

Shadows of Slavery

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in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

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“Anti-black racism”: debating racial prejudices and the legacies of slavery in Morocco

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Abstract

Growing public attention to violence and discrimination against sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco has recently opened a debate on the issue of “anti-black racism” and its connections to the history of slavery. The parallel between current racism and historical slavery offers a powerful narrative to draw attention to the very difficult situations of many sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco, as well as to the lived effects of the contemporary racial legacies of slavery. Yet, conflating the two issues in linear and unproblematic ways may not help us to unravel the complexity of the socio-political dynamics underway. This paper seeks to unpack the issue of anti-black racism by examining the diverse ways in which the different social actors (sub-Saharan African migrants, students and activists, as well as Moroccan people and human rights activists) I met in Rabat in 2014 engaged with these debates. The paper suggests that current racism against sub-Saharan Africans cannot be conceptualized simply as a living remnant of the Moroccan history of slavery and its 17th century racialization. On the contrary, it contends that historically rooted anti-black prejudices are deeply entangled with and shaped by current media and political discourses, transnational geopolitics delegating border control to North African states and Morocco’s current position in the international political arena.

In January 2013, the Moroccan francophone magazine *TelQuel* published an article by Karim Boukhari titled “Blacks and not blacks (*Noirs et pas noirs*),” in which the author calls into question the predominant self-image of Morocco as a colour-blind society. Despite the fact that Morocco is situated geographically in Africa, Boukhari contends that Moroccans neither perceive nor define themselves as “Africans.” In everyday conversations, indeed, the term “African” (Arabic: *Afriqiy*) is used to designate sub-Saharan Africans and generally, not Moroccans. Boukhari provides two hypotheses to explain Moroccans’ denial of their African-ness. First, he mentions the ideological implications of the Arab conquest of Morocco in the 7th century and the historical tensions it engendered with the autochthonous population, the Amazigh. Second, he evokes the history of slavery in shaping enduring racialized worldviews and social hierarchies in Morocco:

The Arab and Muslim societies have been the last ones to get rid of this terrible reminder of ancient times. There remains something, still [...] the one who is whiter (the European, North American person) is superior; the darker (the black African person) is inferior. These two aspects refer to the same conception of the world and prolong the hierarchization of the pro-slave society: the whites on the top and the blacks at the bottom (Boukhari 2013).¹

¹ This and the other quotations from French are translated by the author. [Original in French: Les sociétés Arabes et Musulmanes ont été les dernières à se défaire de ce terrible reliquat de temps anciens. Il en reste toujours quelque chose [...] celui qui est plus clair (l’européen, nord-américain) est supérieur, le plus foncé (noir africain) est inférieur. Les deux

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In this passage, Boukhari suggests that the association of whiteness with advancement and blackness with backwardness and inferiority reveals the existence of a system of classification of individuals rooted in the history of slavery. Tracing continuities between past slavery and present racism, Boukhari highlights the persistence of colour prejudices and discriminations against black Africans as a fundamental racial legacy of slavery.

Boukhari's article is part of an emerging debate on racism and the legacies of slavery in Moroccan society. Other journal articles similarly have recently attempted to discuss current racial attitudes against sub-Saharan Africans in the light of the history of slavery. These articles seem to reflect in part an intent to rectify stigmatizing visions of sub-Saharan migrants and give historical depth to an issue of timely relevance. Whereas this debate contributes to rising awareness about the very difficult situation of the sub-Saharan African "transit" population, conflating the two issues—current racism and historical slavery—in linear and unproblematic ways may not help us to unravel the complexity of the social and political dynamics underway.

This paper seeks to unpack the issue of "anti-black racism" (*le racism anti-noir*) against the backdrop of increased violence against sub-Saharan Africans and the emergent debate on the legacies of slavery in Morocco.

In the last few years, the issue of racism has gained growing media visibility and political attention. International NGOs, Moroccan human rights organizations and sub-Saharan migrants' associations have come together to denounce institutional violence as well as widespread anti-black attitudes against these migrants. They call attention to everyday forms of violence and discrimination which sub-Saharan Africans suffer; for instance, they are addressed with a derogatory vocabulary, including *'abd* (literally meaning "slave" but also used as "black"), *hartani* (generally translated as "freed black" or "free black"; *haratine* pl.), and *'azzi* (contextually meaning black, negro or slave). In the wake of a dramatic rise in civil violence, King Mohammed VI announced in 2014 an exceptional regularization of undocumented migrants. In the same year, the national campaign titled "My name is not a negro" (Moroccan Arabic: *Ma smitish 'azzi*), along with the local campaign "I am Moroccan, I am African" organized by a NGO in Casablanca, contributed to giving public visibility to the issue of racism in Moroccan society. In March 2016, an international anti-racist campaign titled "Neither serfs nor negro: stop that's enough" (Arabic: *ma oussif, ma 'azzi: baraka wa yezzi*) was launched in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Mauritania.

versants renvoient à la même conception du monde et prolongent la hiérarchisation de la société esclavagiste : les blancs tout en haut et les noirs tout en bas.]

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The discussion about racism against sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco is not circumscribed by its connections to slavery and the slave trade. Nevertheless, this line of argument has gained prominence in the Moroccan independent press and online platforms. It also draws on the work of scholars exploring colour prejudices and racial discrimination in the history of slavery in North Africa. In this discussion, the research of Moroccan historian Chouki El Hamel, author of *Black Morocco: A history of Slavery, Race and Islam* (2013), occupies a prominent position. El Hamel's key argument is that the forced conscription of *haratine* in Sultan Moulay Ismail's 17th century black army—the *Abid El Bukhari*—contributed to the ideological foundation of a society divided by colour (El Hamel 2013: 10).

Taking the lead from El Hamel's work, Ian Law (2014) discusses the complex ways in which racialized slavery, along with the “Arabization” process that marked the formation of a national identity in postcolonial Morocco, contributed to racial prejudices against sub-Saharan African migrants, as well as to shaping the ways in which “racialized” individuals and groups are socially ranked today. Hamid Barhi (2014: 143-146) also connects current racism to the history of slavery. Mohamet Timéra (2011: 154), building on El Hamel, points out that stereotypical visions of the Black man as a “slave,” a “servant” and a “moral inferior” is particularly visible vis-à-vis sub-Saharan Africans. In his study on Muslim Senegalese migrants in Rabat (2011), Timéra shows how these stigmatizing visions engender specific forms of anti-black racism and social divisions between migrants and the local population.

I agree with these authors that the idea of anti-black racial attitudes and colour prejudices are rooted in a long history (which is not unique to Morocco and North Africa), but also share their focus on the present. Going against the grain of current Moroccan debates, I suggest in this paper that racism against sub-Saharan Africans cannot be conceptualized simply as a “living remnant” of Moroccan slavery history and its 17th century racialization. On the contrary, I contend that historically rooted anti-black prejudices are deeply entangled with and shaped by current media and political discourses, transnational geopolitics delegating border control to North African states and Morocco's position in the international political arena. This entanglement creates specific forms of racism and discrimination.

My discussion of anti-black racism draws on the diverse ways in which the people whom I interviewed during my fieldwork in Rabat in 2014, when both violence against sub-Saharan migrants and their regularization were considered hot topics, engaged with these debates. Specifically, I present the perspectives of six people: Dadier, a Cameroon activist in a local sub-

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Saharan migrants' association; Mohammed, a Moroccan man originally from the (southern) Dra'a Valley; Abdelrahmen, a young Moroccan man from Fes (a northern city); Ghazela, a high-class women in her 60s from Rabat; Amina, a middle-aged Moroccan activist for human rights and Messeret, an Eritrean student studying in Morocco since 2007.

More generally, this paper combines preliminary results of ethnographic research on blackness and racial attitudes carried out in Rabat between October and November 2014² with an analysis of grey literature (francophone Moroccan journal articles and magazines, official documents and NGOs' reports and online platforms), and with previous fieldwork carried out on several occasions in Morocco between 2008 and 2013. During my fieldwork in Rabat, I interviewed and informally discussed these issues with Moroccan human rights activists and ordinary Moroccans, members of sub-Saharan migrants' associations and sub-Saharan Africans living, working, studying or being "trapped" in the country on their way to Europe. Tracing the ways my interlocutors discussed racism and elaborated on their personal interpretations, my goal is to contribute to current academic debates on the racial legacies of slavery by offering nuanced perspectives on the "racial issue" characterizing Morocco today.

An emerging "racial issue"

Beyond slavery and the slave trade which historically contributed to the formation of an African diaspora in Morocco (for instance, Benachir 2001, 2005; Wright 2007; Hunwick, Troutt Powell 2007; El Hamel 2013), multiple mobilities (cultural, commercial and religious) have historically connected North and sub-Saharan Africa (for example, Peraldi 2011; Lanza 2011; McDougall, Scheele 2012). Since the 1990s, trans-Saharan migrations to and through Morocco have grown in the wake of political and economic developments, wars and humanitarian crisis within Africa, and especially Libya's break with the "Pan-African open-door policy" during the 200s that had attracted labour migration in previous decades (De Haas 2006; Jeandesboz, Pallister-Wilkins 2014: 127-128). The increasing illegalization (De Genova 2002) of labour migration towards Europe, together with European pressure on North African states to collaborate in joint border-control operations, have worsened the situation of "transit" migrants. In this changed geopolitical context, Morocco

² This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC Grant agreement n° 313737. I am grateful to El Hamel for having shared his thoughts with me in a few email exchanges and in an interview on his work. I am deeply indebted to Alice Bellagamba and Ann McDougall who generously engaged with previous versions of the paper and provided valuable comments.

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signed the bilateral agreement (2002) regulating the externalization and militarization of European borders on the Moroccan soil and, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in 2003, enacted a particularly strict migration law (Law 02–03). Following these developments, sub-Saharan “transit” migrations, which had been an important local business to date, have become an increasingly politicized issue (Natter 2013).

In 2005, the tragic events of Ceuta e Melilla became the focus of international and public attention (especially for the uninformed reader). Trans-Saharan transit migration has been constructed as a national problem; migrants have been increasingly stigmatized in the Moroccan press (Natter 2013). In 2012 for instance, the Francophone magazine *MarocHebdo* published a special issue entitled “The Black Peril (*Le peril noir*)” (N. 998, 2-8 November 2012), which featured migrants through a prism of stereotypes—drug dealers, thieves, prostitutes and HIV diseases. That said, these same developments have brought new social actors into the political arena (Martinez 2009; Natter 2013). Besides international NGOs, Moroccan human rights organizations have mobilised to provide material and legal support to sub-Saharan migrants, as well as denouncing state abuses. Migrants themselves have established associations to defend their rights and demand social inclusion, for example, the *Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc*, the *Collectif des Communautés Subsahariennes du Maroc*, and more recently, the *Association Lumière sur l’Emigration Clandestine au Maroc*. These organizations denounce police abuses during raids, arbitrary arrests and deportations to Oujda, the border town with the Algerian desert. More recently, they have been countering racism against migrants through sit-in and public demonstrations. In addition, the Democratic Organization of Labour (*Organization Democratique du Travail*) has set up a section for Immigrant Workers in Morocco, which is the first one in the Arab world, to protect the rights of migrant workers.



1. Sub-Saharan African migrant women in Rabat. Photo by L. Menin

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Following the increased visibility of sub-Saharan migrants in Moroccan cities and their media stigmatization, violent conflicts between Moroccans and migrants have emerged. In August 2013, Alexis Toussaint, a Congolese professor who was visiting Tangier, was arbitrarily arrested by police during a raid and died “falling out” of the police van. Fifteen days later, Ismail Faye, a young Senegalese, was stabbed by a Moroccan in the “Kamra” railway station in Rabat. Faye’s refusal to obey the request of a Moroccan man to move from his (assigned) seat next to a Moroccan woman on a bus travelling to Fes appears to have ignited the dispute. These murders triggered indignation among the migrants’ communities, and the *Association des ressortissants sénégalais résidant au Maroc* denounced this tragic event as a racist act (Gueye, 15 August 2013).

Some members of Parliament have mobilized around the “racial issue.” In July 2013, the opposition, Party Authenticity and Modernity, proposed a law to punish racism (Hartit, 22 July 2013). Criticizing the government’s management of the migration policy, King Mohammed VI called for a rethinking of its approach to migration. To respond to the social tensions and protect diplomatic interests with Senegal (with which Morocco has signed bilateral agreements regarding various sectors of socioeconomic cooperation between the two states), King Mohammed VI launched a new immigration policy.³ This policy, informed by the *Conseil National des Droits de l’Homme*’s report,⁴ included the process of regularizing undocumented migrants between January and December 2014. In spite of very restrictive criteria including certified residence in Morocco for five years and a formal job contract, this amnesty marked a shift in Morocco’s approach to migration.

Nevertheless, sub-Saharan migrants’ associations and human rights organizations have continued to denounce state practices of forcibly displacing “transit” migrants from northern border towns to coastal cities like Rabat and Casablanca (GADEM 2012: 147), where their presence intersects with that of African migrants who have worked and resided in Morocco since long. Following the brutal repression of some migrants’ attempts to cross the fences in (northern) Melilla in March 2013, a group of associations organized demonstration, sit-ins and the “No. 9 Stop violence at the borders” campaign to denounce the brutal use of force at the hands of both Moroccan and Spanish police.

³ Voir le Communiqué du cabinet royale, 13 Septembre 2013, <https://www.diplomatie.ma/Portals/0/Communiqu%C3%A9%202013/Communiqu%C3%A9snew.pdf>.

⁴ “Etrangers et droits de l’Homme au Maroc: pour une politique d’asile et d’immigration radicalement nouvelle” http://www.amb-maroc.fr/Dossiers/Conclusions_et_recommandations_def-2-2.pdf.

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2. The anti-racism campaign "My name is not 'azzi'"

It was in this political climate that the network *Papiers pour tous* organized the national campaign titled, "My name is not 'azzi," which received significant media coverage in Morocco. Some Moroccan activists and African migrants whom I met in Rabat considered this event as being important in opening up a debate, but also believed that the state should support educational projects with a particular focus on the younger generations, to promote social and political consciousness about racism. Some people defined this campaign as an expression of "bourgeois activism" and argued that Morocco has been an historically multiethnic and tolerant country in which 'azzi is an affectionate term (Bencheikh 2014; I also encountered this narrative in my fieldwork and will return to it below).



4. Democratic Organization of Labour (Organization Democratique du Travail), Immigrant Workers' section, National meeting, Rabat 25 October 2014. Photo by L. Menin

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Despite the attempts of some local associations and politicians to end racism, conflicts exploded in August 2014, when a Moroccan murdered a Senegalese in the poor neighbourhood named “Boukhalef” in Tangier (Crétois 2014). During my stay in Rabat, some sub-Saharan migrants’ associations were working together with Moroccan organizations to organize sit-ins, public events and press releases to call public attention to this escalation of violence. But depending upon their personal political orientation, these activists offered very different interpretations of what they thought was actually going on. Below (and in the following section), I allow their voices to explain.

Contemporary racism and historical slavery

Didier is a Cameroonian activist in the *Association Lumière sur la Migration Clandestine*. Discussing his participation in the anti-racist campaign “My name is not a negro,” he said that initially, he thought that only sub-Saharan Africans were subject to racism in Morocco. During the first day of the campaign, a Moroccan black man highlighted that black Moroccans, too, are victims of discrimination. Didier commented: “Suddenly I understood that for Moroccans, black is not just a colour, but also a social position and geographical origin. An American black person is reserved a special treatment, but a sub-Saharan black person is defined as a slave because there is a history behind him.”⁵ For Didier, Moroccans’ racial attitudes against the blacks reflect the history of the relations between diverse social groups in Morocco, but also reveal an identity politics that today look at Europe and seek to deny historical connections with Africa. He said: “This is not something that concerns only sub-Saharan Africans, but it also relates to the political relations between North Morocco and Europe. Moroccan people consider themselves somewhat like Europeans and try to distance themselves from the southerners.”

As Didier rightly reminded me, not all sub-Saharan migrants want to reach Europe. Some arrive in Morocco fleeing from wars or environmental catastrophes in their countries, or simply searching for better living and working conditions. Yet, he said: “We have found all the things that are connected with slavery: discrimination, stigmatization and racism.” Didier’s interpretation of anti-black racism in Morocco combines historically rooted prejudices with contemporary political dynamics and identity politics. However, his emphasis on the legacies of slavery and the ways these affect the social positions that sub-Saharan migrants come to occupy in Morocco seems to reflect a

⁵ This and the following quotations from Didier draw on an interview conducted in Rabat on 12 November 2014.

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relatively recent frame of analysis, one that the independent press and online—magazines popularize.

Since the early 2000s, the magazine *Jeune Afrique* has been breaking the silence on anti-black racism in the Maghreb by publishing testimonies of both Black Maghribians and sub-Saharan Africans (e.g. Mosbah 2004). In a controversial 2005 article, Smahane Bouyahia raised a heated online debate by describing the discrimination of both black Moroccans and sub-Saharan African migrants as a real problem, which, nevertheless, remains a “taboo topic” in Morocco. In November 2013, *Zamane*, a francophone and Arab-speaking Moroccan magazine devoted to history, published a special issue (2013, N. 36) titled “Why we are racist (*Pourquoi nous sommes racistes*).” This special issue included an interview with Chouki El Hamel, as well as various articles that explored the historical foundations of racism, slavery, ethnic divisions and discriminations in Morocco. An intimate link between current racism and pre-modern slavery was clearly drawn.

In *Black Morocco*, El Hamel argues that although in Morocco “race” (*l-irq*), with its intricate relations to ideas of genealogical origin (*asl*) and social status, cannot be reduced to colour, it was affected by the racialization of slavery in the 17th century. He documents how the creation of the army ‘*Abid al-Bukhari* [literally al-Bukhari’s slaves] by Sultan Moulay Isma’il (1646—1727) was a turning point in the social and political history of the Moroccan Sultanate (*al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*). To counter the sultanate’s political instability, Mulay Isma’il conscripted black slaves to create an army of black soldiers loyal to him alone, thereby establishing the hegemony of the ‘Alawite dynasty (1660—present). The ‘*Abid al-Bukhari*, also known as the “Black Army”, included not only black slaves and slave descendants, but also the *haratine* (see also Meyers 1977, 1983). *Haratine*, still a debated term, is generally translated as “freed blacks” or “free blacks” (i.e. Camps 1970; Taine-Cheikh, 1989; Wright 2007: 12); El Hamel (2013: 109—113) defines them as descendants of an agriculturalist population originally living in the fringes of the desert. According to him, the enslavement of the *haratine* has had important consequences in the socio-political history of Morocco. By consolidating the equation between slavery and blackness, Sultan Moulay Isma’il’s 17th century military and political enterprise contributed to “the ideological foundation of a society divided by colour.” (2013: 10).

El Hamel’s work is a rich and well-documented analysis of slavery, gender and race in Morocco from to the pre-Islamic era to the early colonial period; it offers a valuable contribution to the study of the history of slavery. El Hamel recognizes the complexity of early notions of race in the Moroccan Sultanate and their irreducibility to the American model of black-and-white polarization

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(2013: 92–103). Nevertheless, in his effort to create a universal racial watershed of the seventeenth century, he tends to underestimate the significance of regional differences and how they may have shaped perceptions of both class and race. Other scholars' regionally-based studies (for example, Ilihaïne 2004, Tafilelt; Ensel 1999, Dra'a Valley; Goodman 2012, 2013, Fes; Thompson 2005, the southwest) offer crucial insights into the differences that existed with respect to *haratine* and slave descendants' local situations. That said, it is worth emphasizing again the impact El Hamel's work is having in current explorations of racism and slavery in Morocco's independent press. For instance, in the interview published in *Zamane*, El Hamel argues: "The recent sub-Saharan migration has shown the extent to which racist attitudes are deeply rooted in Moroccan culture" (El Hamel 2013b: 62). He identifies the historical and cultural foundations of current racism against sub-Saharan migrants firmly in the history of Moroccan slavery.

An article significantly titled "Old racism, modern racism" (*Racism ancien, racisme moderne*) appears in the same issue. Written by journalist Abdellah Tourabi, it focuses on the existence of a solid racial hierarchy shaping a "culture of rejection and exclusion" (Tourabi 2013: 40): "The image of a harmonious and tolerant Moroccan society, where its components live in osmosis reveal myths and cliché. A deep social stratification and exclusive identity constructions have punctuated the history of Morocco and continue to manifest themselves in present times."⁶

In exploring the legacies of slavery in contemporary Morocco, Tourabi's article seeks to trace continuities between the historical enslavement of black Africans and current racism against sub-Saharan African migrants. He writes:

Another current manifestation of this culture of rejection and discrimination, where "the other" is perceived as inferior, is racism against sub-Saharan migrants [...] The origins of this mentality probably rest in the History of Morocco and the relations with blacks in our country. The past can enlighten the present, but not under the best auspices (2013: 41).⁷

Following El Hamel, Tourabi interprets current racism in the light of the racial legacy of slavery. This line of argument is also present in some journal articles published by the francophone magazine *TelQuel Maroc*. For instance, an article by Jules Crétois (2014) highlights the persistence

⁶ Original in French : L'image d'une société marocaine harmonieuse et tolérante ou ses différences composantes vivent en osmose relève plutôt du mythe et du cliché. Une forte stratification sociale et des constructions identitaires excluantes ont jalonné l'Histoire du Maroc et continuent encore à se manifester dans le temps présent.

⁷ Original in French : Autre manifestation actuelle de cette culture du rejet et de la discrimination, où "l'autre" est perçu comme inférieur, est le racisme contre les immigrés subsahariens. [...] Les origines qui sous-tendent cette mentalité résident probablement dans l'Histoire du Maroc et les rapports entretenus avec les noirs dans notre pays. Le passé pour éclairer le présent, mais pas sous ses meilleurs auspices.

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of racial prejudice in Morocco. Quoting El Hamel among other scholars, Crétois traces the central aspects of the history of black slavery in Morocco, describing “A long history that allows us to better understand the present and racist reflexes still present in Morocco.”

Arguably, articles such as this one reflect a growing attention to the history of slavery as well as its contemporary legacies as reflected in the ways Moroccan society reacts to sub-Saharan migrants. This linear connection between historical slavery and current racism works as a powerful narrative to give visibility to the difficult situation of sub-Saharan migrants. On the other hand, this narrative risks obscuring the complexity of “blackness” in Morocco. First, it puts all black-skinned people—be they slave descendants, *haratine* or sub-Saharan Africans—into the same analytical and social category. Second, it fails to recognize the different local histories and social trajectories of black people in Morocco over time. And third, in searching for the cultural and historical foundation of current anti-black racism, this line of argument jeopardizes its potential political dimension, paradoxically, ending up offering an ahistorical interpretation of racism.

Against the backdrop of growing social tensions and emerging public debates on racism and slavery, in the following sections my interlocutors discuss anti-black racism. Even though their thoughts and statements reflect their personal “situatedness” (Haraway 1988) in time and place—namely, Rabat in 2014, they offer us a deeper appreciation of the complexity involved in these issues.

Beginning the conversation: the meaning of ‘azzi

According to Hsain Ilahiane (2006: 67), the term *‘azzi* (pl. *‘awazza*) was originally used in relation to the Bambara, a particular sub-Saharan ethnic group. Outside Tafilalet, Ilahiane argues, *‘azzi* has also been used with reference to *haratine*. This term came to be (mis)used over time as a generic for “sub-Saharan black/slave” (McDougall, personal communication, July 2016). In the context of my fieldwork in Rabat, most of my interlocutors translated the term *‘azzi* as “negro” or “black,” overlaid with a derogatory meaning. The people whom I met during my fieldwork in the region of Tadla (Central Morocco) agreed with these translations. In Rabat, kids shouted “*‘azzi*” when black Africans passed in the street. More discreetly, this term was also directed at black Moroccans as much in commentary of their inferior social position as a specific reference to their colour (a point I return to, below).

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For Mohamet Timéra (2011: 148), who encountered this term during his fieldwork with sub-Saharan migrants in Rabat, 'azzi is the dialectal equivalent of the Arabic term 'abd (literally, "slave"), used in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya to insult African migrants and refugees. These semantic shifts deserve further attention.

Upon arrival in Rabat, when I was orienting myself towards what appeared to be a sensitive topic, I met Mohammed, a man in his fifties originally from Tata, in the (southern) Dra'a Valley. He ran a small real estate agency in Rabat. Mohammed's skin colour and his geographical region of origin suggest *hartani* identity. Discussing racist discrimination against sub-Saharan migrants, Mohammed complained that racism in Moroccan society also involves Black Moroccans even though it is often denied or downplayed. He told me: "I am often called 'azzi in the street, but I say 'No, I am not a 'azzi'." When I asked the meaning of this term, Mohammed replied without hesitation that 'azzi means 'abd (slave). "Our skin is black, but the heart is white (*jilda dyalna khala walaqin l-qalb byed*)," Mohammed concluded. This idiomatic expression, which associates the whiteness of the heart to moral purity, stresses the moral integrity of black Moroccans. This is one way in which the *haratine* in Ziz Oasis (Tafilalet region, southern Morocco), for instance, reverse racial prejudices and construct their modern identity (Ilhiane 2004). It is also worth noting that Mohammed's vision of racism is very much shaped by his experience in Rabat, namely, being called by the derogatory term 'azzi in the street; his situation in Tata might be quite different.

Unlike Mohammed, the majority of the people with whom I spoke denied that there was a connection between blackness and slavery implied in the term; they agreed however, that the meaning of 'azzi is offensive. Some argued that the term is the equivalent of *khol*, which they said indicates "black/dark-skinned" in a neutral fashion; it is commonly used among friends as a playful nickname without any racist connotation. Among these was Abdelrahmen, a young man who belongs to a *shorfa* family from Fes. *Fassi* (literally "from Fes") bourgeoisie have historically retained commercial, economic and political power in Morocco. *Shorfa* claim patrilineal descent from the Prophet Mohammed through his daughter Fatima, and are considered to have *baraka* (grace). In addition to being deserving of respect and enjoying high social status, *shorfa* were historically accorded social and economic power. This has become increasingly contested in past decades; in 1985, for example the honorific title of *shorfa* on the national identity card was formally abolished (Ensel, 1999: 153, 162).

In discussing the meaning of 'azzi, Abdelrahmen cautioned me not to interpret Moroccan racial attributes as necessarily intrinsically racist. In his view, "racism" in Morocco is different from the

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United States or Europe because skin colour is not a discriminating factor. To substantiate his point, he said that most Moroccans are dark-skinned and call themselves “black head (*ras khal*).” He explained that even though his skin is brown (*smar*), he perceives himself as “white” because of his Arab origin, thereby highlighting his understanding of the complexity of racial attribution in Morocco. He recounted a conversation he had had with a friend when he was enrolling in an American college. He was required to specify his ethnicity in the online application form. Looking at the list, he instinctively ticked the box “white.” “Why did you mark ‘white’? You are not white!” said the friend, stressing that the colour of Abdelrahmen’s skin was brown (*smar*) and not white. “She was right, I am brown (*smar*),” Abdelrahmen acknowledged laughing. Yet he considered himself to be an Arab, he perceived himself as “white.” “I am Arab and I am white,” he concluded. More than colour, he stressed, a person’s *asl* (geographical and genealogical origin) positions him/her in social hierarchy. Abdelrahmen’s vision is consistent with El Hamel’s argument that the notion of “race” evokes the concepts of “root,” “origin” and “source” (El Hamel 2013a: 98, 2013b: 62). Not everybody, however, accepts this version; for instance, Abdelrahmen’s friend defined “race” in terms of colour.

When I reported my conversation with Mohammed to Abdelrahmen, he replied that people like Mohammed feel outraged if called ‘*azzi* because it resonated with their family history, referring implicitly here to a servile origin or low status. He admitted that the term ‘*azzi* can be used as an insult but that this mostly happens with respect to sub-Saharan African migrants. In his view, they are not welcome in Morocco. Among friends or relatives, on the other hand, ‘*azzi* is used as a playful nickname, and is not considered at all offensive. In other words, Abdelrahmen contends that the uses and meanings of ‘*azzi* are contextual and depend on the nature of the relationships existing among people involved.

An “innocent racism”

Like Abdelrahmen, other interlocutors stressed that racism in Morocco is very different from the harsh discrimination practised against black people in the US or in Europe because it involved neither violence nor segregation. Ghazela, a wealthy woman in her early sixties, defined Moroccans’ attitudes towards black people as an “innocent racism.” She admitted that everyday language reflects anti-black attitudes. Even as she emphasized that white slaves also existed, she said, “Moroccans feel a sense of superiority over the blacks. Low status jobs cannot be performed

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by high social class white people.”⁸ She describes the sense of superiority toward black people as being deeply interwoven with a person’s origin (*asl*) and social status. When asked about black Moroccans, Ghazela described them as Moroccans but as a group apart, referring to them as “they” (*homa*). Even terms that are more inclusive subtly underlie difference: “Yes, they are Moroccans” she said, “like the Jews.”

From the time of the French Protectorate, *haratine* could find alternatives to agricultural work as sharecroppers (*khammas*) in the wage labour of the coastal cities or in migration (seasonal or annual) to French Algeria and Europe. Ilahiane (2001, 2002: 109, 2004) noted that this allowed some *haratine* from Ziz Oasis to accumulate resources to buy land. Alternately, others found themselves further exploited by French forced labour in Morocco and/or recruitment to the coal mines of northern France. Thanks to the nationalist policy of mass education promoted in the two decades following Moroccan independence (1956), some people with humble origins accessed education and experienced upward social mobility. Yet despite these societal changes, Ghazela acknowledged that a number of social functions and jobs continue to be implicitly associated with blackness: “Even when a black person becomes important, behind his back people always comment ‘Look at that ‘*azzi* where he is!’.” While the situation may be different according to region and Ghazela’s statements obviously reflect her own personal experience, it is worth noting that her words underline the fact that a person’s economic success does not completely wash away his or her “social colour.”

That said, she promptly made clear that racism in Morocco is not intrinsically “bad (French: *méchant*)” insofar as it does not intentionally aim to harm nor has it violent implications. Ghazela stressed the difference between Moroccan and French racism: “Moroccans are a bit racist. White people do have a sense of superiority towards the blacks, but differently from France [the French], there is no malevolence.” Ghazela’s observations are significant in another way as well: whereas academics usually compare Islamic (or “Oriental”) slavery with American slavery and the different forms of racism these institutions generated, Ghazela’s comparison drew attention to her own different concept of racism: namely, the French protectorate and racism experienced by Moroccan migrants abroad.

⁸ Quotations from Ghazela draw on many conversations we had between October and November 2014.

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A political issue

In an interview for the Moroccan magazine *TelQuel*, Mehdi Alioua (2014), sociologist and founder of the antiracist association GADEM, argued that the state and the police have a big responsibility to prevent violence in certain neighbourhoods. An activist in a Moroccan organization for human rights, whom I will call Amina, shares his opinion. In her view, the stigmatizing visions conveyed in media and political discourses which are, in turn, the consequence of violent transnational migration policies, deeply affect the difficult situation of black Africans in Morocco. For Amina, the situation has changed in the last few years as violence has escalated against sub-Saharan African migrants:

Before there was an “everyday racism” but not to the point of killing, no! Today, the state pushes people to collaborate with this discriminatory policy. Insults and discrimination have always existed, but today the state fuels violence. This policy began in 2012.⁹

Besides deporting undocumented migrants to the border city of Oujda, Amina stressed that police started forcibly dislocating migrants from makeshift encampments set up in the forests surrounding northern cities, to marginal neighbourhoods of Rabat. She also noted that some politicians, whom she defined as “fundamentalist,” emphasize the differences in the migrants’ religion. Amina reckoned that among Moroccans in general, there is a sense of superiority vis-à-vis sub-Saharan Africans but that Moroccans are not racist; relationships with sub-Saharan migrants have long been peaceful. In her view, some racist expressions are simply inherent in everyday language:

Today, a minority of people who are sensitive to the issue of racism use the term *lwiin* (coloured people) to refer to dark-skinned people. The Moroccan language is a bit racist: calling the blacks ‘*azzi*’ is considered to be normal. ‘*Azzi*’ is used to indicate a black, but also means a slave, because black and slave can be synonyms. This is part of common language. We also say *les Africains*, even though we Moroccans are Africans, too.

To have a grasp of anti-black attitudes in Morocco, Amina said it is important to keep in mind local hierarchies of status and power. Moreover, there exist different forms of racism in Morocco:

Fassi people consider themselves and are considered by others to be the top, while the peasants are considered as socially inferior. Certain prejudices against the blacks stem from the fact that among the *fassi* and in the royal palace alike, there were black servants. The *makhzen*’s [the political system, the power, the royal palace] staff was black and

⁹ This and other quotations from Amina drawn on an interview conducted in Rabat, 21 October 2014.

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this is still considered normal. The King appears on TV accompanied by black people wearing *tarbush* [a traditional wooden red hat), a white tunic and [carrying] a stick. In *fassi* families, you can still find black house-cleaners and domestics. That's why there are white-skinned and black-skinned *fassi*. There are laws that declare equality, but reality is different.

As Amina's words emphasize, the bourgeoisie of Fes as well as the *Makhzen* itself, were among the main slave owners. Even so, slavery was also widespread also in the southern regions. As Mohammed Ennaji (1998: 18) has noted: "In XIX century Morocco, a person's power derived from his entourage: family, slaves, thugs, clients and allies." Domestic slavery and concubinage were deeply rooted in Moroccan traditional understandings of power, wealth and prestige (Botte 2010: 158-159; Aouad 2004; Ennaji 1998: 4-10). The French Protectorate (1912-1956), represented by the Résident General Louis Hubert Lyautey (1854-1934), based its legitimacy on the policies of social conservatism and non-interference in matters of religion and local traditions. Consequently, the Protectorate tried to limit the most visible forms of slave trading and public purchase in local slave markets and to mediate between local reality and the expectations of international abolitionist pressures (Goodman 2013, Pennel 2000: 158-166). Neither during the French Protectorate nor after Morocco's independence was slavery officially abolished (Botte 2010: 145-186). Only Morocco's Fundamental Law of 1961 and subsequent Constitution in 1962 sanctioned the equality of all citizens. According to David Goodman (2012: 145), slavery disappeared only gradually in the period following independence and even then, due to the social and economic changes that affected Moroccan society and the institution of the family—not because of formal policy.

Amina's words suggest that history continues to affect current power relations amongst Moroccans, as well as shaping predominating visions of "blackness." As she remarked, social differences based on skin-colour and status are deeply rooted in Moroccan society: "The state is the first institution in which these differences are institutionalized. Many people did not even realize that they are racist." These racial prejudices, in her view, affect the ways in which sub-Saharan migrants are treated and socially ranked as part of what she defined as "everyday racism." Today everyday racism is worsened by institutional racism and state-sponsored violence. Messeret, an Eritrean student (who we meet below), shares Amina's reflections that a rarely problematized "everyday racism" is rooted in Moroccan common language and public culture.

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An exploited issue

I met Messert at the *cit  universitaire* of Rabat, a residence for international students.¹⁰ A student from Eritrea who has lived in Morocco since 2007, Messeret is part of the *Conf d ration des  tudiants et stagiaires Africains au Maroc* (CESAM); as such he has a broad grasp of the situation of African students in Morocco.¹¹ He emphasized though, that he was sharing his own thoughts as a student, he was not speaking as a representative of CESAM. Like other sub-Saharan African students and young professionals whom I met in Rabat, he was surprised that anti-black racism is widespread in Morocco. While he reckoned that racism is present everywhere, he underlined that it has particular implications in contexts where there are unbalanced power relations between groups. His sense is that in Morocco, racism is based on skin colour: it targets not only sub-Saharan migrants, but is also widespread against black Moroccans. When I said that, in theory, in the Moroccan model, “one drop” of white blood identifies a person as Arab, and hence privileged, (El Hamel, interview 2014), he countered that when a black person goes on the street he/she is called ‘*azzi*, regardless’ his/her father’s origin.

In his view, the recent attention to racism is a political issue provoked by the diplomatic tensions emerging in the aftermath of the killing of some Senegalese. It is precisely for this reason, he claimed, that the King launched a regularization of undocumented migrants. “It’s just a political issue, because in fact, documents do not bring integration or help one to get a job, and most migrants continue to live at the margins.” He said that most struggles and protests are politicized. “Human rights activists now come to talk to us, but we prefer to remain a non-political association. CESAM was founded in 1991 and since then, no one has ever come to ask students.” His view is that there has always been racism against [all] blacks.

In Messeret’s opinion, racism affects sub-Saharan Africans but also black Moroccans from southern regions. He said that although this is inscribed in the power relations among these particular groups (that are part of a specific history), sub-Saharan Africans are ranked in the same category as “blacks.” “The difference,” he added, “is that Moroccans blacks are still Moroccans, whereas students suffer a double form of discrimination because they are both black-skinned and foreigners. The fact that they are far away from home and stigmatized in media and political discourses, creates further difficulties”. In fact, my Moroccan interlocutors distinguished clearly

¹⁰ All quotations from Messeret draw on a long interview carried out at the *cit  universitaire*, Rabat, on 27 October 2014.

¹¹ On sub-Saharan African students in Rabat and in Morocco, see also Berriane 2009, Infantino 2011.

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between different types of blacks, be they descendants of slaves, *haratine* or sub-Saharan Africans, highlighting the fact that the former categories are “Moroccan” and “Muslim.”

They distinguished, moreover, among different categories of sub-Saharan Africans. In Beni Mellal, a medium-sized town in Central Morocco, the families of some of the student interlocutors used to invite foreign college students to eat *cous cous* after the Friday sermon or during Ramadan, considering it shameful to leave alone people far from home during important religious celebrations. But the transit population with which they did not have direct contact (few migrants were present in Beni Mellal at the time), was subject to biases that reflected the stigmatization conveyed in the national media. Arguably, the situation may be different in a city like Rabat, where the same intimacy with foreign students might not exist. However, what Messeret wanted to emphasize was that Moroccans accord black African migrants and students alike a status of inferiority vis-à-vis Moroccans.

Messeret said that the majority of sub-Saharan African students at the *cit  universitaire* have experienced moral violence, thefts, and physical aggressions at the hand of Moroccans even in daylight. Besides suffering forms of physical and verbal aggression in the street, they encounter various forms of racism, including “intellectual racism”. He told me he was touched by the fact that the professors and Moroccan students alike referred to foreign students as “You, the Africans (*vous les africains*)” or “our African friends (*nos amis les africains*).” He said: “Moroccans and all North African countries, feel superior, feel they are European, but are themselves African.” Many international students find it difficult to create bonds of friendship with them and therefore tend to remain among themselves. Messeret highlighted that he is fluent in Arabic and most Moroccans refer to blacks with insulting terms. Even his Moroccan friends openly call him ‘*azzi*’ considering it normal. In Messeret’s view, this is a matter of education. “Children learn the word ‘*azzi*’ and learn to despise the blacks from their parents. This attitude is so ingrained that they are not even aware of being racist.”

Conclusion

Growing public attention to the difficult situation of sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco has recently opened a debate on the issue of “anti-black racism,” in turn paralleled by a public reflection on the history of slavery and its racial legacies in contemporary Morocco. Both racism and slavery, previously been taboo topics (El Hamel 2002) in Moroccan society, have come to be

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discussed and debated (in conjunction with each other as well as separately), in the independent press (including online platforms). When these topics are debated together and slavery functions as an explanation for racism, some conceptual and analytical problems arise. Whereas the parallel between past and present racisms offers a powerful narrative to draw attention to the difficult situation of many sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, one should be wary about pushing the parallel too far.

As I have tried to argue, conflating past slavery and current racism in linear and unproblematic ways may risk obscuring, more than revealing, historical and political dimensions of the different and complex issues and powers at play. One immediate effect of this unproblematized parallel between past and present is to overshadow the complexity and multiplicity of the lived experiences of being black in different times and regions of Morocco, putting diverse social categories of people with their own history, personal trajectories and understanding thereof, into the same analytical category. Racism appears to be a universal and *atemporal* phenomenon rather than a very situated experience resting on specific power relations, with specific socioeconomic implications. The narrative that situates sub-Saharan African migrants within the general category of “socially black,” along with slave descendants and *haratine*, pushes onto the background not only the variety of positions and experiences of being sub-Saharan African in Morocco but also the specific powers at play in different types of racism.

As Alice Bellagamba (2016) has argued, the legacies of slavery and its lived effects on flesh-and-bones people today are varied and diverse. For this reason, it is fundamental to listen to what people say about their situations and the broader forces shaping these. Following this lead, I have tried to demonstrate that only through a careful contextualization may we offer some insights into questions that are otherwise difficult to unpack. My exploration into anti-black racism, with the public debates and demonstrations that its entrance into the political sphere triggered, took place in Rabat in 2014. At that time, this issue was considered by most of my interlocutors not only to be of timely relevance but also of a particularly sensitive nature—both in a context marked by growing social tensions and violence.

From different angles, the varied ways my interlocutors reflected on racism offer important insights into the social and political dynamics underway in Morocco today. They suggest that things are more complicated than the *pre-modern slavery-current racism* argument suggests. Most interlocutors of mine agreed that historically-rooted anti-black prejudices continue to affect local constructions of “blackness” and some of them argued that this complex set of racial

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prejudices contributes to shaping what they have called “an everyday racism.” This includes, for instance, certain assumptions about the place that blacks are expected to occupy in Moroccan society, the use of a derogatory vocabulary to refer to black people, and the subtle lines of social division that emerge often in unexpected ways. Like Abdelrahmen, others tended to identify “real” racism with the systems that have historically practiced racial segregation and legal exclusion of the black populations, such as those in the United States of America and South Africa; or in Ghazela’s view, in the colonial experience and in the discriminations that many Moroccans have experienced in France. They also highlight that colour is not the only marker of discrimination, racism in Morocco being intimately connected to status and genealogical and geographical origin.

Sub-Saharan African migrants and students, albeit in different ways, feel that they are affected by historical race-constructs situating blacks in inferior positions. Beyond experiencing what Amina calls “everyday racism,” however, they are also subjected to other forms of discrimination connected to their condition as foreigners; the anxieties that the so-called *les subsahariens* trigger is a novel figure of social alterity constructed in transnational migration policies of border control and local media discourses. As some of my interlocutors suggested, historically rooted racial prejudices combine in complex ways with current media political constructions of “Africans” and “blacks” as “inferior” people; the intertwining of past and present engenders forms of violence and discrimination targeting specifically sub-Saharan Africans. According to El Hamel (2015, interview) “North African Arabic documents since the 11th century referred to West Africa as the *Bilad as-Sudan* (land of the blacks) and often associated this land to slavery and inferior cultural status.” The conquest of the *Bilad as-Sudan* was also related to its economic value and resources, as well as the political expansion of an Islamic caliphate (Wright 2007). In contrast, the vision of Africa as poor, underdeveloped and miserable emerging in some interlocutors’ reflections as well as in “common sense knowledge,” is far more recent. Even though stigmatized visions of Africa and Africans are not unique to Morocco (Troutt Powell 2012: 331; Bensaad 2012: 100), they have had important implications for Moroccan society. From different angles, my interlocutors’ reflections suggest that racism in Morocco is neither a unified nor an ahistorical phenomenon. On the contrary, it emerges as a multi-faceted and historically specific phenomenon which is deeply entangled in contemporary socio-political and economic circumstances. Different groups and social categories are consequently positioned according to their individual engagement with these dynamics.

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