

## In Memoriam

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### Prof. Tahar Labassi

(10 October 1956 - 26 January 2020)



Photo taken by Sahbi Hidri  
(Department of English, Faculty of Human &  
Social Sciences of Tunis, Tunisia, 2013)

Tahar Labassi was born in 1956, Tunisia's independence year, in the Southern-Eastern city of Jerba, an island where Tunisians of more than one faith and denomination have found sanctuary. In 1976, at the age of 20, he moved to Tunis and enrolled at the University of Tunis, the only university in the country in those days, to study for a Maitrise es-Lettres Anglaises that included four years of studies and a year of teaching French in an English speaking country. Tahar chose Bradford, cradle and stronghold of the Labour Party and Britain's most multi-ethnic and multi-religious city.

The years between 1976 and 1984 were among the most turbulent years in the history of the country and the university. Tahar witnessed Tunisia's first General Strike on January 26, 1978 and the assault on the city of Gafsa on January 26, 1980. Forty years later, he passed away on January 26, 2020; one day before his former MA supervisee, Lina Ben Mhenni, “the woman who blogged Tunisia's revolution”, according to the BBC<sup>1</sup>. Destiny has its ways!

Tahar started his career as an ESP teacher in the Chemistry Department at the Faculty of Science, University of Tunis. He then moved to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in 2002 after having obtained an MA in 1996 and a Doctorate in 2002 from the University of Manouba. While preparing his MA dissertation and Doctoral thesis, he obtained scholarships from the British Council and the Morley Scholarship Award Program. He received guidance from Pauline Robinson and Ron White at the University of Reading and John Swales at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

In 2010, Tahar obtained Habilitation, the highest academic qualification the Tunisian education system awards. It allows senior academics to supervise and examine Doctoral students' research work, evaluate candidates' files for recruitment and promotion, and contribute to the community at large.

Before and after Habilitation, Tahar was a very active scholar, administrator, and politician. He was Head of Department, Vice-dean, Dean, President of the National Committee for English Studies, and President of Recruiting Committees. As

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<sup>1</sup> . <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51310557>

Chief of the Cabinet of the Minister of Higher Education in Tunisia's 2011 transitional government, he played an instrumental role in removing the Ministry of the Interior's security forces from the university campuses. The young student in him, who had suffered from their atrocities in the late 70s and early 80s, peacefully avenged himself and generations of peers. The older scholar spoke about this achievement with great pride. He hopes future generations will remember him for that daring act.

Professor Labassi taught different courses in linguistics at the BA and MA levels. He supervised MA and Doctoral theses, participated in seminars and conferences in all Tunisian Universities and in many countries; Morocco, Kuwait, China, Belgium, Italy, the US and others. He was on the Editorial Boards of several academic journals, and he was a reviewer for *Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics*. He attended the Habilitation and Doctoral Committee meetings at the Faculty of Letters, Arts, and Humanities, University of Manouba. He evaluated doctoral students' research projects, wrote reports on theses, and took part in vivas. This is what all scholars do, but Tahar was different; he did it with love.

Tahar's integrity is unparalleled. He defended the profession against any symptoms of nepotism or cronyism. He did it in official meetings and in conversations in a disarming friendly voice and smiling face. His colleagues remember how they discovered that he had chosen to wait for one of his close relatives to graduate before resuming his teaching in the MA programme, and he had to wait longer than he had anticipated. Tahar went to great length in serving his

supervisees, and he never accepted to have his name included as second author in their publications, unless he did more than his share<sup>2</sup>.

The early offspring of independent Tunisia, native of tolerant Jerba, visitor to multiethnic Bradford and many other cities in the world, eloquent writer in three languages, and witness to injustices, corruption, favouritism, embezzlement, and rampant fanaticism, reacted by sending open letters to ministers and by posting his views on Facebook to the public. He won the minds and hearts of the enlightened elite among his fellow countrymen and countrywomen<sup>3</sup>. The native islander and erudite scholar kept himself aloof from all television debates where rambling politicians, to borrow Mr. Bennet's sarcastic and doubly objectless expression in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, "have time to exhibit".

For *AJAL* readers to appreciate Tahar Labassi's maturity, rationalism, humanism, and rhetorical skills, I recommend his 2008 paper. In that paper he discussed the socio-political situation in Tunisia and the Arab world and the self-misrepresentations by some Muslims themselves. He advocated the emancipatory role that English can play for people around the world. The paper had an ominous tone that some Arab politicians failed to sense at the time, but there is a lot in it for them to learn for the future.

We can only hope that Humanity will come to its senses.

God rest Si Tahar Labassi's soul. We are to God and to Him we shall all return.

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<sup>2</sup> . <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/weng.12511>

<sup>3</sup> . <https://www.tunisienumerique.com/par-abdelaziz-gatri-je-pleure-tahar-labbassi-et-la-tunisie-par-abdelaziz-gatri/>

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