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## Esclavages & Post-esclavages

Slaveries & Post-Slaveries

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Lire et narrer le post-esclavage

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### Commemorating the abolition of slavery in Tunisia. The rights of black citizens and the history of slaves of European origin

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# Commemorating the abolition of slavery in Tunisia. The rights of black citizens and the history of slaves of European origin

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- 1 Seated in one of the palaces of the Tunisian Republic, they are conversing politely. Both are fair-skinned. On one side, the late Muhammad Béji Caid Essebsi in his octogenarian president's attire. To his right, Raoudha Labidi, president of the Tunisian Institute for

the Fight against Human Trade. Their polite exchange in 2019 about the president's desire to commemorate the end of slavery in Tunisia is being filmed by the services of the presidency on a specific day: January 23, the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in post-revolutionary Tunisia. It was precisely on this date, in 1846, that the then ruler, the governor of Ottoman Tunisia, Ahmad Bey, signed a decree authorizing black slaves (*al-Sawdān*) to request manumission certificates in order to fight against the abuse of their masters (Largueche 1990: 64–66; Montana 2013: 97).

- 2 It is worth noting that, in the official video prior to the announcement of this annual commemoration, then-president Caid Essebsi had not met with any of the black Tunisian citizens, such as Saadia Mosbah, who had been campaigning for inscribing abolition in Tunisian public memory and who had already facilitated the organization of ceremonies to commemorate this historical event.
- 3 Moreover, and by a certain irony of history, the family trajectory of the late-president Caid Essebsi is possibly linked to the history of slavery in Tunisia, specifically the enslavement of Europeans. His surname 'Caïd Essebsi' refers in Arabic to a specific service, that of the 'pipe keeper' (*al-sabsī*) or master of the ceremony of tobacco smoking. An ancestor of the former Tunisian president, a slave of Sardinian origin who converted to Islam, Ismā'īl Qā'id al-Sabsī, would have occupied this domestic function in the 19th century, in the service of the dynasty of beys or governors of the Ottoman province of Tunis.<sup>1</sup> Despite these personal histories, the new policy developed to commemorate the end of slavery in Tunisia has centred around the formal abolition of the slavery of Africans in 1846. And the meeting in 2019 marking this anniversary was not an isolated act: already in 2017, Tunisian authorities had played an instrumental role in entering into the UNESCO 'memory of the world' register some official documents from the reign of Ahmad Bey between 1841 and 1846 that forbade the slave trade in Tunisia.
- 4 This article challenges the new policy of remembrance of the end of slavery by narrating a history of the gradual end of slaveries in Tunisia. 'Slaveries' is used here in the plural because, during the 19th century, in the Ottoman province of Tunis as elsewhere across the Ottoman Empire, in addition to African slaves, the masters had at their disposal Christian male and female captives as well as Latin and Caucasian slaves who had converted to Islam (mamluks [males] and odalisques [females]). Among these, the Christian captives from Western Europe were the first slaves collectively freed, in the 1810s, long before the Caucasian slaves who had converted to Islam and the African slaves, whose trade continued in clandestine forms until the first decades of the 20th century. Having these various slaveries in mind, in this paper I focus on the way in which the end of the slavery of West and East Africans has become central to State and civic memory in post-revolutionary Tunisia, while at the same time the form of slavery that Latin Christians and Caucasian people experienced in Tunisia and other Muslim lands is—although not ignored—relegated to the background of commemoration policies.
- 5 The emphasis on the memorialization of a single form of slavery, namely that of Africans, at the expense of other histories of slavery is not unique to Tunisia. In France, for example, French participation in the Atlantic slave trade has become memorialized, but the history of the Muslim galley slaves of the southern Mediterranean has never been officially acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> In the Tunisian context, as in others, this emphasis on the suffering of African slaves is particularly meaningful because, in current society,

the descendants of African slaves (and also of free African migrants) still experience discrimination and are kept in subordinate positions.

- 6 This article seeks, however, to explore how considering the so-called abolition of African slavery in the 1840s in relation to the termination of other enslavements might provide opportunities for activists for the rights of black Tunisian citizens today. In this sense, this article first addresses a methodological problem, attempting to demonstrate that if we do not separate the study of Tunisia's history of enslaving Africans from the enslavement of Europeans, as is usually done in the historiography of slavery in the Maghreb and the Ottoman Empire (Mrad Dali 2005; Oualdi 2011; El Hamel 2013), then we will be able to denaturalize and above all to historicize the categories of 'black' and 'white' and understand the transformations of racial categorizations in Tunisia over a long period of time. The concepts of race and racialization are here understood along the lines of 'critical race theory', obviously not as objective facts, but rather as categories constructed and manipulated by societies according to processes of social domination, and through strategies of unequal distribution of resources (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 9). In Arabic and in local customs, these categorizations most often do not explicitly separate 'blacks' and 'whites'. They are often phrased in legal terms. They make a distinction between on the one hand, *aḥrār* (sing. *hurr*: free or pure men or women, often light skinned), and on the other hand, *'abīd* (slaves) and *wuṣṣān* (sing. *wuṣṣif* in Tunisian dialect: a more common term that refers to a servant or a maid), often labeling dark-skinned slaves and people (Scaglioni 2020). However, since the Tunisian Revolution in 2011, in their speeches and writings in both Arabic and French, Tunisian activists fighting against racism and in favour of equal rights for black citizens have clearly contributed to raising the issue of the unequal treatment of blacks and whites by underlining the domination of State institutions by a light-skinned elite. By the same token, this activism has contributed to black citizens mobilizing around a sense of *national* belonging where other black citizens, mainly in the South of Tunisia, had previously mainly developed claims of belonging at *local* levels through specific narratives of origin (Ahmed 2007).
- 7 This article also engages in a dialogue with the claims of black Tunisian activists in order to question (and perhaps subvert) how the Tunisian authorities chose to commemorate slavery, starting with the decree of 1846. From the point of view of the local authorities, designating a particular date to commemorate the abolition of slavery addresses many political issues: it might express a sincere fight against racism, the recognition of inequalities, or a democratization of civic memory. However, a major objective of this official commemoration policy is undoubtedly to present Tunisia again and again as a beacon of modernity, a so-called 'exception' in the Arab-Muslim world (Dakhli 2011 versus Masri 2017). In line with the many modalities of this Tunisian exception, the current post-revolutionary authorities wanted to promote this idea of Tunisia as a pioneer in the abolition of slavery, to remind observers that Tunisia abolished slavery in the 1840s – two years before France embarked on this path with the Constitution of the Second Republic in 1848. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the Tunisian presidency decided to orient State and civic memory around the decree promulgated by Ahmad Bey. The reign of Ahmad Bey (1837-1855) is often described as the period of implementation of intense military, legal and social reforms of Ottoman and European inspiration, including the decree that abolished slavery. Moreover, Ahmad Bey's reign and his choice to abolish slavery was only one of the many illustrations of an 'enlightened reformism' promoted by the late-president Caïd Essebsi

and other Tunisian elites: that is, the questionable idea of a Tunisia modernized by an educated elite and opened to the West.

- 8 This motif of ‘enlightened reformism’ is a common thread in the historiography of Tunisia, a major orientation adopted by various rulers who have brandished it to explain or justify their actions from the time of the Ottoman reforms to the post-revolutionary period (Hibou 2009). By announcing the commemoration of the decree of 1846, then-president Caïd Essebsi sought to demonstrate to the local audience and the international community that elites were capable of transforming the country, by showing the granting of rights over a long period. As for the black Tunisian activists, they wanted to commemorate the promulgation of the decree of 1846 for very different reasons: according to the historian Inès Mrad Dali, rather than honouring a Tunisian reformist spirit, these activists wished to recall that slavery is still an ‘*essential historical factor* for the understanding of the current situation of Tunisian blacks, without it being understood or experienced as a founding element of their presence in Tunisia’ (Mrad Dali 2015: 77; emphasis added).
- 9 In this paper, I want to develop another way of thinking about this commemoration of the abolition of slavery: officially commemorating the slavery of both Africans and Europeans would remind descendants of Latin and Caucasian slaves (including former president Caid Essebsi if his ancestry is confirmed) that they shared a similar condition of subalternity in the past with the descendants of African slaves, but that the stain of slavery subsequently faded in the case of the descendants of European slaves. Their social situation today is often much better than that of descendants of African slaves. In fact, the decision of then-president Caid Essebsi to commemorate the abolition of the slavery of Africans, reconsidered through the lens of other slave trades, unwittingly underlines the strong difference nowadays between the social situation of descendants of African and European slaves; and the observation of this strong difference confirms what is at the core of many of the battles of black Tunisian activists: the idea of a strong distinction between black and non-black and, therefore, the idea of a structural racism that must now be confronted (Ltifi 2020).
- 10 In order to achieve the principal aims of the article, I first position the question of the commemoration of slavery in the context of the emergence of broader civic claims made by black activists in Tunisia since the 2011 Revolution, claims shaped by the profound transformations that black communities have undergone, as has the whole of Tunisian society since decolonization in the 1950s. I then broaden the discussion to include the cases of the end of slavery of Christian male and female captives and of male and female slaves converted to Islam (mamluks and odalisques or *jawārī* – sing. *jāriya* – in Arabic).
- 11 For the first part, I draw on a series of recent, innovative and stimulating works: those of Inès Mrad Dali (2014) on free and non-free black communities in 19th-century and colonial Tunisia; Stéphanie Pouessel’s research on the quest for Africa and the question of unity and diversity in postcolonial Tunisian society (Pouessel 2013b); and the writings and iconographic productions of Maha Abdelhamid, Amel El Fargi and Moutaa Amin Elwaer (2017) as well as the research of Marta Scaglioni (2017, 2020) on activists’ commitments and the transformations of black communities in southern Tunisia and West African migrants after the 2011 Revolution.

## New racial categorizations in the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution?

- 12 The researchers just mentioned have clearly demonstrated that there is something new in the claims made in the aftermath of the Revolution by black Tunisian activists belonging to at least three organizations: ‘Adam for Equality and Development’, formed in 2011 and dissolved in summer 2013; ‘M’nemty’ (‘My Dream’ in Arabic), created in May 2013; and ‘Aqaliyet’, dedicated to the defence of ‘various minorities’ (Mrad Dali 2015: 65). These activists wanted, and to an extent managed, to initiate a new conversation about racial categories within Tunisian society. Since the 2011 Revolution, they have for the first time openly denounced the many racist words and acts occurring on a daily basis and perpetuated by State agents, by means of marches, slogans and posters, as well as in debates on social networks (Abdelhamid 2018b: 350, 355). For the first time, demonstrations were organized to press for this racism to be made punishable by law, initially by campaigning for the adoption of an article explicitly addressing this issue in the new constitution (Mrad Dali 2015: 71). Similarly, together with these other claims, the idea of establishing a formal commemoration of the abolition of slavery in 1846 was promoted for the first time.
- 13 According to the analyses of Stéphanie Pouessel and Inès Mrad Dali, these claims emerged in a new democratic context, at a time when new forms of representation within the post-revolutionary constituent and legislative assemblies were being widely debated, and when a period of ‘real’ citizenship for all Tunisians was experimented with and aspired to after decades of authoritarian regimes, from the colonial period to the 2000s. In this new institutional system, black Tunisian citizens and activists denounced their disproportionately low representation in the new institutions and in the media, given that they constituted between 10% and 15% of the population, not including so-called *métis*, or mixed-race, persons (Mrad Dali 2015: 73; Abdelhamid, El Fargi and El Waer 2017: 10). Interestingly, many of these activists and the leading figures of these movements are women (Pouessel 2012: 5; Mrad Dali 2015: 66; Abdelhamid 2018a: 6). This adds to the question of national representation and subalternity the consideration of intersectionality and gender representation.
- 14 Activists are also calling for greater media visibility in the name of civic equality. They firmly reject all categorizations that would define them with reference to slavery, such as *‘abīd*, *wuṣṣān* (black slave) or the so-called affectionate diminutives such as *kaḥlūsh*, *shūshān* or *kaḥlūsha* (‘little black’ in feminine and masculine forms) that minoritize them (Abdelhamid, El Fargi and El Waer 2017: 29, 45). Citizens across the country and mainly in southern Tunisia are also taking legal action to change their last names and erase components of their names that recall the servile past of their ancestors (Ltifi 2020).<sup>3</sup> On a placard held by a black citizen and photographed by Lotfi Ghariani, a protester declares: ‘No slaves, no servants, we are all free Tunisians’ / “*lā ‘abīd, lā wasṣān, kul-nā Twansa aḥrār*” (Abdelhamid, El Fargi and El Waer 2017: 54). In an interview, Saadia Mosbah, president of the association ‘M’nemty’, proclaims loud and clear in French and in Arabic: ‘I am Tunisian, a Tunisian citizen, period / *anā Tūnsiyya, muwāṭina tūnsiyya*’.<sup>4</sup> This fight against racism is being carried out simultaneously and in solidarity with the efforts of African nationals (migrants, refugees, students) to denounce acts of racism of which they are also victims on a daily basis (Scaglioni 2017: 3, 13).

## The pre-revolutionary foundation of anti-racism activism

- 15 Although the emergence of a new regime of democratic representation appeared in a new form of activism, the claims made after the Revolution have a longer history. As with other Tunisian social movements, that of black Tunisian citizens has pre-revolutionary Tunisia as its foundation. According to Pouessel, during the 2000s local rap, reggae and dub musical groups were formed, explicitly referring to African roots and a pan-African culture (Pouessel 2012: 77). At the same time, the singer Saleh Mosbah testified to the racism he suffered in the mainstream media. Since 2003, Tunisians, or at least the population of Tunis, have interacted in their daily lives with the 2,000 or so employees, mostly sub-Saharan, of the African Development Bank (Pouessel 2013a: 167, 181). The newspapers *Le Temps* and *Tunis Hebdo* published articles by Hajer Ajroudi and Zouhour Harbaoui denouncing racist acts against black citizens and nationals of sub-Saharan Africa (Pouessel 2012: 84, 86).
- 16 Earlier and more decisively, long before the 2000s, black Tunisians in village communities in the south of the country had ceaselessly tried—in the face of many obstacles—to improve their situation through education and by migrating to France. Like all citizens, despite many difficulties, they encouraged their descendants to pursue their studies at university level. More than half a century ago now, in the early 1970s, the anthropologist Geneviève Bédoucha observed these profound social transformations, particularly in the Djerid region (Bédoucha 1987). At the end of the 1990s, Mohammed Jouili (2012) came to similar findings in the Kébili region. These social transformations – achieved in the face of strong constraints, and despite the difficulty for most Tunisian black citizens of accessing education – are fundamental because they make it possible to understand the conditions in which black citizens of Tunisia formulated new political claims and tried to transform the racial categories used in Tunisia as well as the memory of slavery.
- 17 Many of these activists come from southern communities, and, like other Tunisian citizens, they have often thought of their belonging with reference to villages, neighbourhoods, tribes and lineages through narratives of origin which have been brought to light and analyzed by many researchers, including Mohammed Jouili and Maha Abdelhamid. Most often, these narratives of origin explained, and continue to justify, the presence of black communities in a certain locality by the protection of the founder of a tribe or even of a patron saint. These narratives were also intended to legitimize the access of these communities to local resources and/or to rationalize their subordinate positions. We advance the hypothesis, which remains to be confirmed, that with the profound changes during the colonial and even the postcolonial period, such as urbanization, the education of some descendants of black communities, and the gradually diminishing value ascribed to property, these local narratives of origin slowly lost their power to explain and legitimize, or to assign local roles (Ltifi 2020). More than these narratives of origin, what is becoming decisive, notably for the activists, are the categories of belonging to a nation, to a Tunisian civic community, and consequently the debates on collective memory and national historical representations.



## The nationalization of a black community and the claims of black activists

- 18 In a way, activists for the rights of black citizens have contributed through their claims and their inclusion in or exclusion from southern communities to a nationalization of the black Tunisian condition. Activists from Tunis have asked for formal commemoration of 'slavery', although not all black citizens, especially in southern communities, fully approve of this demand. As demonstrated by Inès Mrad Dali, in the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution, activists from the capital also brought to the fore the figure of a national hero defending the communities of the south under the presidency of Habib Bourguiba: the nationalist Slim Marzoug, who was born in Gabès on March 2, 1928, and studied in Paris. Considering himself badly treated by the Bourguibian authorities, he seems to have tried to trigger a popular insurgency in the village of El Mdou during 1962-1963, before being interned in La Manouba psychiatric hospital, near Tunis, for 35 years (Mrad Dali 2015: 65; Abdelhamid 2018b: 347).
- 19 The marked inscription of black Tunisian citizens in national history, the demand for equitable representation in civil society, and the commemoration of slavery are also linked to the dissemination among these activist circles of new academic research on these communities' pasts and on African identity. Researchers such as Inès Mrad Dali and Stéphanie Pouessel have developed for instance notable relationships with organizations, activists and other researchers such as Maha Abdelhamid, host of the Facebook page 'Assurance de la citoyenneté sans discrimination de couleur' ('Guarantee of Citizenship without Colour Discrimination'), created two months after the outbreak of the Revolution (Pouessel 2016: 6).
- 20 But, in addition to civic and national inclusion and to the awareness of the local claims of communities in the south, there were also references to global debates on the condition of blacks and to commemorations of slavery around the world. Tunisian activists certainly refer to the struggles of African-American leaders, such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, but they also have other sources of identification (Scaglioni 2017: 3). When they refer to the African continent and look to Africa as an alternative to Islamic belonging, as understood by Stéphanie Pouessel (2012: 14), they are well aware of the variable dimensions of this Africanness. Thus, between 2012 and 2019, the Facebook page 'Assurance de la citoyenneté sans discrimination de couleur' established links with issues of anti-black racism in Morocco. The contributors to this page, in particular Maha Abdelhamid, also welcomed Quebec's choice to designate February as 'black history month'. They also made reference to the sterilization of Ethiopians in Israel and were inspired, as Inès Dali Mrad has shown, by Brazilian black activism.<sup>5</sup>
- 21 The works cited in this first section make it possible to understand the rise of claims and the reformulations of racial categorizations in a context of slow and deep social changes among black Tunisian citizens and their communities of origin. They open the way for a broadening of the question of racial categorizations and of commemorations of slavery in Tunisia, and set the past of this slavery in the perspective of the history of other slave trades in this country, consequently also comparing the fate of descendants of African slaves with that of European ones.

## In the mirror of European slavery

- 22 In the 19th century, during the abolition era, Tunis was a province of the Ottoman Empire at the crossroads of West Africa, the European world and the Ottoman Near East. Slave traffickers brought African slaves of course, but also Christian male and female captives from different regions of Europe, especially from what is now Italy. They also bought and conveyed from Anatolia, the heart of the Empire, male slaves (mamluks) and female slaves (odalisques) of Caucasian, Georgian, Greek and Balkan origin whom they converted to Islam and who have since become rooted in Tunisia.
- 23 However, during the 19th century, these three groups of slaves (Africans, Christian captives and mamluks/odalisques) did not experience the same trajectory. The first group to be given their freedom was that of Christian male and female captives from the northern shores of the western Mediterranean as a result of European and British military offensives and especially Lord Exmouth's expedition in 1816 to put an end to the enslavement of Europeans in North Africa. This happened long before the end of slavery of West African women and men, which lasted until the interwar period or even after World War II. As a consequence, these Christian captives, who numbered in their hundreds throughout the modern period, became very rare from the 1820s and 1830s onward. In fact, the memory of this type of slavery is much more distant than that of West Africans.
- 24 With the French colonization of neighbouring Algeria in 1830 and the implementation of legal and political reforms throughout the Ottoman Empire (from the 1830s to the 1860s), in particular in the provinces of Tunis and Tripoli, the legal status of Western European Christians improved across North Africa. Not only could they no longer be enslaved, but European Christians now enjoyed legal protection and the full right to acquire land and buildings. It was at this moment that the populations of Italy and more generally of south-western Europe provided a considerable number of fishermen, artisans, labourers and domestic workers; the French colonial administrations in Algeria and Tunisia tried to make these Europeans French citizens and to mobilize them for the exploitation of land and other local resources. At the end of the colonial period, these settlers of Latin origins who had become French citizens of the Maghreb in the first half of the 20th century left Tunisia and the other Maghreb countries in large numbers as they became independent in the 1950s and early 1960s, moving to France from Algeria, Tunisia, and the central part of Morocco and to Italy from Libya.
- 25 At the end of these tumultuous episodes there were few people left in Tunisia, and in the Maghreb more widely, able to transmit the very distant memory of a Christian slavery which had given way to the emigration of Latin colonists. Especially since that Christian slavery was for long appropriated for polemical purposes by a certain number of western historians who supported European imperialism. During the colonial period, these historians saw the captives either as victims of a so-called Ottoman 'tyranny', and of 'Muslim cruelty', or as illustrious pioneers – the precursors of settlers and of Western men and women who brought new European knowledge to the Maghreb (as in the case, for example, of French historian and archivist, Pierre Grandchamp). More recently, after the September 11 attacks in New York, the American historian Robert Davis discussed this issue of these Christian captives in his book *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters* and insisted that Europeans were not the only ones involved in the slave trade, that Muslims were also enslavers, and that they even enslaved Europeans (Davis 2003).

- 26 In a context of widespread Islamophobia, the question of the commemoration of slavery in Tunisia can still be brandished in the Western world by white supremacists in order to denounce the slavery of Christians in Muslim lands. But such claims are peripheral to the Maghreb, and to Tunisian society, where they consequently have little influence on the State and civic memory of abolition.

### Those who have risen to the top of Tunisian society

- 27 A third group of slaves, that of the mamluks and odalisques (slaves converted to Islam from the northern shores of the Mediterranean and the Caucasus) appears for at least three reasons to be more significant than that of Christian captives when one is considering the commemoration of slavery in post-revolutionary Tunisia, and the claims of black Tunisian citizens. On the one hand, these mamluks and odalisques contributed greatly to the building of a Tunisian State during the Ottoman period and up to the beginning of the 20th century, during the first decades of French colonization in Tunisia. Mamluks were promoted to the highest administrative and military positions, while certain odalisques were the wives of dignitaries and princes, thus ensuring the survival of dynasties and households of notables by giving birth to their children. On the other hand, like the figures of African slaves in the large cities of Tunisia, the figures of mamluks and of concubines employed in large households of Tunisian notables were slow to disappear in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th with the gradual end of the slave trade from the Caucasus. Finally, while the country's black subjects were kept in separate communities in southern Tunisia, the descendants of mamluks and concubines merged into Tunisian society and are nowadays little different from other non-black citizens.
- 28 Yet in the Tunisian State archives of the 18th and 19th centuries, male and female slaves were not defined as 'white' or 'European' but were explicitly distinguished from other slaves, who would have been described as 'black'. Up until the late 19th century, the secretaries who drew up the financial registers, historical chronicles and administrative letters did not refer to the skin colour of the mamluks and odalisques but rather to their respective origins (*nisba* in Arabic). Thus documents in Arabic mention Ramdhān the Genoan (al-Jinwī), Muṣṭafā the Georgian (al-Qurjī) or even al-Muralī people (coming from Morea in Greece). These same administrative archives also established differences between African slaves according to their provenance, as in the case for example of men and women from Bornu.
- 29 The distinction between servants of European and African origin was in fact based on the choice of synonyms for 'slave' and 'servant' in Arabic: the term *mamlūk* ('one who is possessed') was very rarely used for African slaves and servants. It was mainly used for slaves from the Latin world and the Caucasus. However, another term, *abd* ('*abīd* in the plural) was more specifically reserved for black slaves. Likewise, the term *khādim* ('servant') was often used as a euphemism to refer to a eunuch. Furthermore, black slaves, with the exception of a few eunuchs, most often occupied positions inferior to those of the mamluks and odalisques of various Latin and Caucasian origins.
- 30 More than their respective appellations, what gradually separated the black slaves from the mamluks and the odalisques was their degree of integration, and that of their respective descendants, into Tunisian society between the Ottoman times and the colonial period. Some mamluks and odalisques who had modest social positions either

as servants or cooks left no trace in the archives after their enfranchisement. Today, with the disappearance of the first generation of fathers and mothers, it would be difficult to reconstruct their lineage. Other mamluks and odalisques promoted by their masters and mistresses rose to important social positions as early as the 18th and 19th centuries: as prime ministers, generals, administrators, or concubines of leading statesman. In the 19th century, free Muslim subjects could still make fun of the servile origins of a certain notable mamluk. But the mamluks, the odalisques and their descendants gradually rid themselves of this stain of servitude. They emphasized instead their former high status and service to the State. From the 1920s, in the context of French colonial domination, the descendants of these Caucasian slaves merged into a majority defined by anti-colonial Tunisian nationalism as Arab and Muslim.

- 31 Alongside the case of former president Caid Essebsi, following the logic of such distinctions, we could also mention the case of the descendants of the *Sāhib al-Ṭābi'* – a reference to the role of the 'Keeper of the Seals', a position held by many mamluks. Interestingly, a female descendant of *Sāhib al-Ṭābi'* (Nawfel) has recently studied the *stambali*, possession rites performed by black populations in Tunisia (Pouessel 2012: 82), while Nadia Sebaï (2007), another descendant, has written a biography of her ancestor, *Muṣṭafā Ṣāhib al-Ṭābi'*, a mamluk figure respected by the members of the Husayni Bey dynasty in the late 1850s. This phenomenon of mamluk and odalisque descendants acquiring high status and distancing themselves from their servile origins was even more visible during the colonial period. Applications of descendants of mamluks for positions in the colonial administration between the 1890s and 1930s show that these descendants were not only interested in being recruited into the ranks of the local and colonial administration (Oualdi 2014). Some sons from mamluk families were also engaged in the Young Tunisians reformist movement in the 1910s or in the ranks of the first Tunisian nationalist party, among them Mongi Slim, a descendant of General Slim, a mamluk of Greek origin. Mongi Slim was the negotiator for internal autonomy and independence, and then a minister and diplomat in postcolonial Tunisia.
- 32 It is logical that descendants of mamluks are less interested in the commemoration of the abolition of slavery or in the collaboration of some of their ancestors with the colonial administration. They have their place in the country's history according to their contribution to the founding of the Tunisian nation and to the performative account of Tunisian exceptionalism: the notion that an enlightened elite, open to the Western world, would always have succeeded in reforming the country. Moreover, one of the figures of the national pantheon or of this mythology of reform is none other than a mamluk of Circassian origin, *Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi*, a reformist vizier or prime minister from 1873 to 1877, four years before the colonization of the country by France, who figures today on the 20-dinar banknotes (Abassi 2012). Quite strikingly, and this goes back to our main methodological argument about the value of considering all these histories together: the uneven integration of the descendants of former slaves into the different layers of Tunisian society, and even more so the different relationship of these groups to the memory of slavery and more generally to the founding of the Tunisian nation, confirm over a long period of nearly three centuries the still valid observation that Tunisians are treated differently according to the colour of their skin.

## Traces of slavery in a multicultural society

- 33 There is another, perhaps more political, lesson to be drawn from this comparison of African and mamluk experiences of servitude. As we have seen, black activists, while being aware of a plural history of slavery,<sup>6</sup> restricted (for good reasons) the issue of commemoration to African slavery. But we should also ask whether it is not in the interest of black Tunisian activists to call for a commemoration of the slavery of both Africans and converted Europeans in order to remind a part, however small, of the elite and the Tunisian bourgeoisie that they share the same historical experience of enslavement. In sensitive discussions about each other's servile past, this would allow black citizens to know or remember that not only were they not all descendants of slaves, as Inès Mrad Dali has shown, but that some non-blacks, supposedly members of the elite, of the *khāssa*, also come from subservient backgrounds... but that these elites were more able to rise above this past.
- 34 The last lesson that could be drawn from this comparison relates to the question of the unity and diversity of the Tunisian society and nation. Historians of modern and contemporary Tunisia (notably Lucette Valensi and Habib Kazdaghli) have stressed the idea that pre-colonial Tunisia was a culturally diverse mosaic, with a Jewish and a Christian presence. According to this interpretation, Tunisia lost much of its multi-coloured aspect and became more homogenous with the departure in large numbers of members of these religious minorities following decolonization and the establishment of nationalist and authoritarian regimes. The anthropologist Stéphanie Pouessel recently has discussed and challenged the value of this historiographical motif in a stimulating way. She has demonstrated that in fact cosmopolitanism did not end with decolonization. In postcolonial Tunisia and across the Maghreb, a new sort of cosmopolitanism was shaped partly through the recognition of internal diversities, in particular of the Amazigh/Berber culture, and partly through the arrival of migrants from West Africa and the multiple movements of migrants, workers and students within and outside Tunisia (Pouessel 2012: 12). Pouessel has also pointed out all the inequalities endemic in this type of 'cosmopolitanism'. Returning to the plurality of slavery and its unequal 'cosmopolitanism' in the 19th century sheds light on the ways in which this legacy of slavery continues to model social hierarchies and racial categorizations in postcolonial Tunisia. The post-revolutionary claims of black activists also demonstrate the continuing tension between nationalization/urbanization on the one hand, and, on the other affiliation and commitment to local rural communities and their narratives of local origins. Finally, the activists' claims for a commemoration of slavery and then the official decision in favour of it are also proof of the permanence of negotiations between rights advocates (such as the associations against racism) and State representatives who, as in the old pre-revolutionary regime, invest in the notions of diversity, inclusion and tolerance with the particular aim of to showing the Western world an image of their good governance.

## Conclusion: the steps of a struggle

- 35 In these interactions between activist circles and those in power, activists fighting against anti-black racism, while they were few in number and moreover divided between several associations and several tendencies (Abdelhamid 2018a: 9), have still

managed to advance their cause by formalizing the commemoration of abolition and by fighting for an anti-slavery law. From this point of view, they were relatively better heard than the activists of the Berber or Amazigh causes.

- 36 According to the established distinctions in critical race theory, these activists initially opted for an anti-racist struggle qualified as 'idealist' not because this struggle would be utopian or unrealistic but rather because what matters in this type of anti-racism is a change of language. It means that the activists first wanted to fight against racist discourses and categorizations, and racist ways of thinking and acting. According to this logic, Tunisian activists have called for designating certain days to foreground awareness about racism and for a reform of the education programme that would place Tunisia in an African context. They denounced, for example, the 'physical separation of black and non-black students' in school transport in the village of El Gosba (Mrad Dali 2015': 72).
- 37 In the Tunisian context, even though they were able to denounce a structural State racism, these activists were unable to fully articulate their claims against the administrative, economic and social causes of racism. Raising awareness of the racism against black citizens within Tunisian public opinion was already a tough battle. Talking about this subject suffices to provoke multiple reactions which oscillate between nuancing (by the idea that one of the main forms of racism in Tunisia today is the rejection of rural people) and outright denial (by claiming that this racism is 'blown out of proportion', and that we should remain a 'united' nation to move forward). Fighting against a structural racism by brandishing economic and social claims in favour of black citizens might not be welcomed in an economic context which is also difficult for a large number of citizens who have the feeling of being treated as subjects or even second-class citizens. In this fight against racism, black activists like other subordinate groups – such as the inhabitants of the marginalized regions of central western and southern Tunisia – come up against the fundamental question of the unequal distribution of resources in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

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## NOTES

1. This information is reported on the Wikipedia page for Ismā'īl Qā'id al-Sabsī, although it should be noted that this source is not completely reliable on this point. The author(s) conflate in a single person at least two mamluks who bore the name of Ismā'īl, notably Ismā'īl Ṣāhib al-Ṭābi 'or al-Sunnī, who are not of Sardinian origin.

2. My thanks to Jocelyne Dakhlija and Cécile Vidal, who brought this point to my attention.

3. <https://webdoc.france24.com/tunisia-slave-atig-name-society-family-name-change-obstacles/chapitre-2.html> [last accessed, February 2021].

4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lgel7UtnQhM&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR0cKfRBSzvRrE98aeUW9NVBDBadAVw79bcKh1tc5FxYAKdMNdelt7yYziU> [last accessed, February 2021].

5. "November 20, 2013, the commemoration day of black consciousness in Brazil, will thus be taken up by certain activists, such as Saadia Mosbah as an example to be followed. Important bonds of friendship and collaboration will be forged, in particular within the framework of the World Social Forum in Tunis in 2013, and again, in 2015, between Tunisian associations and Brazilian or French associations, such as *Unegro*, *NegroNews* or the *Ausar* collective (United and Solidary Associations for Africa and its Renaissance)" (Mrad Dali 2015: 79; our translation).

6. <https://webdoc.france24.com/tunisia-slave-atig-name-society-family-name-change-obstacles/chapitre-1.html> [last accessed, February 2021].



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## ABSTRACTS

This article contrasts a policy of commemoration of slavery in post-revolutionary Tunisia with the gradual and very slow history of the demise of slavery in this country since the beginning of the 19th century. It explores the choice of the Tunisian state to commemorate the abolition of slavery in Tunisia with reference to the promulgation of a decree enacted in 1846, and the way in which the end of West and East African slavery became central to civic memory in Tunisia.

The first part of the article is based on recent, innovative and stimulating scholarly research by Inès Mrad Dali, Séphanie Pouessel, Maha Abdelhamid and Marta Scaglioni on black communities in Tunisia. The second part relies on works on European captives and the Mamluks or Muslim slaves and servants of often Caucasian origin in the Maghreb.

The first section places the issue of the commemoration of slavery in the context of the emergence of civic claims from black activists in Tunisia since the 2011 Revolution. The profound transformations that black communities have undergone since decolonization in the 1950s have shaped these claims. Indeed, the categories of national belonging to a Tunisian civic community, and therefore the debates on collective memory and the historical representations of the nation, have become more decisive for these anti-racist activists than the narratives of local origins which aimed to explain or even legitimize the subordinate positions of these communities, especially in the south of the country.

The second section broadens the discussion to include Christian male and female captives and especially the cases of male and female slaves of Caucasian origin converted to Islam (Mamluks and Odalisques) in 19th-century Tunisia. This section shows that the descendants of European captives are less concerned with the commemoration of the abolition of slavery. Their role in the country's history is greater because of their contribution to the founding of the Tunisian nation and its state. The uneven integration of the descendants of slaves into Tunisian society, in addition to the separate relationship with the memory of slavery of these groups explain over a long period of time the presence today of the differential treatment of Tunisians on the basis of skin colour.

The article concludes with two observations: Tunisian anti-racist activists wanted to fight against racist discourses and categories. From this point of view, they succeeded in advancing their cause by giving official status to the commemoration of the abolition of 1846. Henceforth, the fundamental and difficult question of the unequal distribution of resources in post-revolutionary Tunisia remains to be asked.

Cet article confronte la politique de mémoire de l'esclavage dans la Tunisie post-révolutionnaire à une histoire graduelle, et très lente, de la fin des esclavages dans ce pays depuis le début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Il explore le choix de l'État tunisien de commémorer l'abolition de l'esclavage en Tunisie en référence à la promulgation d'un décret de 1846, et montre comment la fin de l'esclavage des Africains de l'Ouest et de l'Est est devenue un élément central dans la construction d'une mémoire civique.

Cet article s'appuie, dans une première partie, sur les travaux récents, novateurs et stimulants d'Inès Mrad Dali, Séphanie Pouessel, Maha Abdelhamid et Marta Scaglioni sur les communautés noires de Tunisie. Il convoque, dans une seconde partie, d'autres travaux sur les captifs européens et sur les mamelouks ou esclaves et serviteurs musulmans au Maghreb, souvent d'origine caucasienne.

La première partie resitue la commémoration de l'esclavage dans le contexte de revendications civiques portées par des militant·e·s noir·e·s en Tunisie depuis la révolution de 2011. Les transformations profondes qu'ont connues les communautés noires depuis la décolonisation des

années 1950 ont façonné ces revendications. En effet, pour ces militant·e·s anti-racistes, ce qui est devenu déterminant, plus que les récits locaux qui visaient à expliquer voire à légitimer les positions subalternes de ces communautés – en particulier dans le sud du pays –, ce sont les catégories nationales d'appartenance à une communauté civique tunisienne et, en conséquence, les débats sur la mémoire collective et les représentations historiques de la nation.

La seconde partie élargit la réflexion aux captives et captifs chrétiens et surtout aux esclaves, hommes et femmes, d'origine caucasienne convertis à l'islam (mamelouks et odalisques) dans la Tunisie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cette partie montre que les descendants de captifs européens sont moins concernés par la commémoration d'une abolition de l'esclavage. Ils s'intègrent davantage à l'histoire du pays en fonction de leur contribution à l'édification d'une nation tunisienne et de son État. L'intégration plus que contrastée des descendants d'esclaves à la société tunisienne, et plus encore le rapport distinct de ces groupes à la mémoire de l'esclavage, confirment sur le temps long, le constat dressé aujourd'hui d'un traitement différencié des Tunisiens en fonction de leur couleur de peau.

L'article conclut sur deux constats : les militant·e·s anti-racistes tunisiens ont voulu lutter contre des discours et des catégorisations racistes. Ils ont réussi, de ce point de vue, à faire avancer leur cause en rendant officielle la commémoration de l'abolition de 1846. Ils ont désormais à poser la question fondamentale et ardue de la distribution inégalitaire des ressources dans la Tunisie post-révolutionnaire.

Este artículo confronta la política de memoria de la esclavitud, en el Túnez posrevolucionario, con una historia gradual y muy lenta del fin de las esclavitudes en este país desde el inicio del siglo XIX. Explora la elección del Estado tunecino de conmemorar la abolición de la esclavitud en Túnez en referencia a la promulgación de un decreto de 1846, y muestra cómo el fin de la esclavitud de los africanos del oeste y del este del continente se volvió un elemento central en la construcción de una memoria cívica.

La primera parte de este artículo se basa en los trabajos recientes, innovadores y estimulantes de Inès Mrad Dali, Stéphanie Pouessel, Maha Abdelhamid y Marta Scaglioni sobre las comunidades negras de Túnez. La segunda parte hace referencia a otros trabajos sobre los cautivos europeos y sobre los mamelucos o esclavos y servidores musulmanes en Magreb, con frecuencia de origen caucásico.

La primera parte restituye la conmemoración de la esclavitud en el contexto de las reivindicaciones cívicas llevadas a cabo por militantes negros en Túnez desde la revolución de 2011. Las transformaciones profundas que conocieron las comunidades negras desde la descolonización de los años 1950 dieron forma a estas reivindicaciones. En efecto, para estos militantes antirracistas, más determinantes aún que los relatos locales que apuntaban a explicar e incluso a legitimar las posiciones subalternas de estas comunidades –en particular en el sur del país–, fueron las categorías nacionales de pertenencia a una comunidad cívica tunecina y, en consecuencia, los debates sobre la memoria colectiva y las representaciones históricas de la nación.

La segunda parte extiende la reflexión a las cautivas y a los cautivos cristianos, y sobre todo a los esclavos, hombres y mujeres, de origen caucásico convertidos al islam (mamelucos y odaliscas) en el Túnez del siglo XIX. Esta parte muestra que los descendientes de los cautivos europeos se sienten menos implicados por la conmemoración de la abolición de la esclavitud. Se integran en mayor medida a la historia del país en función de su contribución a la construcción de una nación tunecina y de su Estado. La integración, con muchos contrastes, de los descendientes de esclavos en la sociedad tunecina, y más aún la relación diferente de estos grupos con la memoria de la esclavitud confirman, en la larga duración, la constatación que se hace hoy de un tratamiento diferenciado de los tunecinos en función del color de piel.

El artículo concluye con dos constataciones: los militantes antirracistas tunecinos quisieron

luchar contra discursos y categorizaciones racistas. Desde este punto de vista, lograron hacer avanzar su causa volviendo oficial la conmemoración de la abolición de 1846. De ahora en más deben plantear la cuestión fundamental y ardua de la distribución desigual de los recursos en el Túnez posrevolucionario.

Este artigo confronta a política de memória da escravidão na Tunísia pós-revolução com uma história gradual, e muito lenta, do fim da escravidão nesse país a partir do princípio do século XIX. Explora a escolha do Estado tunisiano de comemorar a abolição da escravidão na Tunísia referindo-se a promulgação de um decreto de 1846, e mostra como o fim da escravidão dos Africanos de Oeste e Este tornou-se um elemento central na construção de uma memória cívica.

A primeira parte deste artigo baseia-se nos trabalhos recentes, novadores e estimulantes de Inès Mrad Dali, Stéphanie Pouessel, Maha Abdelhamid e Marta Scaglioni sobre as comunidades negras de Tunísia. Convoca, numa segunda parte, outros trabalhos sobre os cativos europeus e os mamelucos ou escravos e servos muçulmanos no Magreb, muitas vezes de origem caucasiana.

A primeira parte restitue a comemoração da escravidão no contexto das reivindicações cívicas dos militantes negro.a.s na Tunísia desde a revolução de 2011. As transformações profundas que conheceram as comunidades negras a partir da descolonização dos anos 1950 moldaram essas reivindicações. De fato, para esses militantes anti-racistas, o que se tornou determinante, mais de que os relatos locais que visavam explicar e até legitimar as posições subalternas dessas comunidades — em particular no sul do país —, foram as categorias nacionais de pertença a uma comunidade cívica tunisiana e, portanto, os debates sobre a memória coletiva e as representações históricas da nação.

A segunda parte alarga a reflexão, considerando os cativos e cativas cristãos e sobretudo os escravos, homens e mulheres de origem caucasiana convertidos ao Islã (mamelucos e odaliscas) na Tunísia do século XIX. Esta parte mostra que os descendentes de cativos europeus encontram-se menos interessados pela comemoração de uma abolição da escravidão.

Estão mais integrados à história do país em função de sua contribuição para a edificação de uma nação tunisiana e de seu Estado. A integração mais contrastada dos descendentes de escravos na sociedade tunisiana, e ainda mais a relação distinta desses grupos com a memória da escravidão, confirmam na longa duração, a observação hoje em dia de um tratamento diferenciado dos Tunisianos em função de sua cor de pele.

O artigo conclue com duas observações : os militantes anti-racistas tunisianos quiseram lutar contra discursos e categorias racistas. Conseguiram, deste ponto de vista, fazer evoluir a sua causa, tornando oficial a comemoração da abolição de 1846. Devem hoje colocar a questão fundamental e difícil da distribuição desigual dos recursos na Tunísia pós-revolução.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Tunisie, esclavage, mémoire, abolition, commémorations, Noirs, Blancs

**Palavras-chave:** Tunísia, escravidão, memória, abolição, comemorações, negros, brancos

**Palabras claves:** Túnez, esclavitud, memoria, abolición, conmemoraciones, negros, blancos

**Keywords:** Tunisia, slavery, memory, abolition, commemoration, Blacks, Whites

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