

## **Aziza Othmana, full-time social entrepreneur, part-time Tunisian princess**

*What kind of investment would have a ROI made of health, education, spirituality, and selflessness? The woman who has the answer died four centuries ago, but historians have not made her vocal enough.*

### **Historical context:**

*The Ottoman rule in Tunisia extended from 1574 to 1881, then it turned into a nominal rule under French protection until shortly after independence, which took place in, July 25, 1957, the date of the declaration of the Republic. The Ottoman rule began with a short period of pashas that ended with the Battle of the Pashas in 1591. Then Days took over the reins, but they did not maintain their position in power for a long time. Murad Bey was able to seize power, by his dynasty in the year 1631. The rule of the Muradis continued until 1705, when Hussein bin Ali came, and seized rule the same way. The Muradi dynasty ruled until the arrival of the French occupation. History books mention, a large number of rulers, princes, and important figures who played different, political and influential, roles during this period.*

Apart from Princess Aziza Othmana, Tunisia modern history archives left little or no space for women as central character. Debates among historians could be tense on several matters, however they seem to agree on the Princess's positive role, not only during her life, but also after her passing. Even though Tunisian history is written by men for men about men, it has been extremely difficult not to write about Aziza Othmana. Indeed, her name is present in over 450 documents in the Tunisian National Archives.

The abundance of archival material, about Aziza Othmana, is mainly related to her countless endowments, especially her large farming lands, estimated of about 90 thousand hectares, across the whole country. This amounts to 2045 times the area of the Vatican, the smallest nation in today's world. Almost all her land was dedicated to social, urban, and healthcare activities. She also owned bakeries, hammams and storage spaces within the Medina of Tunis, which were managed as what is called a social enterprise today, where profits were used for public lighting, mosques maintenance, madrassas instructors fees, marriage costs for poor young ladies... Anything that could improve people's lives.

### **Who is the person behind the benefactor?**

The important volume of archival material, and underestimated kindness, are strangely not reflected in the amount of published material about Aziza Othmana. Most of what was published about Aziza Othmana, is focused on her endowments, as if being a wealthy princess was the only thing that mattered. In fact, historians focused so much about what she owned, and not who she was, and today nobody is totally sure about her private life. According to historian Leila Blili, Aziza Othmana is the granddaughter of Othman Dey, but all publications have not said much about her private life.

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When studying references, that speak of Aziza Othmana, the most important is “Famous Tunisian Women” by Hassan Hosni Abdel Wahhab, an early 20th century nationalist historian, which is considered one of the most important works, that share information about Aziza Othmana. This book mentions that she was born in the mid-11th century AH/17th century AD, died in 1080 AH/1669 AD. Aziza is buried next to Madrassa Chammaia, in the Medina of Tunis, and her husband was Hamouda Pasha Al-Muradi. As for Al-Sadiq Al-Zimrali, he says in his book “Tunisian Notables” that she married Murad Bey.

Still, most sources agree that Aziza Othmana was educated, pious, and courageous. She went to Hajj, on a long journey, a difficult journey even for strong men at that time. She crossed the sea during peak piracy times, then completed the journey by land, crossing unsafe areas, until she reached Mecca.

#### **Where has Aziza Othmana invested her assets?**

*Aziza Othmana had endowments that concerned wide ranges of support to all segments of society, from marriage preparations, for girls from poor families, to circumcising children, to building and maintaining a hospital, to providing public lighting and maintenance and service of mosques and shrines. She was also innovative in creating a new method for psychological illnesses treatment, through music. A hospital dedicated to healing with music was called ‘the Hospital of Musicians’. This hospital is still active today and is called Aziza Othmana Hospital. In her will, she donated everything she owns to charity after her death and requested that fresh flowers be put on her grave daily.*

#### **Historical opportunity to reconcile with history?**

Contemporary historians agree that their predecessors neglected — if not denied — the importance of what Aziza Othmana accomplished in her life and after her death. The reason behind this is probably because she is a woman. For example, historians like Ahmed Ibn Abi Al-Diyaf lived in a patriarchal society in which a woman cannot immortalize her name.

Beyond gender-related hypotheses, neglect could be related to the essence of doings. Despite their great influence on society, charitable initiatives do not play a clear political role, making historians exclude mentioning charitable doers from the list of politically influential names. During her time, Aziza Othmana was not in the top ten “people of dignity” list or influence. Influence can be gained through politics or religion, and we find more writings about the female saint Manoubiyya, which was known as a person for her “blessings”, due to following a specific discipline, and this was not part of Aziza Othmana’s life.

The true value of Aziza Othmana’s achievements is mountainous, when looking at the archival documents related to her endowments, and the variety of social impact solutions that she designed. She seems to have lived a life full of social innovations, without attracting attention, or expecting anything in return. Aziza Othmana just did well for the sake of it, which seems to have little influence or value from a historiographical viewpoint.

Aziza gave so much to Tunisia, during her life, and after her death. Today, her name is linked in the public mind, to the name of her hospital, and her shrine was sold by the government, during needy post-independence days.

Her deeds continued, even after her death, because many of her social innovations were based on sustainable investments or strategic philanthropic solutions. This makes her a pioneer in social entrepreneurship. Her lack of power, or influence hunger, made her of little or no interest to historians. Nevertheless, she offers social innovation researchers, endless business models, in social investments, which offers solutions, for social harmony, urban resilience and gender balance. Maybe it is time, to explore her legacy from another angle.

Sorry Aziza Othmana, you might have come ahead of your time!