

# FROM SLAVERY ? RETHINKING SLAVE DESCENT AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY : THE CASE OF THE MAURITANIAN AND MOROCCAN *ḤARĀṬĪN*

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## *Abstract*

What does it mean, after worldwide legal abolition, to define groups or individuals as ‘slave descendants’? When slavery was legal, laws and norms distinguished between slave and free (legal) status and defined relations of production, reproduction, and property between enslaved persons and their owners. Today the vernacular terminology that identifies certain African groups as ‘slaves’ or ‘slave descendants’ (e.g. *ḥarāṭīn*, *‘abīd*, etc.) is often an anachronism unrelated to their economic and political conditions. But in some cases slave origins continue to affect the everyday lives of people who never ceased to be exploited by the descendants of slave-owners. This article compares the identitarian, economic, and political strategies of people classified as slave descendants in Morocco and Mauritania; it discusses the connection between labels that imply slave ancestry and the circumstances of the carriers of such labels; and it considers implications for the analytical terminology of African slavery studies.

**Keywords :** Morocco, Mauritania, *ḥarāṭīn*, slavery, slave descent, identity, emancipation, analytical categories.

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## **Résumé**

Que signifie, après l'abolition mondiale de l'esclavage, le fait de définir des groupes ou des individus comme des « descendants d'esclaves » ? Lorsque l'esclavage était légal, les lois et les normes faisaient la distinction entre le statut juridique d'esclave et de celui d'homme ou de femme libre, et définissaient les relations de production, de reproduction et de propriété entre les personnes asservies et leurs propriétaires. Aujourd'hui, la terminologie vernaculaire, qui identifie certains groupes africains comme « esclaves » ou « descendants d'esclaves » (par exemple, *ḥarātīn*, *ʿabīd*, etc.) est souvent un anachronisme sans rapport avec leurs conditions économiques et politiques. Mais dans certains cas, l'ascendance servile continue d'affecter la vie quotidienne de personnes qui n'ont jamais cessé d'être exploitées par les descendants des maîtres. Cet article compare les stratégies identitaires, économiques et politiques des personnes classées comme descendants d'esclaves au Maroc et en Mauritanie. Il discute le lien entre les identités impliquant une ascendance servile et la situation des porteurs de telles identités, et examine les implications des cas de figures analysés ici pour la terminologie analytique des études sur l'esclavage en Afrique.

**Mots-clés :** Maroc, Mauritanie, *ḥarātīn*, esclavage, descendant d'esclave, identité, émancipation, catégories analytiques.

What does it mean, after worldwide legal abolition, to define groups or individuals as 'slave descendants' ? When slavery was legal, written or oral laws and norms distinguished between slave and free (legal) status, and defined relations of production, reproduction, and property between different categories of slaves and their owners. Today the vernacular terminology that identifies certain African groups as slave descendants (e.g. *bellah*, *buzu*, *ḥarātīn*, *ʿabīd*, etc.) is often an anachronism that bears no relation with their economic and political conditions. But in some cases slave origins continue to affect the everyday lives of people who never ceased to be exploited by the descendants of slave-owners. It is also the case that many persons of slave descent were able to conceal their origins and pass as descendants of free ancestors, removing from our records the most successful cases of emancipation. In short, it is not only difficult to identify slave descendants today, but it is also unclear whether those designated as such actually share common circumstances.

From a methodological perspective, slave descent raises similar problems to those of ethnicity. Roger Brubaker argued that ethnicity is 'a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with* ; it belongs to our empirical data, not to our analytical toolkit' (Brubaker 2002 : 165). Should slave descent, like ethnicity, be seen as a category of practice,

that is, a label that tells us more about the interests and worldviews of those who use it than about the backgrounds of those designated as such? Unless evidence of the status of someone's parents or ancestors is accessible, researchers cannot presume to know who is of slave descent and who is not based on the classificatory identities assigned to particular groups and individuals; nor can we presume to know what being of slave descent *does* to those who perceive themselves, or are perceived by others, as coming 'from slavery'. Under which circumstances is slave descent invoked? When is it silenced? By whom? When do former masters remind the descendants of their slaves of their status? When do slave descendants reclaim slave origins for themselves? When do people mobilize legacies of slavery as part of their political strategies? What are the consequences of framing social, political, and economic relations in terms of slave and free descent?

In an edited volume first published in 2009 I suggested that researchers distinguish between actual slaves (persons over whom control tantamount to possession is exercised, see Allain and Hickey 2012), classificatory slaves (persons classified as 'slaves' or 'slave descendants' who do not face conditions analogous to slavery), and metaphorical slaves (exploited groups experiencing conditions comparable to, but not as harsh as, enslavement). More recently, the members of African anti-slavery movements have been making a distinction between 'active slavery' and 'passive slavery', with the latter referring primarily to discrimination based on slave descent, which can occasionally be so mild that the alleged slave descendant can be unaware of his/her status, hence the connotation of passivity (Tidjani-Alou 2000 : 177). Different analytical terminologies are in use, but both researchers and activists working on these phenomena retain a distinction between 'slave descendants' and persons who are, or have been, *de facto* enslaved.

Studies of slave descendants must question what this label means in terms of both status and conditions; why some people self-identify with this label, while others drop it; and what are the economic and political implications of being classed as slave descendant in any one particular place. In certain parts of Africa it still common to find slave descendants who live next to the descendants of the owners of their parents or grandparents; in these cases the genealogical ties that connect them to one or more enslaved ancestor are often known, and the circumstances of their ancestor(s)'s enslavement – and previous non-slave status – may also be known. It is often the case that persons in these conditions are more vulnerable than other groups to continuing exploitation by the former slave owners, possibly to re-enslavement (Rossi 2017 : 999). Moreover it is usually the daughters of women of slave descent who are sold as concubines in an illegal traffic reported for certain regions of the West African Sahel. This is because those who purchase these women specifically seek girls whose mothers were enslaved as a condition for the identity criteria informing the demand for

concubines. If in these cases verifiable slave ancestry is an important determinant of contemporary lived experience, this is not always the case. In other contexts labels that imply slave ancestry are nothing but void representations, often derogatory but rarely indicative of any actual connection to a slave past. These latter instances resemble racialising discourses in that they tell us more about the rationales of those who use these classificatory schemes than about the past of the individual or groups constructed as ‘black’ or ‘slave’.

This paper analyzes testimonies that Ann McDougall and her research assistants collected in Mauritania and Southern Morocco, mostly in 2009 and 2010, from persons classified as *‘abd* (slave); *isemg* (slave); *ḥarāṭīn* (low status peasants in Morocco, slave descendants in Mauritania); *isouqqiyn* (same as *ḥarāṭīn* in Moroccan Berber); and *ḥammas* (landless, who works on someone else’s land for 1/5 of the harvest). It asks how we should interpret these categories. It examines how different carriers of these labels live their lives, and asks what, if anything, is comparable about their conditions. The paper advances preliminary reflections based on a limited set of testimonies, in the hope that these reflections may help us clarify our understanding of ‘slave descent’ in Mauritania and Morocco, and possibly elsewhere in north and west Africa.

### **Slave descent as analytical category : the homogeneity and causal relevance problems**

We are confronted with two analytical problems. First, given the uneven trajectories followed by slave descendants (and their original differences *as slaves*), are researchers justified in studying people seen as coming ‘from slavery’ as one social category? Or are the *differences within* people of slave descent so great that the category ‘slave descent’ cannot be used for meaningful generalizations? We can call this the homogeneity problem. A second set of questions is related to the causal relevance of slave ancestry to contemporary social and economic conditions: is slave descent the causally relevant category that explains the circumstances of the groups classified as slave descendants? There is a risk that using ‘slave descent’ as an analytical category makes us attribute to slave origins conditions that derive from circumstances shared with other marginalized groups (for example, landlessness) and rooted in dynamics that owe little, if anything, to one’s ancestors’ enslavement. But is this always the case, or are there cases where slave descent is precisely what matters, precisely what affects in specific ways the opportunities of persons coming ‘from slavery’?

As memories of actual enslavement fade away, it becomes necessary to question the relevance of slave descent as an analytical category. The *ḥarāṭīn* are a case in point, because the literature about them is divided

between studies that qualify them as slave descendants and studies that see them as being of free origin (Botte 1999 ; Villasante-de Beauvais 2000 ; Leservoisiere 2001 ; Leservoisiere 2004). Many of the *ḥarāṭīn* who claim free origin owe their low status to past or present landlessness and dependence upon exploitative landlords. Thus, the case of the *ḥarāṭīn* illustrates with particular clarity both the problem of homogeneity (not all *ḥarāṭīn* are seen as slave descendants, and ‘slave descendants’ include both some *ḥarāṭīn* and groups known by different names), and the causal relevance problem (the current conditions of some *ḥarāṭīn* seem to derive from erstwhile enslavement, but other *ḥarāṭīn* would appear to owe their marginality to other factors such as landlessness).

The testimonies collected in Mauritania and Morocco by Ann McDougall and her research team reveal an apparent paradox. As Ann McDougall explained at a lecture she gave at the University of Birmingham, in her Mauritanian field-sites those groups who were identified and self-identified as *ḥarāṭīn* saw themselves, and were seen by others, as slave descendants (McDougall 2012). By contrast, in her Moroccan field-sites, persons classified as *ḥarāṭīn* denied that either they or their ancestors had ever been enslaved. Here, slave descendants are known as *‘abīd* (literally, ‘slaves’), and – as shown below – the categories *‘abīd* and *ḥarāṭīn* (sometimes also called *isouqqiyn* or *ḥammas*) are kept distinct. Hence, if ‘in terms of designation’, as McDougall clearly put it, the comparable groups are the Mauritanian and Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn*, in terms of social status within their respective societies the two comparable groups are the Mauritanian *ḥarāṭīn* and the Moroccan *‘abīd*, that is, the two categories that indicate slave descent in local social classifications. McDougall suggested that, irrespective of the categories used, what mattered in terms of people’s status, opportunities, sense of self, and relationships with others, was their ability or inability to recollect the circumstances in which they, or their ancestors, had been freed.

The distinction between being ‘free’ and being ‘freed’ may appear trivial, but it is not so in contexts where being ‘freed’ implies both the fact of having been enslaved, and the lingering social relations that tie descendants of slaves to descendants of masters. For Mauritanian and Moroccan informants, slave descent could only be (self-)ascribed in the presence of tangible and publicly acceptable evidence of past enslavement. Nowadays, such evidence is usually available only through people’s capacity to identify their former master(s) and document the circumstances of their manumission. Therefore, establishing who is and who is not a slave descendant amounts to establishing who has been freed and can prove it, and who cannot. In the societies considered in this volume, proving that one (or one’s parents) had been freed by a particular master does not so much make it possible to terminate an unwanted relationship, but rather it entitles the freed person(s)

to claim support from past masters (who, in turn, can have legitimate expectations from former slaves). Paradoxical as this may appear from the perspective of international anti-slavery activism, the capacity to assert one's slave origins by pointing to a master's act of manumission works two ways : it can bring stigma by confirming one's provenance 'from slavery' but it can also increase safety in the form of alliance to former masters who have a moral obligation to act as patrons, if they can.

These ambiguities – the ambiguity of the category *ḥarāṭīn* (which means different things in different places, and therefore does not have a single translation), and the ambiguity of the slave descendants' condition (which can be undesirable or desirable, depending on context) – suggest two considerations. First, the meaning of any one category depends on how, historically, that category has been used in particular regions and communities. It would seem that while in Mauritania the category *ḥarāṭīn* implies past enslavement, in Morocco it only denotes low status, while other labels, such as *ʿabīd*, evoke slave ancestry. Surely more research is needed to reconstruct the historical processes that shaped this regional divergence of meanings for the same term. Yet, we know that the *ḥarāṭīn* of Morocco have a long documented history of resisting the attribution of slave status. Today their refusal to be assimilated as slaves and slave descendants is nothing new. Yet we know substantially less about the economic factors underpinning their identitarian strategies : as noted above, acknowledgement of former enslavement may provide access to patronage. Did the Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn*'s refusal to self-identify as ex-slaves result in a patronage deficit ? Or was a prior unwillingness of ex-masters to act as patrons result in their refusal to acknowledge former dependence ? Were patrons other than ex-masters available to them ?

The slave- or free-status of the Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn* has been the subject of much public debate since at least the seventeenth century (see, for example, Hunwick 1999). The position of established Islamic scholars and – it seems safe to presume, even though sources are less generous on the perspectives of subordinate groups – of past generations of Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn*, has been that unless their slave status could be legally proven, according to the *sharia* law they had to be presumed free. We do not know if (part of) the Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn* are the descendants of slaves whose original enslavement cannot be traced, or if instead they were wrongly treated as slaves due to racial logics that assimilated all Blacks from West Africa to slaves for reasons of political expedience (Hall 2011 ; El Hamel 2013). But we do know that in Morocco the historical contestation of the designation '*ḥarāṭīn*' contributed to crafting its contemporary complex meaning, which implies low status without warranting assumptions about slave (or free) ancestry. This does not appear to be the case in parts of Mauritania, where many individuals and groups known as *ḥarāṭīn* preserved the living memory of, and often ongoing ties to,

their (former) masters. This regional variation in the interpretation of *ḥarṭāni* status signals to us that we must investigate the local meanings of labels before we can presume that categories refer to homogenous classes of people who actually share the same status.

Moreover, and this is my second proposition, even once we have established that ‘slave descendant’ is the accurate translation for a vernacular category, we still have to enquire into the actual causal relevance of slave ancestry to the conditions of those designated as ‘slave descendants’. Our decision to use ‘slave descent’ as an analytical category presupposes that those who carry this label (e.g. Mauritanian *ḥarāṭīn* and Moroccan *‘abīd*) share common sociological traits, and that these traits are the consequence of slave descent. But do people classed as ‘slave descendants’ really face similar circumstances due to common slave ancestry, or do other factors matter more than slave origins, factors they perhaps share with groups perceived as being of free descent? In order to examine this second proposition, the following sections analyze the conditions of the different groups studied by McDougall with regards to three criteria: access to productive resources and returns to labor; the exit option (migration); and political mobilization and identity politics.

### **Access to productive resources and returns to labor : comparing the options of slave descendants and other marginal groups**

At emancipation, one of the primary concerns of ex-slaves consisted in securing access to land and/or livestock. Remediating landlessness and acquiring productive capital have been key aspects of the process of emancipation. But ex-slaves and today, slave descendants are not the only landless group. Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn* or *isouqquiyūn* who worked as *ḥammas* worked on lands they did not own and received one fifth of the harvest from the land-owners<sup>2</sup>. The terms of the *takhommast* relation are strongly skewed in favor of the landlord, so that « *si un ḥammas n'est pas vraiment prévoyant, son gain ne suffira même pas à subvenir à ses besoins.* »<sup>3</sup> A comparison of the struggles for land of *ḥarāṭīn* working as *ikhommasen* (and denying slave descent) and slave descendants trying to acquire property reveals similar conditions, objectives, and strategies. Moreover, what may appear as a peculiar predicament of Moroccan slave descendants (*‘abīd*) – the difficulties in severing resilient ties to former masters – is in fact a

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<sup>2</sup> « Le propriétaire de la terre et de l'eau donne tout (terre, eau, semences, animaux, outils, dépenses, etc. ) et le *ḥammas* fourni le travail de ses bras (et de ceux de sa famille) moyennant 1/5<sup>e</sup> de la récolte. » Testimony of H. M. B. B., Entretien 4, Zagora, n. d.

<sup>3</sup> Testimony of H. M. B. B., Entretien 4, Zagora, n. d.

condition shared by landless *ḥarāṭīn* (allegedly of free ancestry) too impoverished to risk losing the connection with their exploitative employers (and potential patrons). The Moroccan research findings of McDougall's team suggest that today it is landlessness and economic vulnerability, rather than slave- or free- descent, that determine the relationship to landed employers. In order to understand these dynamics, we need to focus on the opportunities available to marginal groups seeking access to productive resources – not merely on persons seen as being of 'slave' or 'free' descent.

The distinction between slavery and post-slavery matters here. Under legal slavery, the slave was the property of his/her master. Slave status determined living conditions and opportunities. By contrast, at least in principle, the landless laborer could have walked away from his landlord and cleared unoccupied lands for himself. But after the abolition of slavery, the 'exit option'<sup>4</sup> (that is, the option of walking away from relationships perceived as exploitative) is – always in principle – available to all, reducing the difference between slave descendants and the descendants of landless peasants. And just as slave descent may be invoked opportunistically as a claim to the former master's presumed obligation to act as patron, a *ḥarṭāni* may seek support from a landlord for whom his father used to work as *ḥammas*. The ex-master, or ex-landlord, may or may not honor the memory of foregone hierarchies. The choices of persons in either of these two categories today depend on the options at their disposal to access productive resources, and/or their capability to work for returns sufficient to guarantee survival.

Following legal emancipation, in comparable environments, male slave descendants and the male descendants of landless peasants became ultimately faced with the same question: what are the alternatives to exploitative subservience? What are the costs of these alternatives? How great are the risks involved in severing exploitative relations for alternatives that may be only marginally preferable? Coming from extremely vulnerable backgrounds – be they 'from slavery' or otherwise – confronts people with what we might call the paradox of the relative desirability of exploitation: those lacking a minimum capital to invest in economic initiatives carried out on one's own account or lacking fallback options in case of failure, have paradoxically more (not fewer!) incentives to embrace an exploitative relationship. Many persons in these conditions (especially the elderly, children, women, chronically ill persons) will find the risks involved in cutting ties too great to afford. But there are always some who, repelled by exploitation and confident in their own skills and God's magnanimity, will

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<sup>4</sup> I take this expression from Hirschman's classic book, which does not, however, focus on slavery, let alone slavery in Africa (Hirshman 1970).

try their luck as autonomous agents and dare to sever ties with powerful patrons<sup>5</sup>.

The trajectories described in the testimonies of *ikhommassen* suggest that low returns to labor increased their dependence upon the (exploitative) relation that tied them to a landlord. But acceptance of subservience is not the only observable consequence of poverty. Poverty imposes intra-family resource pooling. Sons work with their fathers from an early age, often for the same landlords. Due to the peculiar vulnerability of landless *ikhommassen*, dependence has been transmitted across generations, in a way reminiscent of inherited slave status. The similarities between these conditions increased over time. Under legal slavery, the offspring of female slaves (but not of concubines) continued to be owned by their mothers' masters and found themselves in the same situation as their ancestors unless they were able to emancipate themselves. After legal abolition, slave descendants may have gained freedom but not land. Similarly, the descendants of free landless peasants (*hammas*) were often landless because fathers could not save enough to become land-owners.

McDougall's Moroccan interviews suggest that it was extremely difficult for a *hammas* to break out of *takhommast* while being *hammas*, because a *hammas*'s earnings did not suffice to purchase land and become an autonomous farmer. This condition is similar to that in which ex-slaves found themselves after legal emancipation: free *de jure*, but *de facto* property-less and hence in need of protection. Many ex-slaves in these circumstances chose to do without a patron and struggled to sell their labor as independent economic agents. In this process, they faced huge difficulties, as being seen as lacking a mentor and coming 'from nowhere' was sometimes more stigmatizing than being perceived as coming 'from slavery'. It would seem that Moroccan *ikhommassen* always denied slave origins, but they still had to choose whether to reject, or invest in, their relationship with (former) landlords. Once again, this situation was not dissimilar to that of ex-slaves renegotiating their relationship with ex-masters.

All of the examples of economic mobility mentioned in the Moroccan interviews occurred through geographic movement away from one's landlord as a migrant laborer. Yet, when *takhommast* is one's sole security, and is barely enough to feed one's family, abandoning this status to travel into the unknown with only one's labor to sell is a dangerous option, too dangerous for some to even consider. This is one of the reasons why the decision to migrate tends to be part of a collective strategy based on the collaboration of a set of brothers and male relatives. Sharing risk reduces the potential consequences of failed migration projects for individual actors and

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<sup>5</sup> For a comparative example, see the testimony of 'Mohamed' (a pseudonym) in Rossi 2013.

their dependents. Hence, the stories of emancipation told in the testimonies collected by McDougall and her teams frequently exemplify joint ventures, whereby the earnings of one migrant brother made land accessible to a set of male kin who shared the risks of migration by contributing to the migrant's expenses, or supporting his relatives back home. In turn benefits, if available, were shared upon the migrant's return. These strategies would appear to have been the same for landless peasants and ex-slaves, due to one common causal factor : landlessness.

### **The exit option for slave descendants and other subordinate categories**

Successful labor migrations could end landlessness and the dependence that goes with it. Sometimes, migrants accumulated enough to buy their own fields. Working one's own land did not, however, yield huge profits. At best, as one of the Moroccan interviewees put it, a dependent *hammas* would become 'a *hammas* working on his own account'<sup>6</sup>. This is mirrored by the slow social and economic mobility of slave descendants, showing that material dispossession (lack of ownership of means of production faced by both slaves and landless peasants) is a crucial aspect in shaping emancipation trajectories and that dispossession operates similarly across slave and free status. In the case of Mauritanian slave descendants, migration is also one of the main ways to put an end to relations with one's former masters : 'Comment s'était terminée la relation de ton père avec Cheikh A. M. ? Tout simplement en allant travailler ailleurs pour son propre compte.'<sup>7</sup> Even interviewees who interpret their own trajectory of emancipation as resulting from an open confrontation with former masters, ultimately resorted to physical separation :

Je leur ai demandé de me démontrer comment ils m'avaient « possédé », sur quelle base, à partir de quoi. Je leur ai dit que mes parents étaient libres donc moi aussi, c'est ainsi que j'ai mis fin à cette situation, dès que j'ai pu distinguer les choses par moi-même. Si vous voulez tout savoir j'ai fui...<sup>8</sup>

In Mauritania, following a conflict between two groups of youths descending, respectively, from former slaves and former masters, the

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, when asked about his current occupation, A.B. replied, « Moi, je suis *hammâs* pour moi-même », Testimony of A. B., Entretien 3, Akka, n. d. And the son of H. M. B. B. « s'occupe toujours du travail de la terre et de l'élevage de vaches mais pour son propre compte. Il n'est plus *hammas* pour les autres. », Entretien 1, Zagora, n. d.

<sup>7</sup> Testimony of M., Entretien 2, Akka, n. d.

<sup>8</sup> Testimony of D. O. S. *et al.*, Entretien 3, Garalla 3, n. d.

majority of the population of slave descent moved away from one village, Fraiwa, and resettled independently in another, Sawab :

Un problème s'était déclenché entre des jeunes de notre communauté et ceux de nos anciens maîtres. Finalement nos jeunes ont été emprisonnés dans le chef-lieu de l'arrondissement à Wad Naga, avant d'être transférés vers la prison de la capitale de la province à Rosso. Suite à cet incident quelques familles ont décidé de quitter le puits Fraiwa, et ont choisi de s'installer ici<sup>9</sup>.

The collective exodus and resettlement were facilitated through the intervention of the anti-slavery organization, SOS-Esclaves. But if a break with former masters is now politically possible, economically it increases the vulnerability of slave descendants. This accounts for the conservative choices of a large number of former dependents, who see continued subservience to benign ex-masters as a lesser evil than facing further impoverishment. In a world where ties of patronage function as vital safety nets during crises, moves such as the one of the Fraiwa community have high costs :

Nous avons alors quitté nos maisons construites en dur à Fraiwa pour nous installer ici entre ces dunes sans abri. [...] Nos femmes ont dressé des tentes et improvisé des cabanes pour une habitation provisoire<sup>10</sup>. And : Notre [...] problème c'est la pauvreté. Nous avons reçu un coup dur après notre déménagement<sup>11</sup>.

Migration – the prototypical 'exit option' – is not the only way to establish independent access to productive resources, primarily land. At least two other ways feature in Moroccan and Mauritanian testimonies of slave descendants : the dispersal of masters and/or direct confrontation (the 'voice option'). These two options are not equally accessible to people of slave descent and the descendants of free landless serfs. Insofar as *takhommast* is a contract 'voluntarily' entered by two parties regulating farming production and granting a large proportion of potential benefits to the landlord, it is less likely to end through the landlord's disappearance than are relations based on former slave-master ties. Especially at the desert's edge, where productive resources are of limited value, separation between descendants of masters and slaves may be brought about by the former's resettlement to other regions :

Pour ce qui est des *bīḍān*, c'est vrai qu'il y en avait ici, mais ils ont disparu, soit par manque de descendance masculine, soit par ralliement à d'autres fractions des Ähl Sidi Mahmoud ou même à

<sup>9</sup> Testimony of H. M. M. et (chef de village) R. O. M. S., Entretien 10, Sawab (Trarza), n. d.

<sup>10</sup> Testimony of H. M. M. et (chef de village) R. O. M. S., Entretien 10, Sawab (Trarza), n. d.

<sup>11</sup> Testimony of H. M. M. et (chef de village) R. O. M. S., Entretien 5, Sawab (Trarza), n. d.

d'autres tribus. Il n'y a plus du tout de *bīḍān* A<sup>s</sup>zayzāt. Il ne reste que nous les *ḥaḍriyyīn*<sup>12</sup>.

[L]es *bīḍān* de notre fraction n'existent plus ou presque, il n'est resté que nous, ces jeunes que vous voyez, ils ne connaissent pas nos *bīḍān*<sup>13</sup>.

Petit à petit les *bīḍān* ont disparu de la fraction, soit ils n'ont pas eu de descendance, soit ils sont allés dans d'autres tribus. Même notre chef, le dernier, celui qui est décédé en 1999, il a pris une femme chez les Bejghallé, une fraction Idaw al-Ḥaj. Et bien d'autres ont fait pareil. Donc ce village est resté un village de *ḥaḍriyyīn*, c'est eux qui en sont les chefs et personne d'autre. À tel point que d'autres esclaves sont venus se joindre à nous, et dès qu'ils arrivaient ici, les maîtres ne pouvaient plus les récupérer, même s'ils nous donnaient tout l'argent du monde<sup>14</sup>.

Cases of slave descendants 'abandoned' by former masters are particularly frequent where masters used to be semi-nomadic herders who lost their herds to droughts, or for whom it became increasingly difficult to support themselves through pastoralism given the decreasing sustainability of transhumant herding and their loss of political power<sup>15</sup>. However, conflicts over rights to land are frequent amongst descendants of landed elites and the descendants of either former slaves or landless farm-laborers (*ḥammas*). The frequency and bitterness of such conflicts increases with the quality and value of the lands, but sometimes even apparently barren lands are disputed. It used to be the case that all marginal groups, lacking the prestige and connections of elites, were disadvantaged in legal disputes. But over the last few decades slave descendants have begun to mobilize politically and to benefit from targeted support provided by anti-slavery organizations.

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<sup>12</sup> Testimony of E. O. S., Entretien 5, Garalla 1, n. d.

<sup>13</sup> Testimony of H. O. S. *et al.*, Entretien 6, Garalla 2, n. d.

<sup>14</sup> Testimony of D. O. S. *et al.*, Entretien 7, Garalla 3, n. d.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Testimony of D. M., Entretien 3, Rabat ; testimony of E. O. S., Entretien 5, Garalla 1. For a discussion of the impact of famines on relations between former masters and slaves in Mauritania, see Ould Cheikh 1994. For comparative examples amongst Malian Fulbe pastoralists, see De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995 ; De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2001 ; De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2003 ; Angenent, Breedveld, De Bruijn, and Van Dijk 2003. On the Malian Tuareg, see Giuffrida 2005 and Randall and Giuffrida 2006. On the Tuareg of Niger, see Bernus 1974 ; Bernus 1976 ; and Bonte 1975.

## **Rise of the slave descendants' class consciousness : political mobilization and identity politics**

Until recently legal specialists, both Islamic clerics and state bureaucrats, have been likely to ally or sympathize with the elites, either because they shared the same privileged social backgrounds or because they did not want to disappoint representatives of powerful groups. But the recent growth of anti-slavery activism, backed by national and international organizations, has given new strength to the claims of slave descendants – a position that is possibly not shared by landless serfs and other poor constituencies. But this is merely a hypothesis, as to my knowledge there are no detailed comparative studies from which to draw informed insights. The evidence from McDougall's research appears inconclusive, though it reveals interesting dynamics. A. B.'s testimony from Morocco<sup>16</sup> describes a land dispute between A. B. and other *isouqqiyn* who confronted the former land-owning elites (*imazighen*) and denied their claims to lands located at the southern edge of the village of Tagadirt. He describes his grandfather and father as both (free) *hammas*. His father travelled and worked as *hammas* for several landlords, including for a family of Aït Qandou, also of *isouqqiyn* status, to whom he was related through marriage. The Aït Qandou had been able to purchase land through their revenues as migrant workers and butchers<sup>17</sup>, thereby becoming landed *isouqqiyn* and employers of *hammas* on their lands. In A. B.'s testimony, *isouqqiyn* are kept distinct from ex-slaves.

A. B. attributes the *isouqqiyn*'s resistance against traditional hierarchies to the progressive establishment of a new ethos supported by a young generation who travelled and worked abroad in the northern cities, where 'they had seen how things worked, and had become aware of human rights'<sup>18</sup>. A. B.'s reconstruction contrasts the *isouqqiyn*'s resistance against former elites with the ex-slaves' loyalty to the latter. In this testimony the category 'ex-slave' is mentioned exclusively in connection to slave descendants who defended the interests of their masters<sup>19</sup>. In A. B.'s text, focused on Moroccan groups, the descendants of slaves appear as politically conservative compared to the *isouqqiyn*.

In a Mauritanian testimony by a man of slave descent, the speaker takes a strong position in favour of emancipation, but emphasises that the loyalty of

<sup>16</sup> Testimony of A. B., Entretien 3, Akka, n. d.

<sup>17</sup> Testimony of A. B., Entretien 3, Akka, n. d.

<sup>18</sup> Testimony of A. B., Entretien 3, Akka, n. d.

<sup>19</sup> Testimony of A. B., Entretien 3, Akka, n. d. (an ex-slave of the Aït C., responsible for marking the limits of village lands, does not include Assoul in the village's collective lands, implying that it belonged to the Aït C.; then the Aït C.'s supporters are '20 or 25 people, basically their *hammas*, their ex-slaves and people who worked for them').

one of his ancestors to his masters was what owed them their present independence. This ancestor, a slave, oversaw the affairs of a set of villages while his master was too young to act as chief. This was at once an act of loyalty, which prevented others from usurping his master's position and a precedent for the passage of chiefly prerogatives in the hands of the slave constituencies of this area upon dispersal of the masters<sup>20</sup>. But loyalty is less and less frequently perceived as a viable option. The interviews provide numerous examples of various kinds of resistance, including verbal or violent confrontations<sup>21</sup>, escapes, legal disputes, and the surreptitious sabotage of a master's interests<sup>22</sup>.

Other testimonies by interviewees of slave descent show that political mobilisation *as slaves* is now frequent : in T. (Morocco), M., a man who proudly self-identifies as a slave descendant (*isemg*) founded an association of ex-slaves in his village<sup>23</sup> ; and as mentioned, the group of slave descendants who moved from Fraiwa to their newly founded village Sawab in order to permanently interrupt relations with former masters did so thanks to the support of SOS-Esclaves<sup>24</sup>. In these cases, slave descent has become an identity mobilised politically as part of a relatively recent discourse of emancipation<sup>25</sup>.

How exactly slave descent is mobilised discursively for political purposes depends on the speaker's position. The government and its bureaucracies are conservative, preferring to avoid public discussion of slavery in the media for fear of attracting international attention and eroding national integration. But official conservatism is likely to change as large numbers of slave descendants become elected as mayors and municipal representatives, and join national political parties with an emancipatory agenda that wins them the votes of large proportions of citizens of actual or alleged slave descent (Hahonou 2011 ; Pelckmans and Hardung 2015). National NGOs are multiplying and gaining strength, encouraged by successes partly achieved thanks to the support of international antislavery organisations<sup>26</sup>. And

<sup>20</sup> Testimony of E. O. S., Entretien 5, Garalla 1, n. d.

<sup>21</sup> Two young *ḥarāṭīn* 'ont utilisé des bâtons dans la bagarre, ce qui a causé des blessures chez leurs anciens maîtres.' Testimony of H. M. M. et (chef de village) R. O. M. S., Entretien 10, Sawab (Trarza), n. d.

<sup>22</sup> The elderly Mauritanian slave descendant H. M. M. attested that as a youth she secretly used to give her master less than 50 % of the Arabic gum she collected, and she gave him worse quality gum than the one she retained, see Testimony of H. M. M. et (chef de village) R. O. M. S., Entretien 10, Sawab (Trarza), n. d.

<sup>23</sup> Testimony of M., Entretien 2, Akka, n. d.

<sup>24</sup> Testimony of H. M. M. et (chef de village) R. O. M. S., Entretien 10, Sawab (Trarza), n. d.

<sup>25</sup> For a comparative example, see Hahonou 2009.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the case of Hadijatou Mani, where the Nigerien NGO Timidria intervened in support of a concubine and received help from Anti-Slavery International and ECOWAS, e.g. Allain 2009 ; Duffy 2009 ; Galy and Zangaou 2012 ; Rossi 2015.

individual slave descendants are re-interpreting in positive terms the negative stereotypes traditionally attached to their ascribed status.

A testimony collected in T. (Morocco) is a case in point. The speaker, who founded an association of ex-slaves (*isemgan*), exalts slave ancestry in contrast to *asuqqi/harṭāni* ancestry. His argument is heavily racialized. It contrasts the physical strength of ‘black Africans’ of slave descent with the alleged inferiority of both ‘white’ masters and *isouqqiyn*<sup>27</sup>. In this process, actual genealogies – which may be unknown to many slave descendants – are substituted with idealised ones. Entire groups or villages of slave descendants claim descent from an apical ancestor (or ancestress) whose stigmatised identity as slave is erased by reference to positive qualities, such as unusual courage and resistance :

Suite à cet incident, el-Barra a décidé de quitter Tamghart avec les époux de ses filles et ses troupeaux de vaches et de chèvres. Elle est allée jusqu’à un endroit qui n’appartenait à personne et elle a fait creuser son propre puits par les maris de ses filles. Ce puits porte son nom jusqu’à nos jours. C’est cette dame qui est l’ancêtre de la majorité des *harāṭīn* de Fraiwa<sup>28</sup>.

Alternatively, testimonies call attention to social mobility enabled by a master’s confidence and alleged recognition of a slave’s qualities :

Une femme esclave avait demandé un jour à partir avec son enfant, à quitter le village car son mari était un *harṭāni* de la tribu Tajakânt. Le<sup>s</sup>zizi avait dit non, car le fils d’une *ḥādām* ne peut pas quitter le campement, mais devant sa demande il a quand même affranchi l’enfant qui était fils unique de cette femme. C’est cet enfant qui est notre père à tous, le chef lui a ensuite donné beaucoup de pouvoir, il en a fait quelqu’un de proche, l’enfant a donc grandi dans cette famille et il est devenu un « responsable » de la tribu<sup>29</sup>.

In yet another form of identity renegotiation, slave origins are overlooked, and descent is reckoned from a time prior to one’s ancestors’ enslavement, thus emphasising (pre-enslavement) ethnic origin in lieu of slave status :

Cette petite *kweiriya* sera la mère de mon grand-père. On dit que mon père a hérité son courage et sa bravoure de cette origine bambara<sup>30</sup>.

These three examples reveal positive re-interpretations of slave identity. While they follow different criteria, they all signal strategic reinterpretations of the status of slave descendants. Strategies of political mobilization that challenge the stigma attached to slave ancestry in the name of common

<sup>27</sup> Testimony of M., Entretien 2, Akka, n. d.

<sup>28</sup> Testimony of H. M. M. et (chef de village) R. O. M. S., Entretien 10, Sawab (Trarza), n. d.

<sup>29</sup> Testimony of E. O. S., Entretien 5, Garalla 1, n. d.

<sup>30</sup> Testimony of M. O. B., Entretien 8, Guerrou, n. d.

citizenship are unfolded at the same time as people attribute new meanings to their identities. The ability of a slave descendant to make claims perceived as legitimate depends on how slave descent is represented in his/her society. For a slave descendant's arguments to be considered, s/he must be seen as someone who can legitimately participate in public debate. Hence, the first step in the political struggles of disenfranchised groups consists in overturning the stigma attached to their identity. These struggles happen concurrently with realignments of traditional alliances.

In Mauritania, the process of emancipation is restructuring the logics of political allegiance. In the past the main unit of political agency corresponded to the French concept of *tribu*, which in the specialist literature on Saharan societies refers to a hierarchical structure formed by a dominant segmentary lineage section and different categories of dependents attached to it. The stratified components of a *tribu* could be scattered in space, and practised varying degrees of sedentarism/nomadism. As the hierarchical principles that structured the *tribu* are eroded by egalitarian political logics, political agency becomes a function of locality. The citizens of the same nation elect their representatives, and so do the members of the same village and municipality. This transformation marks the beginning of a transition from hierarchical to territorialised principles of political representation that is publicly acknowledged :

Les hommes politiques n'ont pas trop apprécié un rapprochement entre nous et la tribu Sidi Mahmoud, en politique ils préféreraient qu'on reste « en localités », cela leur allait mieux car une alliance au nom de la tribu allait la renforcer [...] <sup>31</sup>.

The Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn* have been developing a political consciousness based upon awareness of their demographic importance and shared history. Yet over the *longue durée* their identity politics has been rooted in the rejection of all suspicion of slave ancestry. This partly explains the present antagonism between Moroccan slave descendants and Moroccan *ḥarāṭīn*. While, as suggested above, their economic circumstances tended to converge in the post-emancipation period, their political unification is difficult because, historically, their identities have been framed antithetically. Surely, this brief discussion of a limited set of sources is insufficient to draw any general conclusion. But this situation contrasts with the mobilization of the Mauritanian *ḥarāṭīn* whose emancipation struggle is carried out by slave descendants for slave descendants. These struggles bring about major historical realignments, as expectations of solidarity shift away from 'tribal' hierarchies and toward local groups and class-like formations.

It is possible that, as the influence of movements defending the rights of particular disenfranchised sub-groups grows, individuals from a variety of

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<sup>31</sup> Testimony of H. O. S. *et al.*, Entretien 6, Garalla 2.

marginal backgrounds will attempt to pass as ‘slave descendants’ for reasons of political opportunism. Former slave ownership, then, will become a source of shame, not honor, for descendants of masters. For students of African emancipation, this will require increased caution in the definition of analytical categories. The term ‘slave descendant’ will become even more imprecise as it is not entirely unthinkable that people whose ancestors were never enslaved start self-identifying as slave descendants in order to reap the benefits deriving from the slave descendants’ successful mobilization.

Faced with a weakened and weakening political position, some former masters may renegotiate the terms of their relations with former slaves facilitating, rather than hindering, incorporation of their ex-slaves into their own groups. Slavery-to-kinship transitions, multiplied through a reinterpretation of the implications of milk kinship and other inclusivist strategies, could then make large numbers of slave descendants drop below the historian’s radar as slave descendants; at the same time, groups with no verifiable slave ancestry may join the ranks of those actually or allegedly ‘from slavery’. Their rallying together will perhaps have common causes, but slave descent will not be the determinant one. The main force capable of making various groups rally behind the banner of anti-slavery will be the perceived potential of anti-slavery politics to deliver advantages to those enrolled in these movements. Such advantages do not have to be strictly material, but may include commitment to an agenda marked by greater moral and social justice. We can expect change to be faster in cities and slower in the hinterland, where identity categories will perhaps continue to match empirically verifiable biographic circumstances. Should they happen as suggested here, these processes will require historians to be even more cautious about what I have termed the ‘homogeneity’ and the ‘causal relevance’ problems.

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Decades after legal abolition, conditions analogous to slavery endure in circumscribed African contexts. In these contexts, it is helpful to retain an analytical distinction between (illegally) enslaved persons, persons of slave descent with a living memory of their own or their ancestors’ enslavement, and other exploited and/or stigmatized groups whose status should be specified case-by-case. Where the enslavement of specific groups and/or individuals is verifiable, it is helpful to distinguish between (a) the historical trajectories followed by the descendants of enslaved persons (‘slave descent’ as an analytical category), and (b) the discursive mobilization of ‘slavery’ as a metaphor of exploitation by groups who cannot trace slave ancestry anymore, or were never able to do so. Historically and sociologically, these

are two distinct phenomena. Failure to account for their difference would undermine our ability to understand the historical process of emancipation. This paper has shown that people of slave descent are progressively facing similar economic and political circumstances as other marginalized groups. Furthermore, slave descent is increasingly mobilized openly and strategically in the political struggles of a broad range of disenfranchised groups. As actual slave origins become progressively harder to verify, 'slave descent' will lose significance as an analytical category.

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