anti-Semitic laws imposed by the fascist government in Vichy, Alexandre is not so much frightened, as severely disappointed: “C’était la douloureuse, l’étonnante trahison, peut-être entrevue mais si brutalement confirmée, d’une civilisation en qui j’avais placé tous mes espoirs, à laquelle j’accordais toute mon ardente admiration.” Upon realizing that he has been abandoned by the French and by those colonizers in whom he had placed his faith, he presents his letter of resignation to the administration at the lycée before they have the opportunity to expel him. However, he still holds out hope for France, and he goes to visit his old instructor Poinsot, who had so ideally preached to him the righteousness of French ideals and philosophy. Despite Alexandre’s hopes, even Poinsot refuses to help him. The bitterness of this betrayal is reiterated as he states after determining that the Résidence générale would not help the Jewish population of Tunis: “On ne peut croire facilement à la trahison des mythes.”

As Alexandre continues to painfully realize the impossibility of his beliefs and the futility of his aspirations, he begins to move towards some of the alternative possibilities that Memmi describes in Portrait du colonisé. Frustrated by the attempts of his community (the Jewish community in Tunis) to protect the intellectual elite of the community at the cost of the poorer Jews of the city, Alexandre decides, partly as a result of his feelings of guilt and partly out of a heartfelt sense of responsibility to aid those who are not as fortunate as he is, to abandon his pointless job as a member of the community’s bloated bureaucratic system (that was put in place to shelter the educated and affluent members of the community from the camps) and to join those less fortunate than himself in the camps. Alexandre, frustrated and enlightened by the failure of his attempts to appeal to the French authorities in which he had placed so much faith, turns back to the community he had so frequently and vehemently rejected. Instead of embracing the ways of the colonizer, he attempts to affirm his own existence as a colonized person apart from the system of the colonizer.

The very name of the chapter “le camp” is reminiscent of his experience at the “colenie de vacances”, and as he travels to the camp his description of the voyage is eerily

101 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 293
102 Ibid., p. 297

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similar: “Toute la longue journée de voyage, le vieux camion, au ressorts épuisés, nous avait transmis les moindres creux et bosses de la route.”

The colonial existence represented earlier by the “colonie de vacances” is again represented by a camp situation, although this time the situation is far more sinister. Alexandre experienced anti-Semitism for the first time at the colonie. The colonial situation and the narrative have now progressed. The French colony of Tunisia (because of its alignment with the government in Vichy) and the camp itself are now anti-Semitic by design. However, although a member of the Jewish community, Alexandre is again an outsider. His embrace of the colonial myth has alienated him from the other prisoners. As a boy he was an outsider because he was Jewish, but he is now an outsider because he is not Jewish enough.

Alexandre’s voyage to the camps is in part a result of his realization of the futility of his previous endeavors. However, upon arrival, he realizes immediately that his newfound search for affirmation and his willingness to reconnect and come to the aid of his own people is equally futile: “C’est au camp, dans cette vie quotidienne avec eux, que j’ai réalisé l’étendue de mon éloignement, combien le lycée et mes études m’avaient rendu impossible une vie commune avec mon peuple.”

He is ashamed of his naiveté and becomes discouraged. However, because he has no means of exit from the camp, he decides to do what he can. Just as when he was young at the “colonie”, he is forced to stay in a place to which he has chosen to go, but quickly realizes that it is not what he thinks it is. However, looking back, Alexandre the narrator exhibits some optimism with respect to the younger Alexandre’s naïve enthusiasm, perhaps expressing that, although misguided, the intent behind Alexandre’s actions has merit. He states: “Aujourd’hui, le ressort s’est brisé...”

The breaking of the spring inside oneself is an undoubtedly negative statement, but if it does indicate the acquisition of newfound knowledge or wisdom. Perhaps the slightly older Alexandre, or even Memmi himself is, in this instance, regretting a loss of enthusiasm and his acquisition of such a cynical world-view at such a young age. Had he been able to prevent this loss, his life may have been more joyful, and he may have accomplished more.

\textsuperscript{103} Memmi, Albert. \textit{La statue de sel}, p. 307
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 309
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p. 311
However, despite this debilitating realization, Alexandre determines to do his best to help the men, but he is again faced with an impediment when he finds himself unable to even stay with the workers because of the unbearable animal stench in their tents. However, he finds refuge with some members of a scout troop with whom he was previously acquainted, although he again feels shame because of his inability to remain steadfast and stay with the “workers”. He achieves some success, and is able to establish a reasonably strong rapport with the workers, but remains an outsider as a result of his status as an intellectual. However, it is precisely this status that leads some of the prisoners to request that he organize a Sabbath service. He agrees whole-heartedly, despite his secular beliefs, but is forced to use an assistant to say the prayers for him.

Perhaps he recognizes, as Memmi does in Portrait du colonisé, that religion can be used as a means of temporal, as well as spiritual, communication and unification. Although his intentions are good, many are still skeptical of him, particularly those who have a strong faith. Alexandre, as a boy, was alienated as a result of what the other boys believed to be the inappropriateness of his actions when he refused to kneel to the Catholic God while in the church. Now he is again looked upon with suspicion, this time as a result of his efforts to gain membership in the culture of those who had ridiculed him before. Furthermore, he is not able to communicate with his fellow Jews in their native language. As he states: “Je pense en français et mes soliloques intérieurs sont depuis longtemps de langue française.”

The problem he experienced with language early in life has now been reversed, and he is now discovering that he can no more connect with the other prisoners than he could with the middle-class boys who shunned him because of his strange pronunciation. He finds himself regretting his inability to speak his “native” language, the one that he had been taught to consider irrelevant and useless.

Diligent as always, Alexandre continues on, attempting to simplify his French. He even achieves some success during the ceremony when he appeals to the prisoners’ nationalistic rather than religious sympathies (as he is not religious and lacks credibility in that realm). When he prompts them to sing the Hattikvah, the national Jewish hymn, he

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106 Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 148
107 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 314
receives an overwhelming response. However, his enthusiastic efforts in search of approval backfire, and the guards shut down the Sabbath service. Although the Sabbath services fail, Alexandre believes that his appeal to the dignity of the prisoners produces a positive result. Alexandre’s technique is consistent with Memmi’s “affirmation de soi”, in which he suggests that in order to succeed and carve out a place for themselves, the colonized must find dignity within and not only in the emulation of others.\(^\text{108}\) Is it perhaps possible that Memmi, who according to Dugas did spend time in the work camps in eastern Tunisia, first came to realize the efficacy of this particular approach while there?\(^\text{109}\) However, his successful appeals to their dignity aside, the prisoners never take Alexandre as one of their own. Following an argument regarding how best to treat an ailing prisoner (Alexandre believes he has appendicitis and recommends treating it with ice, but the uneducated prisoners insist upon using heat, which could be lethal) the prisoners, as a result of the traumatic situation, disregard Alexandre, and he states: “Il me paraissait clair qu’ils me respectaient ou se méfiaient de moi, mais ne m’adoptaient pas.”\(^\text{110}\) Having moved away from his own family and having been turned down by the western “family” to which he had so long aspired to belong, Alexandre has made an appeal to another group, only to be rejected by them as well. They have refused to adopt him, and he is still without a family. Similar to other survivors of work camps, Alexandre makes note that these events are but a few occurrences that took place during his time in the camps, and that in its entirety, his experience there is “...un bloc homogène qui reste étranger dans ma vie.”\(^\text{111}\) Is this period in Alexandre’s life strange or foreign as a result of the trauma he endured, or as a result of his status as foreign among his own people?

The prisoners, after a harrowing ordeal during which they navigate the front lines, escape successfully, and make it back to Tunis in an old truck. Upon entering Tunis Alexandre remarks the Roman aqueduct on the outskirts of the city, and as they enter he wonders: “Comment était-elle après une si longue séparation?”\(^\text{112}\) Alexandre, although he

\(^{108}\) Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur. p. 147-150
\(^{109}\) Dugas, Guy. Albert Memmi: écrivain de la déchirure, p. 13
\(^{110}\) Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 318
\(^{111}\) Ibid., p. 320
\(^{112}\) Ibid., p. 337
now realizes that his dream of assimilation is only a dream, and nothing more, is still moved by the ancient symbol of western power and influence, and is perhaps nostalgic for the time, not too long before, when he was able to believe in the west. As they enter they are reassured that everything is normal by a woman who comes out with a bucket of milk. This woman, with her milk strongly suggesting maternity, perhaps signifies the city itself. One of the men remarks “Oh! Une femme!”¹¹³, and they are all pleased to see her. Alexandre, thwarted in his attempts to gain membership in the two societies he straddles, previously derided his home city in a vicious manner, but now, more than ever, she is all he has.

Upon his return Alexandre begins to run a fever. That and his precarious position as a Jew in a country still occupied by the Nazis again force him into solitude, just as when he was a boy at the camp, and he is forced to wait out the war in the city, which by now, battered by the increasingly frequent bombing raids, very much resembles the old Arab fort of the “colonie de vacances”. Alexandre makes clear that the very worst part of his sickness is not the illness itself, but the introspection it provokes: “Le pire de la maladie, je le découvris, est cette concentration de soi sur soi, cette tyrannie de soi-même.”¹¹⁴ Despite the horrible conditions and the pain of the camp, it is more painful for Alexandre to gaze into the empty space inside him. Perhaps in an attempt to escape from this “tyrannie de soi-même”, he attempts again to believe in France and the west: “On ne peut croire facilement à la trahison des mythes.”¹¹⁵ He again tries to find the good in the French system, for as he states: “Il m’aurait été insupportable de l’accepter [c’est à dire, d’accepter cette trahison].”¹¹⁶ However, his obstinacy in the face of reason only forces him to realize again what he had determined before, that there is no place for him within the French system.

It is at this point that we are brought back to Alexandre’s full name, and the importance it holds for his identity and place in the world. Much to Alexandre’s friend Henry’s dismay, embracing his rediscovered faith in the French, he decides to enlist in the

¹¹³ Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 339
¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 344
¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 297
¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 345
army. When he presents himself to the recruiter, who is thrilled to find an eager recruit, he encounters a problem when the recruiter discovers that he is Jewish. He asks Alexandre to enlist under a different name in order to avoid any problems with anti-Semitism. When, upon witnessing the recruiter’s concern regarding his status as a Jew, Alexandre begins to appear less enthusiastic, the recruiter attempts to win him back, and in doing so mentions that he is glad that Alexandre is a student, and that he was previously a student of pharmacy. The recruiter’s mention of pharmacy invokes M. Bismuth and the problematic model that he constituted, and reminds Alexandre of the destiny that awaits him should he again put his faith in the French. Alexandre prepares to walk away, displeased and discouraged, not failing to remark that the name he had written (Alexandre Benillouche) did not necessarily indicate that he was a Jew, for he had forgotten to write his middle name, Mordekhai. However, this time, rather than avoiding his middle name, which had so often been a troublesome mark of difference that he sought to eliminate, he steps back to the desk and inscribes “Mordekhai” in between “Alexandre” and “Benillouche”. For better or for worse, he affirms his identity as a Jew and as an outsider. He walks away and does not come back. He states: “Je ne pouvais être que victime de cette guerre ; on ne me reconnaîtrait jamais parmi les vainqueurs.” Alexandre, along with Henry, ponders the next step, and Henry comes up with a plan that would allow for their participation in the war, as well as for their eventual arrival in Argentina, which they had been fantasizing about for some time. However, in the meantime Alexandre has become preoccupied with his upcoming reentry examination in Algiers.

The reader is then, in the anachronistic style discussed above, taken back to the examination room, and to Alexandre the narrator as he sits and pretends to take his exam on John Stuart Mill and Condillac. He then explains how he has come to sit for this particular exam. The discriminatory law of the Vichy government having been lifted, he has decided, despite his realization of the impossibility of this particular path he is following, to continue his studies as a “refuge personnel contre d’insolubles problèmes.” However, he has been rejected yet again. He explains how he is being forced to repeat this

117 Memmi, Albert. *La statue de sel*, p. 352  
118 Ibid., p. 357
exam because he chose to resign his post rather than wait around to be shamefully expelled by an anti-Semitic fascist government, and he reminisces on the decision he is making. The administration has changed but the situation is the same. He is no longer in danger of being exterminated, but he is nonetheless no closer to the realization of the colonial myth. He has already chosen not to take the exam, determining that the differences within him are irreconcilable with the civil servant’s position he would have if he continues. How could he preach to young students what he now knows to be a false and hypocritical philosophy? It is here that we are brought back to the beginning of the novel and discover what Alexandre does next. He exits the examination room and takes advantage of his free time to explore the city. He goes to the souks of Algiers and notices the decrepit architecture and squalid conditions. He cannot be a part of this world either. His alienation is again confirmed.

On his trip back he reflects in a style that evokes Alexandre’s “journaux intimes” (which Memmi also wrote as a young man).119 He reflects forcefully on his situation.

“Ainsi, j’ai passé de crise en crise, retrouvant chaque fois un nouvel équilibre, plus précaire, mais toujours il me restait quelque chose à détruire. Cette fois le bilan est fait : rien, enfin, ne me cache à mes yeux.”120 Unlike when he was a child, it is now impossible for Alexandre to hide the truth from himself. He cannot cover his eyes to escape it. For the first time death does not scare him.

Je suis étonné de ne pas avoir peur; mais l’habitude dispense du courage et, en vérité, j’ai longtemps épié ma découverte : je meurs pour m’être retourné sur moi-même. Il est interdit de se voir et j’ai fini de me connaître. Comme la femme de Loth, que Dieu changea en statue, puis-je encore vivre au-delà de mon regard?121

At this particular moment one gets the strong impression that this is a sort of “journal intime”; and that it is Memmi who is pouring his thoughts out onto the page, just as Alexandre did in the examination room. As he exits the train and returns home to the “passage” he encounters his mother, who is wearing make-up and her best dress. The city

119 Dugas, Guy. Albert Memmi: du malheur d’être juif au bonheur séfarade, p. 34
120 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 368
121 Ibid., p. 368
is full of allied soldiers, and the neighborhood is seeking to profit from their presence. His mother, not wanting to miss out on the opportunity to make money, is boarding and feeding the soldiers. Alexandre is asked to sleep at his uncle’s apartment. Upon his return he is not even permitted to reside in his own home. His mother, like the city, like a prostitute, is rejecting her family and surrendering her dignity, which had been so important to Alexandre in the camp, to serve others. Alexandre is hence rejected from his own home. His alienation is complete.

It is here that he makes up his mind to take the voyage to Argentina with Henry. Henry is of course pleased, and they make plans to leave. However, before leaving, Alexandre decides, not without hesitation, to attempt to pay a visit to Poinsot. When he arrives he finds that Poinsot, suffering from a nervous depression, has left for metropolitan France. Thus even the last glimmer of hope for an egalitarian colonial system in which Alexandre might be able to assimilate has disappeared, as so often happens to the best and brightest in the colonies. As he sails away to Argentina with Henry, Alexandre chooses revolt. He is leaving the colony, and his home. His options exhausted, he has determined that, for him, there is no opportunity for self-affirmation in Tunisia. To solidify this break he burns his journals and leaves his books behind, to start a new endeavor, away from the philosophy that has betrayed him. As he leaves he states: “Et je n'emportais que mon sac au dos, comme j'ai rejoint les camps.”122 Indeed, his new adventure is as unsure as his voyage to the camp, but it is a voyage he must take. Throughout the novel the reader is consistently introduced to places where Alexandre is going or about which he is learning: the city, the world, etc. However, he is now leaving a place: he is leaving his city and the only world he knows - a world that has betrayed him. His future is uncertain, but that is far better than the certainty of repression and misery.

122 Memmi, Albert. La statue de sel, p. 376-377
Conclusion

Alexandre’s adventurous abandonment of his homeland at the conclusion of La statue de sel serves as a reminder of Albert Memmi’s ambitious project. He did not totally abandon the French system. Rather than fleeing, in dramatic fashion, from the constraints of his particular situation, he ventured into their very source. After the war, in 1946, he traveled to France to study at the Sorbonne. It was there that he began to write La statue de sel, the conclusion of which could be read as an expression of regret that the author did not free himself totally from the chains of his predicament. The disparity between Alexandre’s choice, at the end of the novel, and Memmi’s decision to remain within the system clearly illustrates the importance of the fictional narrative. Alexandre’s story is free of the encumbrances of truth. In writing it Memmi was free to articulate his particular point of view without being required to substantiate it. Dugas describes La statue de sel as Memmi’s attempt to write “le bilan de sa vie”123 Memmi states:

J’ai essayé de raconter à la fois l’histoire du jeune homme que j’étais et en même temps celle d’un certain nombre de gens de ma génération qui se posaient les mêmes problèmes mais qui ne savaient pas plus que moi les résoudre. Le jeune garçon est un nord-africain né à Tunis, qui découvre tous ses déchirements et toutes ses difficultés ; il se déchire d’être à la fois Français et Maghrébin, de culture et de langue arabo-tunisienne.124

Memmi has indeed written “le bilan de sa vie”, but it is not only his story – it is also the story of the colonized intellectual in general. Although Alexandre’s experiences are similar to his own, they are not only his, but those of many. His use of so many of his real-life experiences lends credibility to his ideas, and his use of fiction allows him to communicate the problems of colonial life, and more importantly, to propose solutions. Memmi is not bound by his own decisions or mistakes. He has been able to survive and become successful, but the novel is not about him alone, it is about the plight of colonized intellectuals, and the glaring impossibilities of the situation they face.

Memmi finished La statue de sel while working in Tunis as the director of the Centre de Psycho-pédagogie de Tunis. It is extremely telling that his return to Tunis coincided

123 Dugas, Guy. Albert Memmi: du malheur d’être juif au bonheur sépharade, p. 38
124 Ibid., p. 38
with the completion of his first novel, whose conclusion recounts a dramatic break with Tunisia and the colonial world in general. Was it during his time back home, after years abroad, that he realized completely the impossibility of the integration of the colonized intellectual? The decision to make a clean break with the colonial system (represented by Alexandre’s voyage to Argentina) is further justified by Memmi’s “defense” of his work at lycée Carnot (the lycée he attended). Dugas describes the event:

Dès sa publication, l’auteur reçoit des menaces, des lettres anonymes, d’amères protestations de ses coreligionnaires. En mars 1953, il présente son roman dans une salle des fêtes du lycée Carnot pleine à craquer, et devant son père presque aveugle. Face à un public déchaîné, il doit se défendre, justifier ses choix, récuser les clefs que ses proches croient trouver au roman, affronter leurs attaques et même leurs insultes.  

Memmi has come home and finished his book. However, although it was highly praised by some, others regarded it as an affront to their ideas and their way of life. Memmi had attempted to reconnect with his homeland, and was rebuked, just as Alexandre is rebuked throughout the course of the novel. Neither La statue de sel, nor Memmi, are what his readership thinks they are.

What those who read his work fail to understand is that Memmi does not offer solutions, only observations and possibilities. La statue de sel does not pass judgment on the past or offer remedies to the social problems described in its pages: its ending is as ambiguous as Memmi’s conception of the “affirmation de soi”. We do not know what will happen to Alexandre, nor does Memmi know what will happen in his own life. His story, as well as the story of the “gens de [sa] génération,” is ongoing. We cannot know what the solution is because we have not yet arrived at the end of the journey. As Memmi states at the end of Portrait du colonisé, “il faut attendre...”  

\(^{125}\) Dugas, Guy. Albert Memmi: du malheur d’être juif au bonheur sépharade, p. 40

\(^{126}\) Memmi, Albert. Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur, p. 155
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