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The memory of a forgotten slavery: the domestic servants in the houses of Tetouan (Morocco)



This research rescues from oblivion a group of women who were bought in slave markets in Morocco until well into the 20th century, in order to supply the domestic service of the wealthy classes of the city of Tetouan. Through an ethnographic and historical work carried out since 2012 among the families of Tetouan that had acquired these domestic workers, I have reconstructed their life trajectories and the paradoxes of the current memory of slavery. The case allows us to better understand the roots of the new networks of exploitation of humans across the Mediterranean.

Bricha Palace, Tetouan. Photo by Karim El Kamli_@akkamli

Slavery in Morocco was not explicitly abolished either during the Protectorate (1912-1956) or during the period of independence, although its trade was prohibited in 1921 in the French zone. The status of slavery disappeared in an informal way, but not the relations of extreme dependence such as those studied here.

The main source for reconstructing the lives of these women has been the memory of the former

owners, with the bias that this might represent, but also of the descendants of families of servile origin, linked to the Gnawa brotherhood of former slaves. After interviewing about fifty people, the main conclusion is that memories of the present have conditioned the memory of slavery and that this memory is differentiated according to gender and generation. Most families now remember those women with esteem, after living with them or receiving their care and upbringing, since in addition to the domestic chores of the palaces they used to take care of the sons and daughters of the house; and in many cases their culinary production was a symbol of status and distinction of the wealthy classes.

Most of those women died unmarried and left no descendants, but some had children with the masters, so that, if recognized, they were part of the father's lineage, and the slave mothers acquired the status of free when their owner and father of their children died. Both the documents analysed (purchase and sale contracts and manumission acts) and oral history indicate that this situation changed during the first quarter of the 20th century, but these women continued to be linked to the families, forming part of the domestic unit and being called a *tata*.

The oral survey has made it possible to reconstruct the origin and trajectory of some of these domestic women: they were kidnapped or even sold by relatives; they came from West Africa, but above all from southern Morocco, and one of the findings of the research, which is absent from the literature, is that many of them came from nearby mountain areas, where servile populations lived and worked for rural landowners or belonged to former troops of the sultan. Most came as children to Tetuanese families, who labeled them with new names evocative of blessing (Mbarka), happiness (Sa'ada) or beauty (Yaqt). An example of the current mechanisms of this paradoxical memory is that the new generations have given their daughters some of those names that were previously exclusive to the slaves.

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References

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