

“Dans la Peau d’un Noir”: Senegalese Students and Young Professionals in Rabat, Morocco

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Abstract

In the article “Dans la peau d’un noir au Maroc” (*SlateAfrique* 2012), the Senegalese journalist Bassirou Ba describes the prejudice he has encountered as a black-skinned person in Morocco. Ba’s testimony is part of an ongoing debate, both in Morocco and in North Africa more broadly, about the issue of “anti-black racism” and its relations with the legacies of slavery. Tracing the contours of this debate against the backdrop of changing migration policies and emerging anti-racism movements, in this article I discuss the narratives of four Senegalese university students and young professionals in Rabat. My interlocutors’ everyday experiences of, and reflections on, racism reveal the manifold ways in which black Africans are racialized as “the others”. Highlighting the historical contingency of “racialization”, I argue that, while the racial legacies of slavery continue to affect local constructions of “blackness” and to shape racial prejudice, current anti-black racism also speaks of contemporary dynamics in Morocco.

Keywords: racism, racialization, Senegalese young people, slavery, Morocco

Introduction

How can a beggar have such a sense of superiority common to all racists in the world? The scene took place in Rabat when I was still a student. A black Comorian friend, who had just received his scholarship, stopped in front of an old woman begging and handed her ten dirhams. As he continued walking on his way, he heard the beggar saying in Arabic: “Oh my God, what have I done to deserve such a fate: a black, the son of a slave, who gives me alms?” The benefactor could not believe to his ears [...] (Ba 2012, my translation)

Bassirou Ba, a young Senegalese professional, narrated this incident in an interview published in the francophone magazine *SlateAfrique* in 2012 under the title of “Dans la peau d’un noir au Maroc” (In the skin of a black

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in Morocco) in which he describes the difficult situation of sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco. In Ba's eyes, this incident, among the many others he has experienced since his arrival in Rabat in 2000, reveals the sense of superiority felt by many Moroccans vis-à-vis sub-Saharan Africans, and the visions of black people as "slaves" and "inferiors"¹.

As with many sub-Saharan African students, Ba arrived in Rabat to complete his university studies on a Moroccan scholarship. After he gained a master's degree in journalism and communication in 2007, he found employment there, working on various francophone magazines. However, his experience was also marked by racism: from being called 'azzi² to having stones thrown at him or to being spat upon while he was walking in the street. These triggered a sense of estrangement from a country that he had imagined as "the natural extension of his homeland" (Ba 2012).

Ba's testimony is part of an ongoing debate in Morocco and in other North African countries (see Pouessel 2012; Bahri 2014; Menin 2016; Law 2014; King 2019; Mrad Dali 2015; Scaglioni 2017) about the previously undiscussed issue of "anti-black racism" (*le racism anti-noir*) and its relations with the legacies of slavery. Tracing the contours of this debate against the backdrop of changing migration policies and emerging anti-racism movements, I show in this article how "racism" is experienced and reflected upon by four Senegalese students and young professionals whom I met in Rabat in 2014. They are three men – Paul, a physician, Mohammed, a master's student and Ibrahim, a journalist – and a woman, Aissatou, an undergraduate student. All my interlocutors arrived in Morocco to study in public universities on a scholarship funded by the Moroccan state and initially resided at the *cit  universitaire*, the university residence in Rabat. After completing their studies, some of them decided to remain there to work: a prerogative awarded under specific bilateral agreements between Morocco and Senegal. I interviewed them between October and November 2014, as

1 Interestingly, a number of scholars, and my Moroccan interlocutors in the field, note a semantic and imaginative connection between blackness, slavery and the function of serf/domestic which is contained within the term *'abd*, which literally means "slave" but is also used to mean "black" (for example, Aouad-Badoual 2004, El Hamel 2013a)

2 In Moroccan Arabic, the term *'azzi* (pl. 'awazza) can contextually mean "black", "negro" or "slave". This term was originally used in relation to the Bambara, a particular sub-Saharan ethnic group, while outside Tafilalet, it has also been used with reference to *Haratin* (generally translated as free blacks and freed blacks) (Ilahiane 2006: 67); then it came to be (mis)used over time as a generic for "sub-Saharan black/slave" (McDougall, personal communication, July 2016). In the context of my fieldwork in Rabat, most of my interlocutors translated the term *'azzi* as "negro" or "black," overlaid with a derogatory meaning, but others argued that it can also be used jokingly between friends (Menin 2016, pp. 13-14).

part of a broader research project on “race” and post-slavery in Morocco.³ At the time of our conversations, “anti-black racism” was a sensitive issue in Moroccan society. Personal testimonies and articles published in the independent press combined with the voices of Moroccan organizations and sub-Saharan African migrants’ associations to give visibility to, and to open a public debate on, what they described as growing institutional violence and everyday discrimination against sub-Saharan Africans.

My interlocutors’ narratives offer an original perspective from which to examine these questions. Students, unlike the stigmatized “in-transit population”, occupy, indeed, a privileged position as highly skilled people. Senegalese students, in particular, belong to an established national community in Morocco and feel deep cultural and religious connections with the country (Fall 2004; Ait Benlmadani, Chattou 2014). In spite of that, they have found themselves being confronted with overlapping forms of racism and discrimination. Moreover, whereas “in-transit” migrants have been one main focus of scholarly attention in the past 15 years (e.g. Alioua 2005, 2007; Collyer 2007; Martinez 2009; Timèrà 2011; Bachelet 2018, 2019; Stock 2012), only a few studies have explored the experiences of foreign university students. The work of Johara Berriane (2009, 2015a) and Federica Infantino (2011) contribute to filling this gap, *inter alia* by offering insights into the ways in which they feel they are discriminated against in Moroccan society.

Building on this scholarship and expanding on it, I focus specifically on the different ways in which Senegalese students and young professionals experience, interpret and deal with “racism” in their everyday lives. My goal is to raise two key theoretical and ethnographic questions, the first of which is: To what extent does a slavery past cast a shadow on, and enable us to make sense of, the present dynamics? The second is: How can we think, conceptually and ethnographically, of the relations between the historical and the contemporary without flooding both the past and the present with tautological connections and explanations? I engage with these questions through the concept of “racialization”, which refers to “the process through which *racialized groups*, rather than ‘races’, are formed” (Hochman 2019, p. 1245, emphasis in original). This concept, with its historical permutations

3 My discussion of “anti-black racism” also draws on interviews with “in-transit” sub-Saharan Africans, permanent migrants, workers, students and activists, and with Moroccan activists. This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) within the frame of the project SWAB-Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond: A historical perspective (ERC Grant agreement n. 313737). The paper was written thanks to a post-doctoral scholarship funded by the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Milano Bicocca. I am deeply grateful to the three anonymous reviewers of *Antropologia* for their insightful comments on this paper.

(Barot and Bird 2001), has been used by sociologists and anthropologists in various ways as a productive conceptual alternative to “race”. In particular, anthropologists working on migration employ it to expose how post-colonial immigrants in Europe come to be racialized as others par excellence against the backdrop of shifting racial landscapes (Silverstein 2005; Fassin 2012). In this article, I take the notion of “racialization” itself beyond the study of migration so as to interrogate the social constructions of “blackness” that evoke Morocco’s slavery past. My intention, however, is not just to reduce the current “racialization” of black Africans to this past. While, indeed, paying close attention to how the legacies of this past surface in, and intersect with, contemporary imaginations of sub-Saharan Africa and Africans, my approach emphasizes also the *historical contingency* of “racialization” (Hochman 2018).

Before engaging with my young interlocutors’ narratives I first contextualize the presence of foreign students in Morocco, against the backdrop of Morocco’s evolving migration policies. Then I trace the emergence of local debates on “anti-black racism” and the legacies of slavery in Morocco in the independent press. An ethnographic focus on the racialization of black Africans – viewed from the perspectives Senegalese students and young professionals – enriches our ethnographic knowledge of current racial dynamics in North Africa (Timérà 2011; Pouessel 2012; Bahri 2014; Law 2014; King 2019) by offering an understanding of racism as a multi-layered phenomenon. It also contributes to academic debates on the legacies of slavery in West Africa (for example, McDougall 2005; Bellagamba, Klein, Green 2013a, 2013b, 2017; Lecocq, Hahonou 2015; Pelckmans, Hardung 2015) by expanding the conversation beyond a classic focus on former-slave-former-master relationships.

Senegalese students and “racialization” in Morocco

A number of studies have documented the religious, political and socio-economic dimensions of migrations in, to and through Morocco (Baldwin-Edwards 2006; Peraldi 2011; Alioua 2005, 2007, 2009; Bensaâd 2009; Khrouz, Lanza 2015; Benbih 2015; Berriane, M., de Haas, Natter 2015). The presence of Senegalese students, and of foreign students in general, is an integral part of the broader dynamics of mobility connecting the country with the rest of Africa. Their presence has been promoted through co-operation programmes since Morocco gained its independence in 1956. This decades-old phenomenon has increased rapidly since the late 1980s, leading to Morocco having more sub-Saharan African students than almost all other countries (Laouali, Meyer 2012). Relationships with the African continent have been continually reinforced since King Mohammed VI’s ascent to the

throne in 1999, and with Senegal and West Africa particularly; importantly, in 2017 Morocco rejoined the Africa Union, having withdrawn in 1984⁴. In official statements, Mohammed VI highlights the cultural, religious and commercial relations that have historically bound Morocco and West Africa together (Sambe 2010, Berriane 2015a). Transaharan trade and commercial relations between Morocco and *Bilad as-Sudan* (translatable as “the land of the Blacks”) date back to the 8th century and were consolidated further by the Islamization imposed on these territories by the Almoravid dynasty (1040-1147). Moreover, the *Tijaniyya* brotherhood in Fez, where the shrine of its founder Ahmad al-Tidjani⁵ is located, has attracted Senegalese pilgrims since the 19th century (Fall 2004; Lanza 2014, Berriane 2015b). The King’s evocation of the historical connections between Morocco and West Africa – which have important implications for how Senegalese students imagine Morocco and craft their expectations before coming – is a way not simply of celebrating a common past, but also of projecting Morocco’s current political, economic and diplomatic interests in Africa⁶.

These interests also emerge in recent shifts in national immigration policies. Beginning in the mid-1990s, bilateral EU/Morocco agreements have regulated and restricted migration flows through and from Morocco to Europe, including through a particularly strict migration law (02/2003) enacted by the Moroccan government in 2003 (Natter 2014). Within the context of the changing migration dynamics in West Africa⁷ and restrictive immigration policies in Europe, these developments contributed both to Morocco’s becoming an alternative destination for migrants (Bensaâd 2005;

4 After the isolation that followed Morocco’s withdrawal from the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) in 1984, commercial and diplomatic relations between Morocco and West Africa continued with the creation of l’Agence Marocaine de Coopération Internationale in 1986.

5 Ahmad al-Tidjani founded the Sufi order founded in Algeria in the 18th century and then settled in Fez in 1798. The Tidjaniyya spread throughout West Africa, and Senegal in particular.

6 As recently as May 2015, Morocco and Senegal signed thirteen cooperation agreements in the sector of tourism and infrastructure (Majdi, *Telquel* 22 May 2015) and then fifteen co-operation agreements in the fields of maritime fishing, aquaculture, banking, transport, solar energy and green energy, infrastructure and student fellowships, including agreements between the public and private sectors (Majdi *Telquel* 26 May 2015). For an overview of Morocco’s diplomatic relations with West Africa, see Ait Benmadani, Chattou (2014).

7 Since the 1990s, trans-Saharan migrations to and through Morocco have grown in the wake of political and economic developments, wars and humanitarian crises within Africa. The ending, in 2007, of Libya’s “Pan-African open-door policy”, which had attracted labour migration in previous decades, was particularly significant in that it redirected many such migrants to Morocco (See, for example, De Haas 2006; Jeandesboz, Pallister-Wilkins 2014, pp. 127- 128).

Peraldi 2011) and to the emergence of an “in-transit population” involuntarily immobile and living in conditions of marginalization.

While police violence against migrants in the border zones has long been denounced⁸, the past few years have been marked by a spate of violent incidents between Moroccans and sub-Saharan African migrants. In August 2013, Alexis Toussaint, a Congolese professor on a visit to Tangier, was arbitrarily arrested by police during a raid and died “falling out of” the police van. Fifteen days later, Ismail Faye, a young Senegalese, was stabbed by a Moroccan in the Kamra bus station in Rabat. Faye’s refusal to obey the request of a Moroccan man to move from his (assigned) seat next to a Moroccan woman on a bus appears to have ignited the dispute. These murders triggered indignation among the migrant communities, and the *Association des Ressortissants Sénégalais résidant au Maroc*, an association created 1961, denounced this tragic event as a “racist act” (Gueye 2013).

In 2013 Mohammed VI announced a new immigration policy, which included the process of regularizing undocumented migrants between January and December 2014, and a second regularization campaign took place in 2017. In the political climate promoted by what appeared to be a break with the previous migration policies, the network *Papiers pour tous* launched the national campaign *Ma smitish ‘azzi* (My name is not nigger) and then an NGO in Casablanca organized the local campaign “I am Moroccan, I am African”. These media events are just two examples of attempts by local associations, Moroccan and sub-Saharan African,⁹ to stop conflicts and to raise public awareness about racism. Despite these efforts, violence exploded in August 2014 in a poor neighbourhood of Tangier, and the Senegalese Charles Ndour was brutally murdered (Crétois 2014). As we will see, these developments deeply affected the lives and the sense of security of the Senegalese young people I met in Rabat; they also stimulated reflections on racism, its causes and consequences. Next, I will trace how racism emerged as a topic in the independent press.

8 In 2005, the tragic events of Ceuta e Melilla became the focus of international and national public attention (especially for the uninformed reader). Since then sub-Saharan migrants’ associations and human rights organizations have continued to denounce the violent state practice of forcible relocation to the desert. Following the brutal repression of some migrants’ attempts to cross the fences in (northern) Melilla in March 2013, a group of associations organized demonstration, sit-ins and the “No. 9 Stop violence at the borders” campaign to denounce the brutal use of force at the hands of both Moroccan and Spanish police.

9 These associations include, for example, the Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc, the Collectif des Communautés Subsahariennes du Maroc, and more recently, the Association Lumière sur l’Emigration Clandestine au Maroc.

Opening a debate on “racism”

In the early 2000s, the magazine *Jeune Afrique* began publishing personal testimonies of both black Maghribians and sub-Saharan Africans (e.g. Mosbah 2004; Maïga 2004; Bouyahia 2005). In a controversial 2005 article, Smahane Bouyahia raised a heated online debate by describing discrimination against both black Moroccans and sub-Saharan African migrants as a real problem, which, nevertheless, remains a taboo topic in Morocco. In the article “Singes, olives et chocolates” (Monkeys, olives and chocolates), Zoubèïrou Maïga, who came from Mali to study at the University in Casablanca, brought Morocco’s slave past into the discussion. Describing his experiences in Morocco when he arrived as a student in the late 1980s, he reflected on the extent to which the history of slavery had left legacies – that affect current relations between Arabs and sub-Saharan Africans – of racial prejudice and the hierarchization of human beings. Since then, a number of newspaper articles and magazines have addressed the question of racism against sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, both by giving voice to the migrants themselves and by reflecting on Moroccans’ “racial attitude” and identity. The question of racism received increasing social and political attention, however, after the violent incidents between Moroccans and immigrants in 2013.

A multiplicity of voices animated societal debates, offering different perspectives on racism, its causes and origins. I have discussed elsewhere (Menin 2016) the perspectives of human rights activists, both Moroccan and sub-Saharan African, and ordinary people; here I focus on the narratives that, drawing on history to understand the present dynamics, trace the continuity between past slavery and current racism. A striking example is the special issue *Pourquoi nous sommes racistes* (Why we are racist) published by *Zamane*, a francophone and Arab-speaking Moroccan magazine devoted to history, in November 2013. This included an interview with the historian Chouki El Hamel and various articles on the historical foundations of racism, ethnic divisions and discriminations in Morocco.

El Hamel is the author of *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam* (2013), a well-documented analysis of slavery, gender and race in Morocco from the pre-Islamic era to the early colonial period. El Hamel’s key argument is that, although in Morocco (patrilinear) descent, more than color, defines “race”, it was deeply affected by the racialization of slavery in the 17th century, when the Sultan Mawlay Ismaïl conscripted black slaves, slave descendants and *Haratin* to create an army of black soldiers loyal to him alone, in order to establish the hegemony of the ‘Alawite dynasty (1660-present). *Haratin*, still a debated term, is generally translated as “freed blacks” or “free blacks” (Wright 2007, p. 12). El Hamel (2013, pp. 109-113) defines them as descendants of an agriculturalist population

originally living in the fringes of the desert. For El Hamel, their forced conscription in the 17th century Black Army contributed to the ideological foundation of a society divided by colour (El Hamel 2013, p. 10). In the interview published in *Zamane*, El Hamel identifies the historical and cultural foundations of current racism firmly in this history and highlights the extent to which the increasing presence of African migrants has made this history visible: “The recent sub-Saharan migration has shown the extent to which racist attitudes are deeply rooted in Moroccan culture” (2013b, p. 62).

The work of El Hamel, popularized in the independent press, is having a significant impact on the shaping of current explorations of racism and slavery in that press. In another article that appears in the same issue, significantly titled “*Racisme ancien, racisme moderne*” (Old racism, modern racism), the journalist Abdellah Tourabi, following El Hamel, interprets current racism in the light of the racial legacy of slavery. He writes: “Another current manifestation of this culture of rejection and discrimination, where “the other” is perceived as inferior, is racism against sub-Saharan migrants [...] (2013, p. 41)”. From different angles, these voices point to the importance of history in understanding today’s racism. This connection between historical slavery and current racism tries to rectify stigmatizing visions of sub-Saharan migrants and to give historical depth to a current phenomenon. On the other hand, in searching for the cultural and historical foundations of current anti-black racism, it fails to consider the present socio-political dynamics and, paradoxically, ends up proposing a trans-historical vision of racism. An understanding of racism as a legacy of Morocco’s slave past emerges vividly in Mohammed’s narrative, which I discuss below.

“I don’t take a taxi with a negro”

At the time of our meeting, Mohammed was 25 years old and studying for a master’s degree in Communication in a public university in Rabat; he also worked in a Moroccan company. He did not envision a future for himself in Morocco. “The final project is to come back and manage my business quietly, next to the family. For sure, I would not send my son to Morocco!” he said. He described Morocco as a good country, with beautiful cities, modern infrastructure and well-paid jobs, but he also stressed the difficulties he encountered. When he arrived in Morocco in 2009, he expected to find a very religious country: “Before I left, my mother said: ‘You have the opportunity to become more religious’”. However, the reality of the cosmopolitan Rabat engendered a sense of estrangement triggered by religious, cultural, racial and linguistic barriers. Mohammed recalled that when he first ventured outside the university residence with a friend to do some shopping in the local

market, the greengrocer’s son called him *‘azzi*. “He is a child”, he commented “and is not aware, but the problem is the older ones; his father does not react when his child say *‘azzi* to a black, this means he authorizes him”.

In addition to being called *‘azzi*, Mohammed learned quickly from his fellow students that sub-Saharan Africans are the victims of thefts, muggings and acts of aggression when out near the university residence. The residence is in an isolated area of Rabat, surrounded by low-income neighbourhoods inhabited by people whom Mohammed described as “marginal, ignorant and poor”. He also said that, beyond marginality, racism is often a motivation to attack black Africans, verbally or physically: “When you walk in a street and guys throw stones at you, or spit on you, they aren’t seeking money. This is racism.” Mohammed’s feeling of estrangement is also sharpened by the growing sense of insecurity triggered by the recent murders of sub-Saharan African nationals. “Every year they stab someone, in daylight. They attack you in the street and no one intervenes. Even the police do nothing [...] Security is not guaranteed” he commented. While Mohammed made it clear that this happens especially in marginal neighbourhoods, he thought that racism cuts across different contexts and social classes. Indeed, he also encountered subtle expressions of racism at the university and this made it difficult for him to develop friendships with Moroccan students. He said: “A female student asked: ‘If you bathed a lot, would you become whiter?’ This is real ignorance. Students ask the most ridiculous questions”.

Mohammed complained that many Moroccan students assume that sub-Saharan Africans are animist and when he said he is a Muslim and could read the Qur’an, they are happily surprised; their belonging to Islam, though, does not necessarily create a sense of closeness. Mahamet Timéra (2011) makes a similar point in his study on Senegalese migrants in Rabat, showing how, in a context marked by racism and social divisions between migrants and the local population, Islam is experienced both as a factor of common belonging and as an element of difference.

While the street and the university are the main sites where Mohamed found anti-black prejudice, the university residence was the place where he could build friendships with other foreign students and craft a shared identity as “blacks”. These dynamics emerge also in Johara Berriane’s (2015a, p. 582-584) exploration of sub-Saharan African students’ experiences in Rabat, where she notes that foreign students’ experiences of racism lead them to re-appropriate the stigmatizing identification as “Africans” as a collective identity. Similarly, although Mohammed recognized that there are vast internal differences within Africa, he felt the main difference vis-à-vis Moroccans: “I don’t describe myself as Senegalese, I’m African”.

Mulling over his experience, Mohammed admitted that his lack of knowledge of Moroccan Arabic and his tendency to socialize with foreign students have contributed to his social isolation. He added that, despite his efforts to

master the language, he continued to feel discriminated against in everyday life situations. For example, he claimed that in a shop or at the market, he always has to wait until after the Moroccans had been served. “There is nothing you can do. You keep your pain inside”. For Mohammed, Moroccans who travelled or migrated abroad are more sympathetic with the situations of foreigners not only because travelling broadened their minds but also because they have experienced racism and discrimination in Europe.

Reflecting on racism, he said: “This happens everywhere. Everywhere there is discrimination. I don’t want to generalize and say that Moroccans are racist, no, but there are Moroccans who are really racist.” In particular, he recalled an incident that deeply marked him because an elderly person was involved:

When you see an elderly person you respect him because he might be your uncle. One day I went out to go to the *fac* and I was in the street waiting for a taxi. I called the taxi, and when it stopped, the old man got up, though it was me that had called the taxi. I tried to get in [the ‘petit taxis’ can accommodate up to 3 people], but the old man said in French: “I do not take a taxi with a negro.” Why so? I pay like you, I have the right to get in the taxi.

When I asked him if he thought that prejudice and discrimination were linked to his skin colour or to a general sense of xenophobia, crucially, Mohammed evoked the history of slavery in Morocco. He said: “Since there was slavery and Arabs owned black slaves, Moroccans think that all blacks are slaves. Even the King owned black slaves. When they see a black person they think he is a slave.” Until the late 19th century, indeed, black slaves from West Africa were traded along with other precious items like gold, spices, salt etc. Slaves were employed in agricultural labour, but the majority were employed as domestic slaves and concubines in the houses of the élite families and in the Sultans’ palace, as an expression of power and prestige (Botte 2010, pp. 158-159; Aouad-Badoual 2004; Ennaji 1998, pp. 4-10; El Hamel 2013a). Neither during the French Protectorate nor after Morocco’s independence was slavery officially abolished (Botte 2010, pp. 145-186). Only Morocco’s Fundamental Law of 1961 and subsequent Constitution in 1962 sanctioned the equality of all citizens. Slavery disappeared gradually in the period following independence and, even then, this was the result not of formal policy but of the socioeconomic changes that affected Moroccan society and the institution of the family (Goodman 2012, p. 145).

Crucially, for Mohammed, the history of racialized slavery in Morocco has left a legacy that affects not only slave descendants but also people who are black and come from sub-Saharan Africa in general, regardless of their ancestry. His reflections resonate with the local debates discussed above, in highlighting how the racial legacies of slavery refract in contemporary ex-

pressions of racism and discrimination against black Africans in Morocco. Others of my interlocutors also evoked contemporary social and political processes in order to explain racism. Let me begin with Aissatou’s narrative.

“They think we are all easy girls”

Aissatou, a 22-year-old student of journalism originally from Thiès, arrived in Morocco in 2011. When I met her, she was an active member of *La Confédération des Élèves, Etudiants et Stagiaires Africains Étrangers au Maroc*, an organization established in 1981 with the aim to promote foreign African students’ integration and the knowledge of their cultures within Moroccan society. Unlike Mohammed, before departing home, Aissatou had been aware that many Senegalese experience racism in Morocco because, she explained, this has become common knowledge, in her view, especially thanks to the growing circulation of information and news on the topic. “When you arrive,” she said, “students explain everything to you, the dangers, the places you should avoid, and how to survive here.” Precisely because of the many difficulties she experienced, Aissatou did not envisage a future in Morocco after completing her university course. In her view, racial prejudices against black Africans are rooted in the stereotypical representations in TV and newspapers:

People think that all sub-Saharanans live in primitive times because in the documentaries they show blacks living in the forests. They associate black Africans with primitivism, slavery, animism – they think that there are no sub-Saharan Muslims. And this is a major problem for our integration here because at first sight you are classified in this way.

For Aissatou, the history of slavery and ahistorical representations of sub-Saharan Africa combine in the construction of black Africans as the “other” coming not only from a remote area but also from a remote time, in an asymmetrical relation in which coevalness is denied. For Aissatou, this peculiar geopolitical imagination impacts on the relationships between Moroccan and foreign students. “At the university”, she went on “there is a hidden, intellectual, racism, not directly perceived. Students do have prejudices, but they do not show racism openly, I’m not saying they are not racist, but they do not manifest it”. While, for Aissatou, Moroccan students hide their racial prejudice, their behaviour reveals the sense of superiority they feel toward sub-Saharan Africans. “Moroccans think that if you’re black you have a less important civilization than theirs. At first glance, it is skin colour that makes a difference”. In her experience, being a Senegalese and a Muslim can reduce the distance between students, but cannot erase it completely.

It is, however, in the street that Aissatou encountered what she described as “real, overt racism”: “In the street is different, they call you *‘azzia*, nigger. People manifest racism clearly.” In addition to media representations of Africans, Aissatou ascribed what she perceived as an escalation of racism to the increased presence of undocumented migrants, which in her view has exacerbated social tensions and negatively affected both the image of sub-Saharan students and their integration in Moroccan society: “This has created a negative image for all sub-Saharan Africans and created the root of racism”. This perception constrains Aissatou’s movements and everyday actions, like taking a bus or hanging around with her friends. Following her fellow students’ advice, she avoided going out of the *cit * alone, and especially at night, without the presence of male friends, and did not take public transport. She described the buses and the coaches as very dangerous places, evoking the Senegalese man who had been recently stabbed by a Moroccan in the “Kamra” bus station in Rabat (cf. *intra*). She went on: “There is a great security problem in Morocco” she commented, “but there is also racism, Moroccans can attack you just for the sake of racism”.

Another reason that motivated Aissatou to avoid public transport is the fact that, in her view, sub-Saharan girls are particularly exposed to sexual harassment, because, she said, “Moroccans associate black girls with prostitution”. Aissatou connected this sexual prejudice to the fact that there are black African women who work as prostitutes in Rabat, but also added that their different sexual behaviour and style of dress lead Moroccans to regard them as “easy girls”. “Moroccans think that a girl should remain a virgin until marriage”, she went on, “I do not think this thing exists in Africa. So, when they see that sub-Saharan African girls have sexual relations with their partners, they think they sleep with everyone”. For Aissatou, this prejudice not only compromises the integration of sub-Saharan African female students, but also makes it very difficult for them to find a Moroccan partner. The association between black African women and prostitution may also be interpreted in the light of the historical presence of black concubines in Morocco. Importantly, although Aissatou herself mentioned Morocco’s slave past, she connected the sexual prejudice to other factors: mainly to the role of the media and press in shaping anti-black stereotypes. While Aissatou felt somehow apart from Moroccan society, Paul, a 30 years old physician in a public hospital, tried to develop an “emic” perspective on it; his efforts, however, coexist with a deep sense of ambivalence.

“That which really hurts me about Morocco”

Originally from Dakar, Paul arrived in Morocco in 2005 to start his university studies in medicine, assuming that he would integrate easily. Evoking

the historical, commercial and religious ties between the two countries, he said: “Many Senegalese do pilgrimage to the Tijanija brotherhood in Fez [...]. In Dakar, Moroccans are well integrated, trade, speak our language and marry Senegalese women. I thought it would be the same for me here”. Upon arrival, however, he realized that social life in Morocco was different from his expectations. “Initially, it was a cultural shock,” he said. Comparing his experience with that of other foreign students, Paul claimed that he has never felt discriminated against because of his skin colour, but his reflections below reveal the subtle ways in which racial boundaries were drawn. He recalled the first time he heard a professor referring to the foreign students as “Our friends, the Africans (*Nos amis, les Africains*)”, an experience that marked him deeply.

He said and repeated it, it is not a lapse. I was shocked. I talked to Moroccan students, and many think that Africa begins under the Sahara. They consider themselves as Maghrebians and Arabs, as if there was a frontier between sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world. Many do not really know that Morocco is in Africa, and this is ignorance, it is shocking. I think it’s a question of education and a certain superiority complex.

Being called “the Africans”, which is felt by students as a clear line of demarcation between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, reflects, in Paul’s words, Moroccans’ alleged geopolitical imaginations defining North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa as two distinct cultural areas. A second barrier is, for Paul, the language: this is not only because foreign students expect educated Moroccans to master French, as Morocco is a francophone country, but also because he feels that the Arabic language is used to exclude them intentionally. Paul said: “I felt frustrated when students made me feel a foreigner. Imagine: you are in a small group, discussing in French, and someone begins to speak Arabic, and you feel excluded.” Paul’s feeling of being excluded was sharpened by the impression that Moroccan students gossiped behind his back, an impression that was confirmed when he started mastering the Moroccan dialect. “When I started speaking Arabic, I understood that they were talking about me, in front of me, making racist and xenophobic comments.” Another barrier for Paul was religion as, being a Christian, he felt blamed and was pressured to convert. “In my country, 90% are Muslims” he explained, “but I’ve never had problems. When you come here and say you are a Christian, they say you are wrong. I don’t like to be classified on the basis of my religious affiliation or skin colour.”

In Paul’s view, students’ prejudices are rooted in their very limited knowledge of Africa, and its history and culture.

In schools they don’t study the history of Africa, they only associate it to war, famine, poverty. And every time they see a black, they identify him with it. A

student asked me, do you have schools? Do you have roads? Do people live on the trees? It's caricature, but there are many students for whom we are the first blacks with whom they have had contact. This shocked me. I knew many things about Morocco before coming, but when you come here you find students who don't know anything about Senegal, where it is, or the Ivory Coast. This shows that much needs to be done on the educational and cultural level.

Paul highlighted the extent to which such racial prejudice affects his intimate life. He recounted that in his first years of university, he had romantic relationships with Moroccan female students, which ended because of social pressures: "People spoke behind my back with her and gossiped about her saying she was an easy girl because they don't conceive, nor accept, that a Moroccan girl can be together with a black man." Crucially, Paul made clear that anti-black attitudes affect not only sub-Saharan Africans but also black Moroccans: "Some families would not marry their daughter to a black Moroccan man because of his skin colour. It is changing, but this still exists". Although Paul pointed to uneven relationships *among* Moroccans, based on specific constructions of blackness and colour, he did not delve into this issue further. He explained, instead, how he tried to deal with these difficulties by maintaining an open attitude toward Moroccan society and by avoiding generalization: "I have always tried to educate people by explaining things and by breaking the prejudice with my behaviour".

Especially since he started his specialization at the hospital, during his sixth year of study, he became part of a small group of Moroccan students with whom he could build close relationships and met ordinary people at the hospital's ER. This experience, he said, enabled him to develop a deeper understanding of society:

I am a foreigner and I have a college scholarship when there are Moroccans who cannot afford to study at university and don't have a job. One must understand the attitude of these people, who are marginalized and who think: "these foreigners study or work in the place of my son".

While his open attitude enabled him to live with everyday expressions of racism, he disclosed that there are things that continue to hurt him deeply.

I don't mind about what I hear in the street, what hurts me is what people I know say about me. A week ago, at the hospital, I was returning to the unit where I worked, and a woman said "ah that '*azz!*'" And this hurt me deeply because I am a doctor, I have my doctor's coats, I am on duty in the place where I work every day. This made me feel very bad. [...] In other contexts racism is thinner, maybe they can hurt you with a word. For example, you are with friends at the restaurant, they watch you. They don't say openly "look at the African as he eats", but they say a word or make a remark.

Paul’s narrative offers a glimpse into the many roots of the racial prejudices that shape, and affect deeply, the relationships between Moroccan and sub-Saharan African students. In spite of his attempts to sympathize with the feelings of frustration felt by some Moroccans vis-à-vis the foreigners, a sense of ambivalence runs deep in Paul’s experience. While sharing Paul’s understanding of racism as a multifaceted phenomenon, his friend Ibrahim, whose words I discuss below, suggested that “racism” is too often invoked to cover social, economic and political problems that deeply affect Moroccan society.

“Racism covers other social problems”

Paul put me in touch with Ibrahim, a middle-class radio journalist in his late 20s originally from Dakar. Ibrahim arrived in Morocco on a scholarship in 2008 to complete his university studies. He aspired to study in France, but life circumstances led him to Morocco, which was his second choice. He assumed that he would integrate easily, but initially he had to face many difficulties. As Ibrahim explained, he went through different phases after his arrival, the first of which was marked by both disorientation and curiosity. In the second phase, he experienced difference and discrimination; he found it difficult to establish friendly relationships with Moroccan students and suffered from widespread racism.

When I met him he was experiencing a new phase: he said he realized that what he had previously identified as “racism” was, in fact, the result of misunderstandings between foreigners and locals and of what he described as “the jealousy of Moroccans, who do not accept that foreigners could obtain a national scholarship or have a good job”. Ibrahim recognized the existence of everyday racism in social interactions between sub-Saharan students and Moroccans in the street, and of an intellectual racism present at the university level, but also made clear: “There is racism, but it’s very dangerous to generalize”. For Ibrahim, Moroccans in Rabat are not used to black people, because the local black Moroccans mainly live in the South and those people who live in the capital belong to the lower class. From the time of the French Protectorate, *Haratin* migrated to the main coastal cities in search of jobs and, where they could access education, they could experience upward social mobility (Ilahiane 2001, 2002, p. 109, 2004). However, many of them work as taxi drivers or small traders in Rabat.

Ibrahim emphasized that his immersion in Moroccan society over the years has enabled him to understand it more deeply and to reconsider his experience of racism and discrimination in the light of broader dynamics. As he remarked, “Morocco has only recently become a country of immigration” to emphasize that people are not accustomed to immigrants. Moreo-

ver, he shared Aissatou's view that prejudices against foreigners are mainly the result of media stigmatization of sub-Saharan Africa in terms of poverty, famine, wars and savagery. "Take for example the number of the magazine, *Le peril Noir*, in which Africans are depicted as tramps, thieves, prostitutes and drug-dealers. This is an example of bad journalism", he said referring to the Francophone magazine *MarocHebdo's* special issue (November 2012), in which migrants are featured through a prism of stereotypes.

He also identified three further factors and levels of analysis. The first one is what he described as the sense of superiority and jealousy Moroccans feel vis-à-vis sub-Saharan Africans, an aspect that Paul, too, underlined. "If an African excels in his studies", Ibrahim said, "his talent is not recognized, because Moroccans want to be the best ones and do not accept that an African can be better than they are." Interestingly, Ibrahim did not problematize what he described as Moroccans' "sense of superiority" vis-à-vis black Africans, taking it as a matter of fact rather something to be interrogated, nor did he interpret it necessarily as an expression of racism.

The second factor is, in Ibrahim's words, the "cultural difference" and the inadequacy of foreign students' behaviour to the context in which they find themselves. He explained:

For example, in Morocco public displays of intimacy between unmarried couples, such as holding each other's hand, or kissing or hugging, is not socially accepted. Or, Africans listen to music until late at night or speak loudly. This fuels prejudices, misunderstanding and tensions.

For Ibrahim, foreign students should try to adapt themselves to Moroccan society, and avoid frowned-on behaviours like making noise or listening to music at night. He claimed that Moroccans' reactions to such behaviours are too easily labelled as "racism" by students, while, in fact, they reveal cultural and social differences which create mutual misunderstanding.

Thirdly, for Ibrahim, students barely take into account the socio-economic reality of Morocco when they discuss racism. While he recognized that sub-Saharan African students living in the *cité* are exposed to thieves, he also stressed that security is a major problem in Morocco in general: "It is common knowledge that going out in the street showing off mobile phones costing 6,000 dirham and other expensive items exposes students to robbery." In Ibrahim's view, such behaviour reveals the students' lack of understanding of the socio-economic context in which they live. He said:

What is labelled as 'racism' is the result of ignorance, poverty and marginality. The *cité* is next to working class neighbourhoods, where marginal people are ready to do anything in order to survive. They easily extract a knife and stab one just to steal a mobile phone or a wallet.

As with the aggressions against foreign students, in Ibrahim’s view, the tensions that exploded in Tangier in 2014 and in Rabat, often took place in very marginal and poor neighbourhoods. Ibrahim thought that, while these events were depicted as a matter of racism in the national press, there were unspoken elements in public debates on racism. “In the media and press”, he went on, “very complex socioeconomic dynamics are easily reduced to ‘racism’ because journalists write from their office without going on the ground, into the streets”. For Ibrahim, debates on racism often conceal, and divert public attention away from, other structural problems, the first of which is extreme poverty: “Nobody speaks of, and wants to see, poverty. Racism is exploited by the media to cover other more serious problems present in the country”. Statistics show that although poverty has substantially declined between 2001 and 2014, the urban-rural gap remains significant both in poverty rates and the social divide¹⁰. “In Morocco”, Ibrahim went on, “there are two main social classes: the rich and the poor. In the middle, there is not a real middle-class, but people who aspire to join the rich”. In addition to poverty and social inequality, Ibrahim argued that neither the police system nor the justice system function properly. Commenting on the large number of acts of aggression complained of by foreign students, and the recent cases of murder, he stressed that students label as “racism” what can be also explained as the shortcomings of the Moroccan justice and police systems.

Ibrahim’s analysis of racism moves the focus of attention from Morocco’s history to present-day socioeconomic dynamics and argues that migrants become the scapegoat for, and the trigger of, *existing* social tensions.

Conclusion

To what extent does a slavery past continue to inform today’s Morocco? Is a knowledge of post-slavery societies key to an in-depth understanding of present racial dynamics? In his historical exploration of “race” in Muslim West Africa, Bruce Hall (2011) argues that contemporary race relations should be understood in the light of pre-colonial dynamics and their developments in 19th century and not just as a legacy of colonialism. In so doing, Hall poses a challenge to postcolonial interpretations of recent conflicts in West Africa, and, making reference to Stuart Hall (1980) Michael Holt (2009), invites us to focus on what he calls the “historicity” of race: “Fo-

10 See, for example, the High Commissioner of Planning and the World Bank joint report (2017) “Poverty in Morocco: challenges and opportunities”, available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/559921523249877468/Poverty-in-Morocco-challenges-and-opportunities> (accessed in March 2020).

ocusing on the historicity of race means insisting that there are historically specific ‘racisms’ rather than some singular ahistorical forms” (2011, p. 11). For Bruce Hall, like for Stuart Hall and Michael Holt, social hierarchies and race-constructs relate to both history and politics.

In my exploration of “racism” in Morocco – viewed from the specific perspectives of sub-Saharan African students – I take seriously these scholars’ invitation to consider carefully the “historicity” of race and racism. As we have seen, some local debates on racism in the national press in Morocco, inspired by the important work of Chouki El Hamel, try to give historical depth to current manifestations of anti-black racism by connecting them to the history of slavery. The narratives of the Senegalese students and young professionals discussed in this article complicate these debates by inviting us to interrogate the weight of Morocco’s slave past in shaping current forms of discrimination and racial stereotypes, rather than taking it for granted. In addition to focusing on the “historicity” of race in Morocco, indeed, they compel us to reflect upon the historical *contingency* of racialization of black Africans: the process through which they are racialized as black today.

In sharing their thoughts, Paul, Mohammed, Aissatou and Ibrahim reveal different aspects of this phenomenon. In spite of their common experiences, indeed, each of my interlocutors developed a personal understanding of “racism”, in which historical and contemporary dynamics are variously articulated and understood. For example, Mohammed stressed the extent to which the racial legacies of slavery continue to affect local constructions of “blackness”. He explicitly said that black people, often independently of their ancestry, inherit the status of social and moral inferiority historically accorded to black slaves. In addition to the “bitter legacy” of past slavery (Bellagamba, Green, Klein 2013b), Mohammed also discovered, upon arrival, a reality in which unexpected linguistic, social, cultural barriers made their integration difficult.

While Aissatou evoked slavery, her focus was not on longstanding racism but on the current racialization dynamics; she highlighted the role of national media, the increased visibility of undocumented migrants stuck in the capital city, along with Moroccans’ poor knowledge of Africa and Africans, in rendering sub-Saharan migrants the new “Others” in Morocco. Albeit in very different ways, both Paul and Ibrahim emphasized that rising unemployment, widespread poverty and social insecurity work together to nourish frustrations, social tensions and resentments vis-à-vis the “new” comers. Ibrahim went a step further, arguing that too often racism is used to cover deeper social problems in Moroccan society.

Taken together, the narratives I have discussed in this article suggest that “anti-black racism” against black Africans is not simply a “remnant” of the local history of racialized slavery, but also reflects contemporary developments in Morocco. Therefore, while a historical perspective remains central

to the study of present-day racial dynamics in Morocco, a focus on “racialization” may help us reflect, theoretically and ethnographically, on the intricate relations between the historical and the contemporary in post-slavery contexts.

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