

Shadows of Slavery

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

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“I wish I did not understand Arabic!” Living as a black migrant in contemporary Tunisia

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Abstract

After the fall of former dictator Ben Ali in 2011, questions of race have come to the forefront in Tunisia, along with the quests for equality for ethnic minorities. Several associations and TV programs began tackling the everyday reality of social discrimination and violent attacks suffered by Black Tunisians and Black Foreign Nationals. Their discourse, however, tends to borrow the concept of human rights and values from the West, and rests ideologically and linguistically on American models—Martin Luther King—, French words—*racisme*—, and on an idea of race which risks to conflate Blacks' categories and to overlook different historical trajectories behind every actor. Addressing life histories of Black sub-Saharan new comers in the Southern region of Mednine allowed me to question racial concepts in Southern Tunisia by drawing comparisons with the other biggest group of Blacks who were present on the same territory: Black slave descendants. This paper suggests that Blackness in this region is an ascription from the outside, and does not confine in one trait, that is, colour. It points at a conceptualization of race where racial prejudices are constructed, and come at play with other coordinates: lineage, Arab ethnocentrism, institutional and legal positioning, and the status of outsiders.

Introduction

Under a scorching, blazing sun, a few dozen sub-Saharan migrants have been staying on a desert plain in Southern Tunisia, at the border with Libya, since 2011. Torn, threadbare tents, left by the UNHCR, serve as the only shelter for these refugees fleeing the Libyan crisis, triggered by the UN intervention and the subsequent assassination of former dictator Muammar Qaddafi on 20 October 2011. The Libyan crisis is considered the second most severe migration crisis in the region since the first Gulf War in the 1990s, and led to a reduction in new waves of migration (Abdelfattah 2011). Migrants escaping 2011 Libya at first were of many nationalities (Libyans, Arabs residing in the country, Asians, and sub-Saharans) but later this extremely severe humanitarian crisis also affected Black sub-Saharans from Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Chad, Liberia, and others countries (MPC Migration Profile: Libya, 2013) who worked in Libya on a seasonal or permanent basis.

“You hear it on the street, ‘slave,’ ‘servant,’ ‘monkey,’ that’s how they call us,” tells Mohammed from Sudan. Hosted in the South-Eastern, most conservative part of Tunisia, the Governorate of Mednine, sub-Saharan migrants experience everyday discrimination in the form of verbal racism and violent physical attacks. While Arab refugees (Palestinians, Syrians, and Egyptians) were quickly absorbed by Tunisian society and White Foreign Nationals (Italians, Croatians, South Asians) were hastily repatriated, sub-Saharans are still out under the sun without running water,

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

toilets, and food. Might Blackness alone explain this difference? Is there a connection between those former workers and Tunisia's historical links with slavery and with captives trapped in the trans-Saharan slave trade? Does Blackness reconnect those people captured in raids and kept in chains with these modern-day, voluntary, trans-Saharan migrants or is colour not sufficient to explain their extremely deprived situation? How are these refugees placed in pre-existing social categories and how are they racialized?

Engaging with these questions, in this paper I will explore these migrants' everyday encounters—and clashes—with Southern Tunisia's society and racial prejudices, in the light of the country's longstanding historical involvement in slavery and abolition. My argument is that newcomers, in this case the sub-Saharan refugees fleeing 2011 Libya, suffer similar verbal and social discrimination Black Tunisians usually have to cope with, and which are in most cases an embodiment of the heritage of slavery. Differently from Black Tunisians, though, sub-Saharan African refugees lack not only residence permits, but, most importantly, a genealogical affiliation to a society where kinship is considered to be essential, and this exacerbates their political and economic vulnerability. It is precisely the absence of an Arab lineage, as I argue in this paper, what makes these migrants "Black." Blackness in Tunisia is an historical cultural construction originating even before the Islamic conquest, with skin colour certainly being a key feature, but entailing a complex mixture of ideas about bodies, ancestry, religious morality, and behavior. If Black sub-Saharan Africans are being discriminated on the basis of their skin colour, then, their marginal status is the outcome of various factors, and the result of centuries of stratification of changing understandings about race and structures of racialized relations.

My reflections are grounded in ethnographic work carried out among refugees hosted in the former camp of Choucha, in the Governorate of Mednine from February to April, 2015. During this period, I got in touch with two activists from a refugee camp in Southern Tunisia and visited the camp several times, helping out with the writing of open letters to the UNHCR and to national institutions. I also attended the activists' activities during the World Social Forum in Tunis in March, 201. This is part of a broader research project I am currently conducting in the Governorate of Medenine, where I am questioning old-slavery categories and the legacy of slavery which shapes the understanding of Black Tunisians' every-day activities and practices. Collecting Choucha refugees' life histories helped me rethink racial categories, breathing new life into the long-standing, historical debate on slavery, the legacy of slavery, and race in Tunisia.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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



1. Jaffara, road heading to Libya

Into and out of Libya: migration policies and the outbreak of the Libyan crisis

The 2011 Libyan crisis and the subsequent UN military intervention had a profound impact on international migration movements. Libya, with its dynamic economic growth, estimated at 6 percent annum (Abdelfattah 2011), has always been a country of immigration since as early as the 1960s, when the discovery of oil and other hydrocarbons attracted cheap manpower, both Arab (from Tunisia and Egypt) and sub-Saharan through the “Libyan migration corridor,” (Bredeloup, Pliez 2011) that is the transit desert area used by illegal sub-Saharan migrants to reach Southern Libya. The “Libyan corridor,” however, did not emerge with the discovery of oilfields, and the Sahara has never been an insurmountable barrier; rather, it was shaped by traders and pastoral communities long before the arrival of economic migrants, marking out different routes between Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Libya.

Gaddafi played a major role in attracting or rejecting this cheap, unskilled manpower: promoting Pan-African policies from the 1990s onwards, he prompted a rapid increase in the number of sub-Saharans in the country (Adelfattah 2011). CENSAD (Community of Sahelian-Saharan States) was created with the aim of the free circulation of people in 1998 and Libya was both a transit country and a destination for the increased number of people crossing the Sahara. In

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

both cases, the migrants' stay in Libya remained highly precarious and they were subject to the arbitrary decisions of the Libyan police: differentiating between regular and irregular migrants became an increasingly difficult task for the Libyan authorities. Most migrants complained of being victims of abusive and discriminatory treatment by Libyan officials.¹ Karim, 37 years old from Ghana, lived in Tripoli under the constant threat of expulsion and harassment.

They come to collect everything from you. Imagine, my friend! They come and ask you the documents, they call it *iqāmah* [the word *iqāmah* refers in the Arab world to a long-term visa for a foreign national. In Libyan it is a stamp on the foreigner's passport]. This is just how they are doing to Blacks. Even if you have an *iqāmah* you're not safe. People with *iqāmah* because the company did it for them. The police rips it off from your passport and ask you where is your *iqāmah*? And then I am taken to prison without *iqāmah*. They catch you, without reasons. Libya: it's not a country, it's a stress.

Following UN Resolution 1973 and the consequent imposition of a no-fly zone, migrants fleeing from the collapsing Libya went mainly to Tunisia (44.9 %) and Egypt (31.6 %), two countries already suffering the post-revolutionary economic slowdown,² and to Niger and Chad (MPC Migration Profile: Libya, 2013).

Part of the “Colonel’s blackmailing”—the term used for the retaliation against the NATO attack (Cuttitta 2012)—consisted in letting hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants leave from the Libyan coasts. He himself told Western journals that he was ready to turn “Europe Black.”³ Arson from Ivory Coast was rescued by the Tunisian navy after a shipwreck: “I was the only one not paying the boat. One day some officials picked me up from work and brought me to the coast. They pushed me on a boat with rifles and I had to leave. The boat shipwrecked and I found myself in Tunisia,” says Claude, 29-year-old Ivorian. An official report by the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Franco Frattini in 2011 stated: “It was Gaddafi who sent foreigners to Lampedusa!”⁴

¹ Likewise Tunisia, Libya is without a national asylum system but the UNHCR is informally tolerated. The interim constitution of August 2011 prohibits the extradition of political refugees.

² For a detailed account of post-revolutionary economic scenarios in Libya and Egypt, see Abdelfattah 2011.

³ He repeated his threat several times, to Italian newspapers and in a long, exclusive interview with “Le Journal du Dimanche”: <http://www.lejdd.fr/International/Afrique/Actualite/Exclusif-L-interview-integrale-accordee-par-Mouammar-Kadhafi-au-JDD-278745>.

⁴ <http://www.stranieriinitalia.it/attualita/attualita/attualita-sp-754/frattini-gheddafi-comandava-i-flussi-dimmigrati-verso-lampedusa.html>.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

Reports about beatings of Black Libyans⁵ and Black Foreign Nationals spread in foreign newspapers and on the net. In spite of the accusations of being Gaddafi's supporters, many sub-Saharanans were involved neither in politics nor in the military. Karim, 37 year old from Ghana, states bitterly: "I don't even know who is Gaddafi. In Libya when you're walking on a road like this, as long as you're a Black, young boys would do like this [chasing to kill]. You live in a house, they enter your house like this and ask for money." "I woke up one morning and my neighbors came to me screaming: 'they are coming, they are coming to take Africans to kill them'. So I decided to leave" adds Tropique, 29 year old, from Ivory Coast. Many Black Libyans and Black African migrants were lynched, increasing the number of IDPs (Internally Displaced People), who numbered 56,544 in September, 2014.⁶ Subsequently, many sub-Saharan Nationals decided finally to leave the country, and the first area to be targeted by this massive flow of refugees was Southern Tunisia.



2. Choucha refugees begging for water, food, and money on the main street

⁵ See Tawergha's example: <https://humanrightsinvestigations.org/2011/09/26/libya-ethnic-cleansing-tawargha-genocide/>.

⁶ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/libya/figures-analysis>.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

The establishment of Choucha in Jaffara

In spite of fears of a “Biblical exodus”⁷ of sub-Saharanans from North Africa to the Southern European border, foreign Nationals fled in huge numbers to neighbouring countries. “I stayed, hidden, for many weeks, but one night they entered in my apartment, tied me, threatened me with a gun, and robbed my belongings. I said ‘well, I have to leave’.” continues 29-year-old Tropique. The composition of these migration waves towards Tunisia was very heterogeneous, the sub-Saharanans who fled Libya differing profoundly by nationality, job, length of stay in Libya, age, and life trajectories. They were often reported to have been refused direct entry into Tunisia and Egypt. The UNHCR described the situation in March 2011 as a “humanitarian disaster” and warned that “a large number of sub-Saharan Africans are not being allowed entry into Tunisia at this point.”⁸ Along with “Egyptians, Tunisians, Turks and a (...) steady number of Libyans”,⁹ sub-Saharanans joined the flow which was recorded at almost 4,000 persons a day crossing the Tunisian/Libyan border before the fall of the Colonel.¹⁰ Blacks were not, however, the only targets of violence and petty criminality; on the contrary, several refugees from different nationalities told Tunisian authorities that they had been waiting along the border on the Libyan side with some “gangsters” who repeatedly threatened them with knives and confiscated their phones and money.¹¹

The numbers of displaced people during the Libyan crisis are difficult to estimate: at the peak of the “humanitarian disaster” in May, 2011, 746,000 persons fled from Libya,¹² and were sheltered in hastily built, overflowing refugee camps in Tunisia and Egypt. The refugee camp of Choucha was created on 24 February 2011, 7 km away from the frontier outpost of Ras Jedir and 25 km away from the next village, Ben Gardene, on a low-lying plain called Jaffara, in the South-East Tunisian Governorate of Medenine. The camp was not the only one built in response to the Libyan refugees’ crisis: Remada, El Hayet, and Tataouine camps are nowadays all closed but they hosted, like

⁷ In the words of former Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8343963/Libya-Italy-fears-300000-refugees.html>.

⁸ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/africa-mideast/at-a-tense-border-crossing-a-systematic-effort-to-keep-black-africans-out/article1925955/>.

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ This is what *Globe and Mail* correspondent Doug Sanders reports live in a recording at the frontier on 24 February 2011: http://beta.images.theglobeandmail.com/archive/01208/Doug-am-0224_1208682a.MP3.

¹¹ This was the report of a Bangladeshi to The New York Times:
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/world/africa/04refugee.html?_r=0.

¹² <http://theweek.com/articles/484872/libyas-devastating-refugee-crisis-by-numbers>.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

Choucha, Sub-Saharan, Palestinians, Libyans, and Syrians fleeing violence and harassment, and seeking to start the application procedure for refugee status.

During the two years the UNHCR opened it—the UNHCR officially closed it in 2013, following the rejection of the asylum requests of the remaining asylum-seekers and the resettlement of those entitled to refugee documents—the camp was provided with running water, cafés, electricity, language courses and other facilities. The provision of food and water were stopped by the UNHCR in October 2012 and after 2013 all that remained were military personnel patrolling the border. Currently¹³ 70 people live in Choucha without running water and electricity, begging food and money on the main road leading to Libya.

In the middle of the desert, closer to Libya than to Tunisia, on the plain of Jaffara, it is evident that there is very little possibility of integrating refugees into Tunisia's society. Refugees experience a permanent situation of liminality, distance, waiting, and a sort of quarantine the so-called justification for which is a spurious concern for public health. Fears of possible contamination and hygienic risk spread among neighbouring villages and policemen, who often avoid the place because of "Ebola, aggressiveness, diseases."¹⁴ Alongside the traumatic experience of violence, loss, and deprivation, refugees have to cope with a society which is neither willing nor able to integrate them, which became strikingly clear after the UNHCR abandoned the camp and the area. "We left everything. Do you know the feeling of closing the door behind you, as you would go to the *hanut* [small shop], but you know that you won't come back any longer? I just had some pictures with me, my mother and my children. That's why I say, UNCHR must finish its job. I have nowhere else to go." says Abraham, 43 years old, from Ivory Coast. As Frantz Fanon (1967) points out, healing the psyches of patients to re-introduce them into a sick society has no real healing meaning. Likewise, these UNHCR-rejected war refugees have been helped over their first two years to re-acquire sociability, skills, and tranquility, only then to be placed in an area, Jaffara, which has been threatening and suspicious towards them.

¹³ The data refer to Spring, 2015 and therefore are not updated.

¹⁴ Members of the *Garde Nationale* and of the Tunisian Police try to prevent journalists, volunteers, and researchers from intruding in their activities and witnessing the extremely deprived situation of the Choucha refugees. This is a quote from a *Garde Nationale* member, who checked me at the entrance of the camp and attempted to stop me from entering.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

This café is only for Tunisians: blackness and slavery

Choucha and the other refugee camps, in fact, altered a well-established equilibrium, in a region where solid social structures rank individuals in a rigid way. The perceptions of Blackness in Tunisia are undeniably connected to Tunisia's past of slavery.

Slavery impinged on the whole of North Africa from ancient times, involving different categories of individuals, and thus shaping different forms of racialization of people. In spite of the vaunted colour-blindness of Islam, religious principles were replaced by “racial concepts and a racial ideology in order to establish and preserve social boundaries that demarcate the identities and privileges of the Arabs and the Berbers.” (El Hamel 2014: 10).

Although not all slaves in North Africa were Black, doubtlessly “slavery was associated with blackness.” (El Hamel 2014: 13). In Tunisia, specifically, ninth- and tenth-century writers equated Black Africans with animals, and fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun stated that the only people who accepted slavery were the Negroes, due to their low degree of humanity and their proximity to the animal realm (Wade 2015; Goldenberg 1999). In fact, a substantial number of Black slaves were continually taken in raids in sub-Saharan Africa, and then transported forcibly to the big cities to the North, where they were sold in open markets.

After the Ottoman conquest of Tunisia—initially in 1534, then in 1574—, there were also the Turkish janissaries who quite soon took over control from the Regency, thanks to the lax nature of the Turkish administration. They were foot-soldiers on the Sultan's payroll who acquired high social and economic status, despite some of them having been captured as slaves in raids in the Eastern part of today's Turkey. The Ottoman term *kul* slavery referred to White elite slaves, and *kul* slaves were differently racialized and hierarchized. *Kuls* were military slaves (*mamluks*) and *concubines* of eastern European origin, mostly from Georgia, Circassia, Abazah, and other territories at the eastern edges of the empire (Montana 2013). White slavery in Tunisia also included people captured in raids along the Mediterranean coasts by corsairs and pirates, whose activities was independent under the Hafsids dynasty (1229–1574), but were later officially promoted and taxed by the Turks (Montana 2013).¹⁵

To complicate this picture further, though the majority of Black people in Tunisia are slave descendants, the North of Africa was inhabited by Nigritic elements well before the Roman Empire (Largueche 1973), leading to a process of cultural and racial *metisage* whose outcomes are visible

¹⁵ For a deeper understanding of Ottoman slavery, see Toledano 1982, 1998, 2007.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

now. After the introduction of Muslim jurisprudence after the Arab conquest, manumission was sanctioned as a pious act, and this, along with the institution of *concubinage*, led to an increase in interracial marriage and thus to a high degree of *metissage*.

In short, refugees happen to be present and to be Black in an area which has seen a process of cultural and racial stratification since time immemorial. Black freed slaves rubbed shoulders with Black descendants of freemen and with White descendants of slaves, the latter group, though, being of a higher social class. Notwithstanding, Blackness, especially in post-2011 activists' discourses, came to be regarded as the potential for economic and political subjugation, deriving from the living legacy of slavery. This perception has historical reasons: "Black blood" was historically regarded as harder to shake off through interbreeding than other origins such as Circassian, Turkish, or Berber—which diluted quickly within the Arab population—and the undeletable mark of a divine curse, the curse of Ham (Wade 2015). In spite of the consequent stigmatization of Black slave descendants, partly extended to today's Black individuals, Blackness cannot be considered a sufficient tool to understand today's racial hierarchization and ranking of individuals within their own society.

The South-East, including Jaffara, is the region where the presence of Black people is higher and more visible, and where early abolition, conventionally dated 1846 (Montana 2013; Medici 2005), converted slaves into free peasants, leaving the residual phenomenon of geographical marginalization, common in the Tunisian countryside. The region's historical evolution has been shaped by the paramount economic importance of the trans-Sahara slave trade and the activities of the corsairs, and for this reason it is not surprising that abolition met tough resistance here from slave owners (Montana 2013).

Being part of the social fabric, Black Tunisians live peacefully with their White counterparts, albeit racially stigmatized and occupationally segregated. Studies on educational levels among Black people in North Africa have shown that secondary school enrollment percentages have always been low, likely due to a shortage of economic capital (Bahri 1992).

While not all Black Tunisians are slave descendants, nowadays they tend to be given the label of slaves, mainly in the form of verbal insults. "*Wassif* [servant], *'abd* [slave], *kahlouch* [blackie], *gairda* [monkey] are usual epithets" Blacks rights advocates would claim.¹⁶ In the South and in the countryside, where slavery morphed into the Islamic institution of *wala*—a sort of paternalistic relationship where the former masters impart their patronym to the former slaves' lineage

¹⁶ Saadia Mosbah, Tunisian activist.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

sometimes adding *'abid* or *shawashin* to it (El Hamel 2013)—low-status work and degrading working conditions continued to be the lot of the descendants of slaves. While *'abid* refers to recently emancipated slaves, other epithets were historically given to Black people: *ma'atiq* were people who were freed (or whose ancestors were freed) long time before abolition, *shawashin* are the native-born Blacks, and *wassif* the domestic servants (Montana 2013). Some of these names remained in the patronyms—through *wala* relationships—and in the insults.

Their inferior social status is mirrored by their occupational levels. Throughout North Africa some jobs are considered to be for Blacks and Tunisia is no exception. The preparation of weddings, musical performances during the ceremony, working at the *hammam* (steam-baths of Ottoman origin) and jobs connected to iron and fire (for example blacksmiths) are the prerogatives of Black Tunisians and of Black Arabs in general (Brunschvig 1962).



3. A Somali refugee praying in Choucha

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

Jaffara's reaction

As soon as Black sub-Saharan refugees inserted themselves into this historically stratified system of racial understandings, colour-coded racism hit them doubtlessly, and race operated in processes of exclusions. However, racial understandings in Southern Tunisia entailed much more than an abstract xenophobia related solely to phenotype, but also flexible ideas regarding ancestry, religious morality, and institutional positions, thus explaining the difference in treatment between sub-Saharan refugees and Black Nationals.

Jaffara's reaction to the camp's presence demonstrated how the population of Southern Tunisian neither had the resources easily to deal with incoming foreigners nor—more importantly—the desire to do so, and especially the sub-Saharan refugees. Several incidents were reported and there were a number of casualties.

According to media accounts, in May 2011¹⁷ and in March 2012¹⁸ the Choucha camp was set on fire and several deaths occurred. Social tensions were exacerbated by the layoff of UNHCR local workers who had been responsible for cleaning and for the hygienic services in the camp. The first incident was caused, in the refugees' eyes, by a demonstration organized on the main road to Libya. "In the night they came and set fire to the camp, and nobody intervened. I saw a man holding a pole of the tent burning alive, it is something I will never forget" tells Claude, 29 years old from Ivory Coast. The incident caused, in fact, six deaths, and was the subject of a report by Human Rights Watch.¹⁹ The church was burnt down after clashes erupted in the camp among asylum seekers, after "people in charge of the camp divided us according to nationality and created tension among us" adds Daniel, 35 years old, from Nigeria. To help them in organizing the camp, UNHCR operators had created three large, clearly separate areas, roughly along language lines: one for French speakers (Chadians, Ivoirians), one for English speakers (Nigerians, Liberians, Ghanaians), and one for Arabic speakers (Sudanese, Somalis and Egyptians).

On the main road to Libya, cars pass by at a very high speed with no regard for the migrants begging for food and water along the side of the road. On one occasion a car crushed a child and did not stop to provide any assistance. "They do not give any importance to us, as we were not human beings. Just Libyans stop by and drop some water, because they are wealthy and they understand what it is to experience a war. Tunisians do not give anything" continues Kino, 35 years

¹⁷ <http://www.unhcr.fr/4ddfaf97c.html>.

¹⁸ <http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2012/03/06/incendie-dans-le-camps-des-refugies-de-choucha/>.

¹⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/23/tunisia-protect-migrant-camp-residents>.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

old, from Liberia. In spite of memories of lynching of Blacks by Libyans' during the war, the refugees feel an identitarian connection to Libyans rather than to Tunisians. Libyans are perceived to be generous, sometimes even showing off their wealth, and more devoted to the *zakat*, the Muslim charitable practice and moral duty (even sanctioned by a law) of alms-giving. It is undeniable that Libyans are better off and more conservative than Tunisians, and they contribute to the refugees' survival by dropping their remaining Tunisian dinars in Choucha before leaving the country. Southern Tunisians, on the other hand, perceive the refugee camp as an obstacle and a possible threat. The road towards Libya is intimately involved in the illegal economy of smuggling, economically and morally the domain predominantly of White Tunisians. "They don't accept the road to be closed nor occupied, since they live on that" says Claude, 29 years old, from Ivory Coast.

Black migrants are normally hired in Tunisia for low-paid, dangerous jobs, competing with Black Tunisians and the lower classes and creating tensions. While Choucha was still open, asylum seekers were allowed to move only to Ben Garden with temporary UNCHR job permits. Nowadays, after its closure, its subjects, devoid of any institutional framework, are not allowed access to the Tunisian job market. However, they can still find temporary casual jobs in Ben Garden and Medenine as construction workers. The sub-Saharan workers in Ben Garden consider themselves to be exploited at work. They work as day-labourers in the construction sector for a wage fluctuating from 15 to 20 dinars (£5–7, €6–8) for a 10 to 12 hour day and they all complain about the danger involved in their jobs. Alan did not accept a job because it consisted of climbing scaffolding up fourteen floors, a job "no Tunisian would accept," says the 24 years old Ivorian. They often sleep at their work place, and usually work without any security provision. Young Tunisians also work in the construction sector around Mednine but their jobs do benefit from higher security standards. Without governmental control of the job market, employers now prefer sub-Saharan migrants. Yassin, 29 years old, from Sidi Makhoulouf—Governorate of Mednine—complains about the situation: "We are paid 60 dinars a day, they are paid 20 because they have no documents. It is normal that they prefer them, and there is no control." The expired UNHCR document, in fact, allows the employers to hire them without job contracts.²⁰

For their part, Southern Tunisians, like Tahar—45-year-old man from Tataouine—claim that "they help as much as they can refugees" and give them equal opportunities and access to resources like housing, jobs, and transport. This attitude is consistent with the usual wall of suspicion

²⁰ This is, however, a common situation also for Tunisian workers, as the employment black market is particularly lively in Tunisia. However, refugees are more exposed to exploitation at work due to their absence of legal documents.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

regarding racism and racial discrimination in Tunisia. Tunisian Blacks rights activists often complain about the complete denial and the culture of silence covering racist acts even at an institutional level.²¹ Claiming to be a victim of racism can even trigger violent reprisals. Sub-Saharan refugees residing in Ben Garden, when challenged on the issue, say that “co-habitation is peaceful” and they are not “victims of racist acts”—in the words of Alan, 24 years old, from Ivory Coast. When interviewed inside the camp, however, far from the public Tunisian eye, the story changes greatly and episodes of racism come out.

Racist acts are indeed an everyday reality: Tropique from Ivory Coast was denied access to cafes many times and hid himself promptly when he saw some drunk people on the streets of Tunis looking for sub-Saharans after Tunisia was expelled from the Coup d’Afrique following its defeat against Equatorial Guinea.²² The ones usually at risk of attack are students who take advantage of the system of scholarships and workers attracted by the neo-liberal economic openings made by Ben Ali during the 1980s. In that particular case, blinded by xenophobic rage, attackers did not distinguish between Black Nationals and sub-Saharans, or between students and refugees (that is, legal or paperless settlers), or between Equatorial Guineans and other sub-Saharans. Squeezing all Black people into one single category is no doubt a result of the mob’s fury, but it has some roots in the understanding of Black skin as originating from “the outside” (*el-barra*), and resounds in post-revolutionary instances of Blacks’ rights.

Tropique continues: “Sometimes I enter a café and the waiter comes cagily to me stating: ‘This café is only for Tunisians, I am sorry.’ Once I was with a European friend of mine and he addressed the waiter angrily. He let us in.” Claude from Ivory Coast was hit by a bus driver in Ben Garden who did not want him on his bus, while a friend of his, a foreign journalist, was already on the bus. The driver punched him, causing a fight on the street. All the local inhabitants sided with the driver, and Claude and the journalist had to run away.

²¹ See, among others, these articles:

http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2013/07/24/racisme-noir-tunisie_n_3638938.html;

<http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2013/05/09/tabou-racisme-tunisie-242159>;

http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2016/06/14/racisme-tunisie_n_10454282.html.

²² Here is the piece of news about the general episode: http://senego.com/les-noirs-malmenes-en-tunisie-apres-la-defaite-des-tunisiens-face-a-la-guinee-equatoriale_214764.html.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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



4. Choucha refugees

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

Ranking new-comers

Given a consistent racist attitude made of racist insults and exclusion addressing both Black Tunisians and Black refugees, Tunisian society—that is, in this case, “White” Tunisians—operates a discernment between the two categories, therefore Blackness alone cannot be considered enough a tool to understand the hierarchization of new-comers in Tunisia, nor how race categories are understood and negotiated from below.

Racialization is indeed an exogenous phenomenon, an ascription from the outside, stemming from historically stratified categories but also from actual socio-economic and political stances (Curtis IV 2016). In North Africa, in fact, Blackness has been socially constructed with the intent of maintaining power relations, and entails social status and patrilineage more than physical traits (El Hamel 2014). Racially fluid constructions were partly maintained and partly adapted to the new post-abolitionist scenario. Refugees in Jaffara inserted themselves into an already highly racially hierarchized landscape, however their positioning, compared to that of Black Tunisians, allows us to unravel conjunctions of different elements: race (and its controversial relation with colour), ethnicity (Arab/non-Arab), and status (both social and institutional, that is, the presence or absence of legal papers).

The status of refugees as “outsiders” is constantly repeated in Tunisians’ discourses. “They come from the outside [*el-barra*], they are Africans” tells me Mohammed, the 60-year-old taxi-driver who guides me to the camp. Refugees perceive themselves as “outside Tunisia:” “I went to Tunisia to the hospital, and then came back to Choucha” recalls Omran, 75 years old from Sudan. Choucha is often referred to as an “inside.” Black Tunisians, on the other side, stress their belonging to the predominant Arab lineage, although they are often pointed out as exogenous elements in the discourses justifying racial prejudice. Former President Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987), for instance, was reported to have hired a Black Tunisian politician, Slim Merzoug, for a diplomatic office in sub-Saharan Africa, with these words: “I’m sending you as an ambassador to a country in sub-Saharan Africa, so you will be fine among your people.”²³

The controversial perception of Black Tunisians’ belonging has historical roots: freed slaves were connected through the *wala*, a fictive kinship tie, to the free Arab lineage. On the one hand, in fact, former masters imparted to them some elements of their social class, while on the other, the defamatory patronym (*‘abid*) imposed on them constantly emphasises their status as freed slaves.

²³ <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2016/06/21/bourguiba-raciste-lincroyable-destin-de-slim-marzouk/>.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

Their socially constructed kinship alliance with their former masters was, therefore, a way to reconnect to Whiteness, which, in the Arab world, refers less to a colour than to “claiming ascendance to the Prophet and to the ruling class [...] a privileged class” (El Hamel 2014: 89). Scholarly research (Hall 2011; Clarence-Smith 2003) has shown how the theoretical impasse of being Black and Arab in West Africa was bypassed by a typical feature of racial attitudes in North Africa: the reconfiguration of local genealogies. It is important to re-emphasise that racism is less a question of skin color or religion than of genealogical lineages. For instance, the Tuareg soon connected Berber-speaking tribes to important Arab Islamic historical figures in North Africa and some went so far as to trace their ancestors to Arabia (Hall 2011).

The flip side of this coin consists in Sub-Saharanans’ lack of an Arab lineage. Being sub-Saharan outsiders, they are perceived as “dark-skinned” or “Black,” mainly due to an absence of affiliation within the Arab society. The fact that the sub-Saharanans share a belonging to the Islamic *umma*—the supra-national community of Islamic believers—is irrelevant: as long as a lineage connecting to noble Arab tribes in the Gulf cannot be traced, one is perceived as a “second-class Muslim,” or as lacking the Islamic and religious authority which seems to be the privilege of Whites. “They say I am different because of my colour and my language (*el-lwn w el-‘ajmy*). They attack me on the street. They call me ‘*abd* and *wassif*. I speak Arabic with a different accent, I pray five times a day, but Arabs do not have any respect for me. I do not want to live in Tunisia” complains Kaki, a 33-year-old refugee from Jbel el-Nuba, Sudan. Absence of “affiliation, *sharif* descent from the Prophet’s kinship, and ethnic solidarity” (El Hamel 2014: 90) are the reasons behind Blacks’ marginalization. “We are in an already lost competition with other refugees. Syrians get it better because they are Arabs,” complains Osman, 30 years old from Sudan. Syrians and Palestinians seem to know how to get resources from non-governmental organizations, and were warmly welcomed and hosted by Tunisian households when they arrived through Libya or directly from Syria at the outbreak of the war, since they do not need a visa to access Arab countries. There are, indeed, many Tunisian charity associations which have been providing basic support to Syrians after the crisis, drawing upon a common Arabic identity: “our brothers and sisters are in need” is what is often said in order to solicit contributions.

Within the overall community of refugees, however, individuals are not all perceived in the same way, but through the prism of a hierarchization based on nationality, language, and religion. Muslim refugees are at least incorporated in aid projects by the Red Crescent and communicate with the same cultural, linguistic, and symbolic references as Arabs. During the holy month of

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

Ramadan, for example, they go to pray in Ben Garden's mosques and receive clothes, food, and general supplies. They greet and thank Libyans, stopping them by drawing upon their shared religious background and appealing to a common religious universe: "Allah's blessing be upon you [*baraka'llahu fyk*]", "I'm not a stranger, pray for my Prophet" [*ana mysh ajnaby, şally 'ala naby*].²⁴ For their part, Arabs respond to these pleas but draw a clear distinction between who is Arab, and thus, in their perception, Muslim, and who is not: the Africans [*el-afryqyn*] are often questioned as to what religion they belong to.

Since Islamic enslavement ideology drawing from the Quran and the Holy Scriptures is based on infidelity (*kufir*) (El Hamel 2014), the perception of Blacks as less religiously pious and lacking morality offers a history-based narrative which is applied to both Black Tunisians and Black refugees. Stemming from the historical stigmatization attached to slavery, Black Tunisians are considered to be "lesser Muslims" and therefore prepared to consider morally questionable jobs. However, Blackness alone does not mark out people as "morally questionable" but skin colour intertwines with the status of outsider. "They always ask me: what are you? Christian or what? You know what, sometimes I wish I did not understand Arabic!" sums up Kaki, 33 years old, from Jbel el Nuba, Sudan.

Arabic-speakers (that is, Sudanese, Nubians, including even Sudanese who attended Islamic schools and other nationalities who have worked in Libya for a long time), in fact, bore the brunt of the racist insults. Refugees gave me different accounts depending on their background: while almost all refugees have a basic knowledge of Arabic, Sudanese, Arabic-speaker Chadians and Somalis have a profound understanding of all the chatter going on in Ben Garden, especially the insults. Daniel from Nigeria reported that he was told "go back to your country (*tymshy bledak*)," while Ibrahim from Sudan accuses Tunisians of calling him '*abd, guirda* (monkey), or *ebola*, and he complains that even in the mosque people doubt if he is fully entitled to pray there. There seems to have been a change in the range of insults used, references to hygienic and medical emergencies (e.g. the global alarmism involving Ebola disease in Sierra Leon) and fears of fundamentalism from West Africa having recently become more prominent vis-à-vis sub-Saharan people.

Another reason why sub-Saharan refugees are more vulnerable than Arab refugees and Black Tunisians seems to be their lack of a regular institutional position and of a legal status, in short, documents and visa. Due to the EU border controls and to the international policies of restrictions on migration, refugees lack residence permits and often even passports from their own countries,

²⁴ These are common greetings between Libyans who stop by in Choucha and refugees begging at the roadside.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

therefore they are stranded on Tunisian soil with their expired UNHCR documents, which do not grant them the right to stay in Tunisia and cause episodes of abuse and arbitrary expulsion by Tunisian authorities. “The police told me, I can tear it up, it’s the same.”²⁵ On the one hand, the police is willing to turn a blind eye to the refugees’ illegal presence in Tunisia, but on the other they exploit their vulnerable position to harass and threaten them. “My papers were checked at the airport and suddenly they disappeared. I went to the police and they told me that they had my documents but I had to pay to have them back. I offered them five dinars and they told me that it was too little” recalls Chaka, 40 years old, from Ivory Coast.



5. Black Southern Tunisian while sheep herding in Jaffara

²⁵ Choucha migrant interviewed by storiemigranti.it.

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

Conclusion

The local perception of distinctions between Black sub-Saharan African refugees and Black Tunisians is crucial to the understanding of racial concepts in the area of Jaffara, and is much more than a simple “colour issue”, since “the color line is a fuzzy concept that takes religion and lineage as a salient criterion for social status” (El Hamel 2014: 102). In Jaffara, race, conceived as a fluid social construction, intertwines with genealogy, religion, and institutional status in defining the position of Black sub-Saharan refugees in Tunisian society. In a highly hierarchized society such as Tunisia, “Black” racialized and “White” racializers subjects coexist in a hierarchical relationship. While this colour line narrows sub-Saharan migrants to Black Tunisians and thus to the category of the “Black racialized”, sub-Saharans are perceived as inferior, since they lack personal protection, economic-support and a legalized institutional position, but most importantly they lack affiliation to a society where kinship is essential. Arabs’ ethnocentrism drew legitimacy predominantly from a mind-set resting on genealogy, status, and *sharif* nobility (El Hamel 2014), therefore refugees are racialized as “Blacks” because of their status as outsiders. To overcome Tunisia’s emphasis on kinship and affiliation, many Black Tunisians create genealogies which link them to an Arab, White—and therefore free—past, as part of their strategy of emancipation and re-negotiation of their servile status. Black newcomers, in contrast, remain outside the predominant, patrilineal, Arab lineage; moreover their illegal institutional position creates an unbridgeable gap between them and Black Tunisians. Historically, even though one of the outcomes of this high racialization saw colour defining status most of the times, categories of slaves and of Blacks were blurry and Black slaves overlapped with other categories of Black individuals, a phenomenon which was also scholarly described in other North African countries (El Hamel 2014; McDougall 2005 for Morocco). Therefore, conflating the category of Black sub-Saharans with that of Black slave descendants proves functional to post-2011 quests of activists for Blacks’ rights, but, on the other side, risks to overlook the history of local Black Tunisians and to simplify several century of slavery, post-abolitionist processes, and racial stratification.

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Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

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

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