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## December 2006 Newsletter

### **Tikettin yat familia/Once upon a Family: Family Origins and Slave Histories in Southern Morocco**

By Madia Thomson

**Dissertation Abstract:** Dr. Thomson received her Ph.D. from the Department of History at Boston University in 2005. Her dissertation, entitled “The Historical Present: Modernization, Slavery, and the Transformation of Social Hierarchy in Southwestern Morocco, 1912-1956,” addressed aspects of modernization and social change in twentieth-century Morocco through the lens of slavery. Her dissertation argues that the actions of slaves encouraged changes in the institution of slavery that, when combined with the forces of economic modernization, reshaped earlier social configurations. Patron-client relations in Moroccan society mirrored the power structures of the institution of slavery; changes in the institution therefore reflected changes in the political economy of Morocco.

Using Arabic, Berber, and French sources, the study first examined life in Berber-speaking Tazerwalt (southwestern Morocco) where the saint Sidi Ahmed ou Moussa established a *zawiya*, religious center, in the sixteenth century. As elsewhere during this period, the region consisted of social groups with varying social power: *shorfa*, the Prophet Muhammed’s descendants; *igourramen*, saints’ descendants; *imazighen*, white Berbers; *issouqin*, black Berbers; *isemgan*, black slaves; *udain*, Jews. The religious heritage attributed to the *shorfa* and *igourramen* assured high social standing. Lacking similar standing, *imazighen*, *isemgan*, and *issouqin* defined themselves in terms of economic function, family origins, and physiognomy; differences of religion distinguished them from *udain*. Using this social organization as a baseline, the dissertation shows how a combination of government policies and human agency under the Protectorate promoted both domestic and international migration amongst non-elites, eliminating slavery and giving Moroccan society its current fluid, increasingly urban social configuration.

The following paper, derived from that larger study, presents an analysis of identity formation among the descendants of formerly enslaved individuals in Morocco.

Driving along the winding dirt road leading to Iligh from the Zawiya of Ahmed ou Moussa, one would hardly guess that the dusty village was once the capital of a wealthy principality. Trans-Saharan trade in cloth and ostrich feathers, a popular nineteenth-century fashion accessory, the key to its prosperity, ended early in this century, leaving the village and

the surrounding region of Tazerwalt to face a modernizing economy without the major source of its income. Ruined walls are all that remain of its physical grandeur, but traces of its former social and economic power are visible in the culture and color of its modern inhabitants, some of whom are descendants of slaves brought from the Sahara and Sahel. This essay examines how descendants of slaves account for their origins by narrating family histories which deal with the recent past of slavery. I will argue that the family histories recounted by descendants of slaves reflect social and economic imperatives of contemporary life in the village by stressing origins in Iligh, minimizing historical connections to other parts of the Sahara and the Sahel. Telling one's family history in a way that minimizes origins outside the village enable descendants of slaves to affirm belonging in the local community and receive the social and material goods that go with this status.

The history of Iligh and the descendants of slaves who once served there is inextricably linked to the leading shorfa family in the surrounding region of Tazerwalt, the descendants of the sixteenth-century saint Sidi Ahmed ou Moussa. Sidi Ahmed ou Moussa was born in the late fifteenth century in Abu Merwan, territory held by the Ida ou Semlal clans. He showed a youthful interest in Islamic scholarship, and went to Baghdad as a young man to study. According to local hagiographic tradition, his first miracle dates to this period: seeing people doubt his description of his homeland, he made an argan tree appear in middle of Baghdad. On his return to Morocco, he settled in Marakesh for seven years, teaching at the *medersa* he founded near the city's Bab Doukkala.<sup>1</sup> He resided briefly in Taroudant before returning to Abu Merwan on his father's death.

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1. One of the four gates in the walls of the old city of Marakesh, Bab Doukkala served as the principal entrance for caravans coming from sub-Saharan Africa. Doukkala is also the name of a Moroccan Province that lies on the Atlantic coast. Another interviewee told me about his slave

One night after his return to Abu Merwan, say the legends surrounding him, messenger from God came to him and told him to move to the valley of the Oued Tazerwalt, southeast of present-day Tiznit, to chase away the occupants and build a sanctuary. He moved into a cave and gradually informed the population about his divine mission. Not everyone followed him immediately, but his most vigorous opponents had their houses destroyed in a hail storm. Following this incident he began building the sanctuary which would become the Zawiya Ahmed ou Moussa. His five children settled in various areas of Tazerwalt, and the descendants of his son Mhammed became the most powerful rulers of the region beginning in the seventeenth century with Ali ou Damia, the founder of Iligh.

The emergence of the Tazerwalt as an independent principality ruled by the *shorfa* house of Iligh typified the political and social changes in southern Morocco following Sultan Ahmed al-Mansour's invasion of Songhai (1591) and the subsequent weakening of the Makhzen, the Moroccan central government. By 1613, the year Ali Abu Damia became leader of the family, the Ilighi were able to make economic and political capital out of mercantile connections with West Africa. Ali Abu Damia had contributed to the rise of Iligh by strategically locating his citadel on one of the principal caravan routes.<sup>2</sup> Sub-Saharan commodities stopped in Iligh on their way to the port city of Massa (near present-day Agadir) contributing to the political and economic strength of principality and founder. Commercial connections to West Africa allowed families like the Ilighi to draw on resources such as supplies of gold and slaves which were essential to the Moroccan economy. Continuing the efforts at state consolidation begun under the Saadian dynasty, the Alawi rulers moved to monopolize these resources and reduce the

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father who went to Marakesh from El Jadida, in the province of Doukkala. His father went in the company of a well-known Saharan scholar, Ma al-Ainin.

2. Paul Pascon. *La Maison d'Iligh et l'histoire sociale du Tazerwalt*. Rabat: SMER, 1984.

power of peripheral fiefdoms like Tazerwalt. In 1670, Sultan Moulay Rashid destroyed Iligh and exiled the ruling family, who represented an element of Moroccan regional politics which, if not under their control, made the Alawi dynasty uncomfortable.

In 1695, Yahya Abudamia and his family were the first of the Ilighi to return to Tazerwalt, where they kept a low political profile for the next hundred years. Near the end of the eighteenth century, the family once again expanded its political and economic control of the south. A weak central government and an outbreak of plague in Morocco at the turn of the century may have helped them renew their role in politics in the early nineteenth century. Participation in trans-Saharan trade, with the help of some Tazerwalt Jews in the port city of Mogador, contributed to their economic restrengthening. Under the leadership of Hussein ou Hachem, the family started repurchasing the land lost during their exile and regained its former position as hereditary rulers of a quasi-independent principality. In 1886 following sultan Hassan I's second expedition to Tiznit (the first had been to establish the city as a Makhzen stronghold in 1882), during which he closed virtually the entire southwestern coast to maritime commerce, commerce which the Ilighis controlled, the family became caids of the Makhzen. However, their economic power again declined, this time along with the trans-Saharan trade, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, their financial independence had been considerably reduced. Nonetheless, the Abudamia family used their continued political importance to obtain the status of privileged interlocutors in negotiations with the French. Mohammed ou Hussein, caid of Tazerwalt and head of the Abudamia family in 1912, the year of the Protectorate treaty, was the first to be courted by the colonizers. However, it was only in 1934, under Sidi Ali, Mohammed's son and successor, that the French established themselves in Iligh.

The social and cultural history of Iligh and its ruling family is incomplete without the histories of the region's slaves and their descendants. Although almost none of these families have any paper documentation of their past, their stories exist in oral form, collected in interviews in Iligh beginning in November 1999. Stories told by three members of Iligh's dark-skinned community attest to this known past as well as enrich one's knowledge of local history.<sup>3</sup>

### **Si Embarek**

At the age of ninety-seven, Si Embarek is the oldest person in Iligh, the human archive of the village. He worked as a fqih, teacher of the Qu'ran, in his youth, and was close to Sidi Ali Abudamia and his descendants. The family history he narrates begins with his grandfather Mahmoudi, who came from the Sahara, bought and raised by Hussein ou Hachem, the most powerful of Tazerwalt's nineteenth-century rulers. Mahmoudi later became an officer in the army, a cavalryman. Si Embarek begins his family history with his paternal grandfather's coming to Iligh. His grandfather's education at the hands of Hussein ou Hachem suggests that he came as a young child. Si Embarek specifies that his grandfather came from the "Sahara," as opposed to the "Soudan," the most common local term used for West Africa. He explains that there was a *mousse*m in the Sahara called the Mouloud, to which people (Jews, he believes) went to buy men and women. He later declared that when they arrived from the Sahara, these slaves did not know how to talk. They only knew a language that villagers call "tagdawit," the language of the Gnawa, which he associates with people from the desert. Whether a trader's

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3. This paper represents the first presentation of my graduate fieldwork for the manuscript "The Historical Present: Modernization, Slavery, and the Transformation of Social Hierarchy in Southwestern Morocco, 1860-2000." Prior to my study of the southwest, virtually all of the writings on ethnicity, slavery, and social hierarchy were written by either European or Moroccan scholars in languages other than English. The only other example of a work in English by a scholar working in the United States is Daniel Schroeter's *Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in southwestern Morocco, 1844-1886*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

pidgin or a full-fledged language, it was this that Mahmoudi spoke on his arrival in Iligh. Si Embarek does not mention his mother's family, either because of the importance given to paternal origins, those to which the children lay claim, or simply because his origins on his mother's side are more obscure than those his father's. In any case, they are not likely to involve such prestigious figures as the "princes" of the Tazerwalt.

### **Moulouda**

Moulouda's identity card says that she is sixty-five years old. She thinks she might be younger, since she is not yet bent over with age, but lacking proof, she is unsure of her real age. Her father was a servant of the Abudamia family. Her mother came from the Sahara and spoke Arabic. Moulouda is the youngest of five children. Her only brother was sold while he was a young boy before she was born. She and two of her sisters (the eldest died before Moulouda was born) worked for Sidi Ali's wives. At the time, she explained, the *shorfa* no longer bought and sold slaves. She and her sisters were not beaten, and the *shorfa* women did not get upset with them. In return for their services, they received food and clothing. When Sidi Ali's wives died, she was free to leave. When asked if there were anyone in her family from the Soudan, she said no. She seemed unwilling or unable to provide any details on her grandparents. Her father, she asserts, carried the Abudamia family name.

### **Larbi and Rahma**

Rahma and Larbi are mother and son. Rahma is in her sixties: Larbi, his thirties. Larbi is one of the rare examples of a young man who left the village and then returned. When asked if there was anyone in the family from the Soudan, Larbi spoke up to say that there was, in his father's family. His paternal grandmother was from "Senegal," he said; his mother agreed. In Ilighi parlance, "Senegal" is sometimes used in place of "soudan" to designate sub-Saharan

Africa, a habit that may have started among traders engaged in trans-Saharan commerce. When Larbi says that his paternal grandmother was from Senegal, therefore, it is not certain whether he means the territory from Guinea-Bissau to the Senegalese River or simply an unspecified region south of the Sahara. Larbi's paternal grandmother was brought as a child to work in the house of Sidi Ali's brother, Sidi Ahmed. Since her own family origins were not known to the people of Iligh, she was called Fatma Sidi Ahmed. Larbi's paternal grandfather, Messaoud, was also a servant in the Abudamia household, but, Larbi asserts, he was born in Iligh. Among the relatives he claims to remember, only his paternal grandmother was known to have come from the Soudan. His father, who worked for the Abudamia family, was born in Iligh. As for Rahma, she said that her paternal great-grandfather came from the Haha region (the area of Essaouira which in addition to having an important slave market, was the terminus of the trade route passing through Iligh). His son Embarek, Rahma's grandfather, only knew Iligh. She is thus a third generation Ilighi. In summing up, Larbi went to considerable effort to insist that people on both sides of his family are from Iligh, with the sole exceptions of his paternal grandmother Fatma and his mother's great-grandfather.

Events and personalities in Abudamia history help us read and date events in the lives of these families. Si Embarek's grandfather was bought by Hussein ou Hachem, a fact which does not provide a specific date of arrival in Iligh, but gives a general time frame for the story. Hussein ou Hachem ruled Tazerwalt from approximately 1840 to 1885, so Si Embarek's grandfather could have arrived in Iligh around the middle of the nineteenth century, during a period of great economic and political strength for the Abudamia family and Tazerwalt. It was also the time in which the local history says that Sidi Nouh ben Nacer of Tamegroute (Draa Valley) encouraged Hussein ou Hachem to "surround your house with slaves (isemgan) and treat



them as brothers. They will not be ungrateful and will never betray you.”<sup>4</sup> It is not clear whether Si Embarek adapted his story to fall more in line with this local legend. As for Larbi, he says that his paternal grandfather, Messaoud, was a slave of Sidi Ahmed, brother of Sidi Ali, governor of Tazerwalt from approximately 1916 to 1956. Messaoud and Fatma, Larbi’s grandmother from “Senegal,” were both freed on Sidi Ahmed’s death, after which Fatma was free to marry. Larbi and Rahma’s stories give a general schema for marking important events such as manumission and marriage in Larbi’s family, events for which there seem to be no documentation.<sup>5</sup>

Si Embarek’s designation of the Sahara as his grandfather’s place of origin brings up the vital question of how family members think about origins. In surveys conducted in 1982 and 1984 as part of Project Tazerwalt at the Institut Agronomique et Veterinaire, the investigators Brahim Lmalih and Abderrahman Aadri list Si Embarek’s grandfather’s origins as “Kaarta, Senegal;” under the rubric of “recent” origins, they note “Sahara.”<sup>6</sup> They also say that Mahmoudi came to Iligh when he was eighteen years old. This information conflicts with Si Embarek’s assertion that Mahmoudi was raised by Hussein, a fact which should give his grandfather a stronger claim to Ilighi identity, both by virtue of time spent in Iligh and by closeness to the rulers of the region who would have trained him in local custom. An eighteen-year-old from the Sahara might be considered more of an outsider to Iligh than a young boy raised by the elite. Today, however, the Sahara is nonetheless officially considered a part of

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4. Abderrahman Aadri. “La Population d’Iligh.” Unpublished manuscript. 1984.

5. I subsequently went to the Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes in France where I ran across a brief description of Tazerwalt that mentioned Sidi Ahmed’s death date (1903). It was a most fortuitous occasion. See Chapter 6 of the manuscript “The Historical Present: Modernization, Slavery, and the Transformation of Social Hierarchy in Southwestern Morocco, 1860-2000.”

6. Brahim Lmalih. *La population noire du Tazerwalt*. Unpublished manuscript. 1982 and Aadri, *op cit*.

Morocco, and so Si Embarek's contemporary listeners, his grandfather may seem less of an outsider than someone coming all the way from West Africa. By giving Mahmoudi's place of origin as the "Sahara," Si Embarek can account for his family's relatively recent installation in the village ( in the mid-nineteenth century), while still claiming legitimate connections to southern Morocco. His assertion that his grandfather was raised by the Abudamia gives him greater claim to belonging in Iligh.

In talking about her origins, Moulouda says that her mother was not from Iligh. Nonetheless, her mother spoke Arabic, unlike Si Embarek's grandfather, the taganawit speaker. She does not mention grandparents on either her mother or father's side. In her mother's case, the reason seems clear: her mother was brought as a young child to Iligh and may not have known her parents. Her father's story is less clear. Moulouda says that her father carried the Abudamia family name which might indicate once again that his real family origins were unknown. Her omission of her grandparents in the story reflects a real lack of information; without knowledge of previous ancestors, she cannot begin her story outside of Iligh. However, the mechanism of social legitimation for descendants of slaves in the Tazerwalt gives her no incentive to do so. Assimilation for descendants of slaves is predicated on asserting one's connection to the village and to its leading family.

The social stakes of family origin and personal history become evident in Larbi's story. When asked whether they had family from the Soudan, Larbi immediately acknowledged that his grandmother had come from Senegal, but insisted that everyone else in his father's family was from Iligh. His story shows a clear need to assert the Ilighi identity of his other relatives, and especially to stress the fact that they were born there. Later in the interview, he brought out his identity card and showed me that Iligh was indeed given as his place of birth. He went on to

explain that land ownership in Iligh depended on one's belonging to the Iligh community. In the past, slaves acquired land from their masters, the *shorfa*. The Abudamia family gave their slaves either *jnan*, land on which a well had to be dug, or plots in the area of the *segua*. The produce of land near the *segua* had to split with the Abudamias, since water rights there belonged to them. In the *jnan*, the cultivator could keep the entire crop. Now, Larbi explained, no one who was not a native of Iligh could own land there. "Iligh is known as *habous*," Larbi said, "the land is neither bought nor sold." *Habous* is normally a religious property endowment that is kept in perpetuity. Others may make use of the property but ownership rests with the trust which established it. Whether this is actually the case in Iligh, or simply a manner of speaking on the part of the local population remains to be verified. Someone wanting to obtain land has to first ask the *shorfa*, namely the current occupant of *tigemmi mqorn*, the chateau of the Abudamia family in Iligh, or his brother in Tiznit. Consent is only given to those who can demonstrate a connection to Iligh usually possible through a combination of family residency, birth and connection to *shorfa*. Once belonging in the Ilighi community has been established, the person can work the land. According to the villagers, no one has titles to the land and how much of the harvest they keep depends on the kind of land they cultivate, either *jnan* or *segua*. Larbi's desire to clarify that only his paternal grandmother and his paternal grandfather came from outside Iligh suggests a need to insist on close familial connection to the village and to its *shorfa* family in order to justify land tenure.

None of the family histories recounted by dark-skinned people in Iligh show much desire to do more than acknowledge origins outside of Iligh. Si Embarek the *fqih*, who has lived all his life in Iligh and remains close to the *shorfa* goes as far to say that his grandfather was from the Sahara. This is information that is likely to be known locally and so, can not be denied even to

an outsider, especially one who knows the *shorfa*. His own close relations with the *shorfa* from his youth contributed to his becoming a *fqih*, and therefore gave him a special status within Iligh, one that affects the way he presents his own family history to an outsider. In addition, as a third generation Ilighi, he can claim true belonging in the community. For Moulouda, Ilighi identity seems to be all she has. She points out that her mother was an Arabic speaker from the Sahara, but she says nothing about her mother's family. She mentions her father only briefly in her story and never refers to his family. What is foremost in her story is her life as a servant of the Abudamia family. A near life-long servant of the Abudamia family, she holds a specific status in Iligh. It may not be as elevated as that of a *fqih*, but it gives a means of showing belonging. Like Si Embarek, personal connection to the Abudamia is an important mark of her incorporation into Ilighi society.

Larbi and Rahma's story most clearly shows that social concerns linked to Ilighi identity. The ability to work the land is vital to living in Iligh; there is virtually no other means of supporting oneself without it. Skilled labourers find little to do given the rareness of money in the village. Agriculture is the principal means of existence. Access to the essential commodity of land is limited to those who can show that they belong to the community. Unlike Si Embarek or Moulouda or even his mother, Larbi's relationship to the *shorfa* has never involved daily, one-on-one contact. His identity as a member of Ilighi society is based on his birth. His age in addition to his experience outside the village allow him to have a different perspective on what it means to be part of a community. He has had the experience of being an outsider, not a member of an "in" group with access to vital resources. Larbi's insistence on the Iligh identity of his ancestors based on birth is a fundamental means of asserting his place in the Ilighi community.

For Si Embarek, Moulouda, Larbi and Rahma, the discussion of family origins outside Iligh is of little importance in itself. They gain nothing by insisting on them and therefore it is important to minimize those allusions as much as possible. Whether they claim connection through their relationship to the *shorfa*, through birth, the result is the same: Iligh is their home and they receive the benefits thereof.

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