

LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD: RESEARCHING SLAVERY IN MOROCCO

MADIA THOMSON

23 January 2000: I arrived in Ilich at approximately 10:30 am to find the house abuzz with the sound of men and women preparing lunch for the *qā'id* of Tazerwalt and the governor of Tiznit province. Ḥammū's brother Bihi was there to show the visitors around *tigemmi mḡorn*, literally, the Big House of Ilich. I had seen Fawziyya, Ibrāhīm's mother, as I approached the houses and discovered upon entry that most of the village had come to the house to help with preparations. One of Ibrāhīm's brothers, °Adī, was dressed in a white *gandoura* while Ibrāhīm himself was dressed in his usual blue work smock. The women sat either in the kitchen or just outside in the arcade preparing plates of food. The appetizer course consisted of three separate dishes: *amlou*, a paste made from ground, roasted almonds, argan oil, and honey, freshly churned butter, olive oil, and freshly-baked bread for tasting it all. Next came skewered beef seasoned with cumin and salt which were followed by coffee. When the skewers were removed, trays of appetizers appeared again, followed this time by a meat tajine and more bread. For dessert, the hostess served strong, sweet mint tea and cookies.

Lunch for me at the Big House was a much simpler affair eaten with members of the *shurfā'* family. My hostess did not serve appetizers, just a simple meat tajine or *seksou d turkemin*, couscous with parsnips cooked in a thin tomato sauce on top. No elaborate Fezzi or Rabati meal, just simple straight-forward fare accompanied by water, in the case of

tajine, or *agho*, curdled milk, in the case of couscous; we usually had fruit for dessert. The simplicity of southwestern village cooking stood in stark contrast to that of northern cities. It was also striking that the event had mobilized most of the village. Ibrāhīm and his brother, who had their own households and *ibhern*, vegetable gardens, served as head waiters to the guests at the lunch party. I had learned earlier that Ibrāhīm was *ra^oīs-n-isemgane*, literally, chief of slaves, the person in charge of planning *ma^crūf-n-isemgane*, the annual slave festival. The symbolism of his and his brother's presence as head 'servants' for the guests was hard to avoid. The free descendants of former *shurfā^o* slaves led the service contingent. They were the only non-*shūrfā^o* men allowed near the kitchen where they could see (and be seen by) the *sharīfa*, Lalla Mūniya. I was at first surprised since I knew that men foreign to the household never saw *shurfā^o* women. I then made the connection: as descendants of the family's slaves, they were considered members of the family and therefore could actually see the women of the house. They held a different status from other free men. Such social phenomena which have become increasingly rare in the country provide a glimpse of how the institution of slavery functioned in the past. In their present-day enactment of such historical relationships, such events act as markers of social change in Morocco.

My assessment of Moroccan society differs from that presented in Abdellah Hammoudi's *Master and Disciple: The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism* in that, unlike Hammoudi's use of the institutionally-based relationship between teacher and student to understand political institutions, I use micro-level interpersonal relations to understand social hierarchy and its transformation.¹ One quickly notices that social relations determined by the insti-

1 Abdellah Hammoudi, *Master and Disciple: The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1997.

tution of slavery are most apparent in regions of southern Morocco that still have a strong *shurfā*⁹ presence, and that both documentary and ethnographic evidence are crucial to understanding the existence and disappearance of slavery in the everyday life of southern villagers. I use the Anti-Atlas village of Iligh as a case study. Understanding that social dependency lies in historical relationships among villagers allows one to create a genealogy of freedom and servitude that provides a way of explaining modernization and social change.

The Method—Documents

The history of Tazerwalt is a history of power and domination, religion and conflict management both within the region and between it and the central government, the Makhzen. Tazerwalt initially flourished under the leadership of °Alī w. Ḥasan, *kunya* Bū Damia, who established his capital at Iligh in 1613, ten years into the period of *fitna* that followed the Sa°dian king Aḥmad al-Manṣūr's death. Under his leadership, Tazerwalt became a principality with the Abūdamia family controlling much of the southern Moroccan economy. The family thrived until 1670, the year Mūlāy Rashīd of the new °Alawī dynasty destroyed Iligh, assuring their exile and effectively ending Abūdamia control of southern Morocco. A family member by the name Yaḥyā w. Aḥmad returned to the region in the eighteenth century. He led a contemplative life, rejecting the economic and political prestige of his seventeenth-century antecedents.

Using the *Dīwān Bū Damia* which listed the family's land purchases and donations prior to their exile, Hāshim w. °Alī began acquiring the lost land. His son, Ḥusayn w. Hāshim, re-established control over southern Moroccan trade, allowing him to regain the family's political prestige and expand their real estate holdings. Trade between Essaouira, on the southwest coast of Morocco, and Timbuktu

figure prominently in the memories of villagers who consider his reign the golden age of Tazerwalt. The family archive contains accounting documents confirming these assertions with lists of goods bought and sold, loans given to Ḥusayn w. Hāshim's Jewish and Muslim clients, treaties for regional security, and *ʿurf*, customary law.

The slave transactions that appear among these records give a sense of the variation in slave prices in addition to noting the kinds of slaves available. Dates and currency descriptions allow one to estimate price per slave at a given time and thereby to place numbers in historical context. The *Kunnāsh al-Bahr*, a slave register that lists the arrival of slaves through the official port of Rabat, could be considered the official record of the slave trade.² The transactions mentioned in the family archival documents therefore, would represent the unofficial record of the slave trade and give further evidence of the distinctiveness of social and political systems in *bilād al-makhzan*, areas controlled by the central government, and *bilād al-ṣībā*, provinces beyond its control.

The style of the Abūdamia accounting documents is quite distinct from documents in other regions of Morocco. An official *kātib* trained in the even Makhzen style wrote government correspondence. In Tazerwalt, mosque-educated *faqīhs* and *ʿadūls* (notaries) wrote contracts and treaties using a combination of Arabic renditions of Tachelhit Berber expressions and more recognizably Mauritanian words which make them difficult to understand for the *fushā* speaker. Writers sometimes translated Berber village names into Arabic and only with a thorough knowledge of the region discussed, the languages concerned, and the persons involved can one decipher them. Misspellings and uneven handwriting further complicate reading.

Records of slave transactions did not vary much from

2 John Hunwick, 'Information on Kunnash al-Bahr', e-mail, Washington, DC 2002. I have never seen this book and therefore can provide no further detail.

those of other sales transactions. A record might begin with a *bismillāh* or a *ḥamdu lillāh* then, using *wa* as a transition word, give the name of the buyer who attested to giving a certain sum of money (usually calculated in *mithqāls*, a weight measure), to the head of Iligh. After citing the name of the Ilighi party to the transaction, the document continues stating the reason for the payment. The contract ends giving the month, day, and year followed by a formulaic closing which ended with the *kātib*'s name.

One of the transactions appears to be a case of pawnship. It reads,

الحمد لله ورحمن وصى على سيدنا محمد وليعلم الواقف
عليه انه آيها الكاتب المساء الاخير ان شاء الله الفين مثقال
وثمنية وعشرون مثقال قل ثلاثة اربعة قبضته طيب من كراء
العبيد وغير ذلك قبضته [قبضا و في] به اخير الربيع الثاني
عام 1229، عبد [] باب بن ابراهيم الخليل وهذا كله من يد
سيدي حسين من قمة الريش والعبيد قبضته وعبد ربه
الممتعة به يوسف بن زروق كان الله له وجميع المسلمين امين،
امين .

A certain Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl received two thousand twenty-seven and one-fourth *mithqāls* from Ḥusayn w. Hāshim for a pawn (or pawns), a tidy sum when one considers that an individual slave during the same period sold for approximately 150 *mithqāls*. Though the word '*kirā*' means a rental, the context suggests that Ibn Ibrāhīm used the slave or slaves as collateral against a debt, a system referred to as pawnship by the historian Paul Lovejoy. He describes pawns

as slaves held as collateral against a debt and who maintained fictive kinship ties with the debtor. A creditor would assess the pawn's value based on his relationship to the debtor; if he were highly valued, the creditor might set a high price with the expectation that the 'family member' would buy him back at the set price. The concept seems to describe what the historian Frederick Cooper calls 'slave mortgaging,' a term more in keeping with the Arabic.³

The Method—Ethnography

The reminders of the former master-slave nexus permeate Moroccan social life. Nowhere is this more visible than in areas of southern Morocco that have seen little economic development. The commune of Sīdī Aḥmad w. Mūsā, which is part of the former Tazerwalt, offers an ideal setting for observing a life once common to most of the Anti-Atlas. Iighi villagers continue to show deference to the *shurfā*² who have maintained the religious prestige of their ancestors. Their symbolic importance as descendants of the Soussi saint Aḥmad w. Mūsā gives them spiritual capital which few villagers can contest. Having lost their political significance, many of the *shurfā*² now work as Makhzan functionaries. Unlike other southern families who have abandoned their castles, the Abūdāmiyas have maintained *tigemmi mqorn*. Mūlāy Ḥammū, who works as a secretary at the *qiyāda* or township office in a neighbouring *duwar*, lives there year-round with his wife, Lalla Mūniya and his youngest son Yūnas. His job enables him to live in the village and makes him one of a very few residents with a regular income.

Although in the past the house was filled with wives, concubines, and female servants, today only Lalla Mūniya

3 See Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, 5, and Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1977.

lives in the house year-round. Village women come to chat and help with the housework. Sanā²a, the *faqīh*'s daughter, walks the animals, a task which Lalla Mūniya cannot do herself. As a *sharīfa*, she is expected to stay at home in order to avoid the stare of village men. All essential housekeeping activities that involve leaving the house are therefore delegated to village girls and women. Only one of the regular non-*shurfā*² women who visit is Tamazight, a white woman. She looks after the garden located within the walls of the compound where a *tagiwin* is used to draw water from the well.⁴ When Lalla Mūniya's sister-in-law Lalla Hāshimiyya visits, other girls and women come to help her. The visits of the village women and the deference shown to Lalla Mūniya and Lalla Hāshimiyya bring alive a past history of social domination and cohabitation which the above ethnographic evidence begins to explore.

In November 1999, I interviewed the *faqīh* Sī Brāhīm who is now in his late nineties. He explained during one of our sessions that all the slaves who came to Morocco had their own language. During Ḥusayn w. Hāshim's reign, they came from the Sahara. They arrived from different regions, speaking their own languages. Upon arrival in Igh, they mixed with free people and slaves who spoke Berber and, in the process, learned it themselves. They tended to stay together and had their own Gnawa language that people outside their group found difficult to understand. Jews and Muslims alike went to the Sahara to acquire slaves where they bought men, women, and young children. Sī Brāhīm was careful to specify that buyers often looked for young

4 A *tagiwin* is a well in which multiple recipients are used to draw water. The system works by having an animal, in this case a donkey, walk in a circle, thereby turning a piston that lowers and raises the buckets. The buckets then empty into a flat tray from which a metal pipe extends, directing the water to a concrete basin.

people who had reached puberty.⁵ Without specifying which one, Sī Brāhīm said that the *sharīf* of Iliḡh went to the Mel-lah to choose his slaves ‘who had been bought with money’. Their children spoke *taganawit* and *tachelhit*. When asked if he knew *taganawit*, he said no, but his grandfather Maḥmūdi, whom Ḥusayn w. Hāshim had bought, had known how to speak it. In talking about the independence period, Sī Brāhīm said that under Ḥasan II’s reign, social relations had changed considerably. The social hierarchy that determined them had relaxed. He used the statement ‘*kif Anta, kif Anā*’ to express the feeling of equality among citizens. I later heard a similar comment from other interviewees.⁶

Sī Brāhīm’s story raises the question of the language spoken by slaves. Documentary evidence of their language does not seem to exist and this information could not be known without conducting interviews. In discussions with villagers, one discovers that they use the word *taganawit* to designate the language spoken by slaves. Slaves came from ‘Sūdān’ as villagers referred to Sahelian Africa, and were brought across the Sahara by Arab nomads and later left in Berber-speaking villages. From the descriptions, *taganawit* was probably a creole that mixed Berber, Ḥassaniyya, and West African languages. Embodied in the word *taganawit* is the word *gnawa*, one of the words that designates people of slave origin. This linguistic pattern follows the normative Tachelhit concept that links language and group identity. On

5 Sī Brāhīm uses an expression that translates literally as ‘those old enough to fast’. As pre-pubescent children do not fast, I have interpreted his expression to mean ‘those who have reached puberty’.

6 These comments parallel others made to me by interviewees both in Rabat and Tiznit. In these cases, people cited particular dates close to 1956, the year Morocco became independent. In one someone mentioned 1958 as a seminal moment for the slave market in Goulmime, where a small contingent of slaves could still be seen. In others, people remember hearing a speech or speeches either in the late 1950s (and therefore given by the late Muḥammad V) or the early 1960s (possibly a young Ḥasan II) that asserted the changed social conditions of the kingdom.

telling a villager that you are American, he might ask if you speak *tamericanit*, in much the same way French people speak of ‘American’ as a language. I corrected villagers, saying that I spoke *tinglizit*, or English.

The information about both Jews and Muslims buying slaves in the Sahara is interesting in that trans-Saharan trade and the trans-Saharan slave trade in particular are usually associated with Muslim merchants. The historian Michel Abitbol has much to say and show about the importance of Jewish merchants who provided capital for caravans leaving Morocco for West Africa.⁷ The French ethnographer who worked on Jewish populations in southern Morocco, Pierre Flamand, also mentions that Jewish merchants subsidized southern caravans.⁸ Whether they sent Jewish traders along with Muslims with the *azalai*, the caravan, is not entirely clear; but the mere fact of their subsidizing caravans would mean that they contributed to the purchase of slaves when they did not actually sell them in the markets.⁹ Another possibility might be that Jewish merchants carrying other goods within Morocco accompanied slave dealers. This information remains to be verified, however.

By mentioning that Ḥusayn w. Hāshim bought his grandfather, Sī Brāhīm gives some indication of the course of his family’s history in the village. Ḥusayn w. Hāshim ruled from 1258/1842 to 1303/1886, thereby situating Maḥmūdi’s purchase during the second half of the nine-

7 Michel Abitbol, *Les commerçants du roi: Tujjār al-sulṭān: une élite économique judéo-marocaine aux XIXeme siècle*, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose 1998. Abitbol has a number of articles that talk about trans-Saharan trade and Jewish life in Morocco.

8 Pierre Flamand, *Diaspora en terre d’Islam*, Casablanca: Imprimerie reunie 1958.

9 See Mohammed Ennaji, *Serving the Master: Slavery and Society in Nineteenth-Century Morocco*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 1999, and Daniel Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in Southwestern Morocco, 1844-1886*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988.

teenth century, the renaissance of Ilighi power. Maḥmūdi family lore states that he arrived in Iligh with a group of Ṣaḥrawī merchants who brought him to *tigemmi mḡorn*. Ḥusayn w. Hāshim noticed the servant's fascination with his house and decided to buy him from his owners. This story of Ḥusayn w. Hāshim's choice of Maḥmūdi mirrors the position Sī Brāhīm claims to have had in Sīdī °Alī's household, which was that of a specially chosen black child; but that seems to be the extent of the parallel. Maḥmūdi never became a *faqīh* whereas Sī Brāhīm did.¹⁰ As a first-generation slave in Iligh, it was virtually impossible for Maḥmūdi to have become a *faqīh*. Sī Brāhīm's father had served in Sīdī °Alī's cavalry, a highly-prized position in Sīdī °Alī's service. Sī Brāhīm considers himself privileged to have received an education and does not recognize the word 'work' as a description for the teaching he did in the village. One sees a clear line of mobility between the first and third generations.

A researcher studying the history of slavery in Morocco must use the tools of both ethnography and history. Close observation of current social relations reveals a history of social inequality rooted in the foundation of village social hierarchy, the *shurfā'*. The memory of this past time remains vivid in the memories of current village inhabitants and determines the ways in which they interact with one another. Everyday activities between *shurfā'* and non-*shurfā'* women reflect the nature of former servile relations and are in fact a modern extension of them that is easily seen in the village. Male descendants of slaves who did not emigrate maintain their independence in their daily activities and not only on special occasions like the one discussed do they assume their forefathers' roles. The differences in the daily roles of men

10 Movement across the Sahara went both ways and consisted not only of servants, as in this case, but of members of both the *shurfā'* family and the Jewish community. Both Bukhārī of the Abūdamia family and a certain Mordechai ben Hazan of Tazerwalt went to Timbuktu in the second half of the nineteenth century.

and women in the village show how economic and social modernization affected the lives of village dwellers; while men were liberated for the most part, women continued in dependent relations. We cannot, therefore, think of changes in the institution of slavery in absolute terms, but must qualify for gender. Such an assessment is more readily apparent with the use of both documentary and ethnographic data.