26 Witchcraft and Slavery
Accusations of Remote Vampirism – The Colonial Administration of Mauritania Investigates the Execution of Three Slaves (1928–1929)

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In the course of my research in the archives of the Governor-General of French West Africa in Dakar in April 2007, I came across an enigmatic file on “the religious and social condition of Islam in Mauritania.” There I found thirty-one pages dealing with an affair involving important members of the tribal group that was the subject of my doctoral thesis. The documents described an investigation conducted in 1928 and 1929 following the murder of three slaves accused of witchcraft in northwest Mauritania. As I had never heard of this episode, and because of the incoherence of the various elements contained in the file, I decided to wait for an upcoming trip to Mauritania to clarify matters.

In October 2008, I had the opportunity to travel through the area where the events took place. I thus took advantage of the occasion to question various parties about what they knew of the episode. Despite a thorough search, the quite badly maintained and organized Mauritanian archives provided only a few complementary documents of secondary interest. Interviews, conversely, turned out to be very fruitful. Many old people and a few younger ones shed new light on the remembered events and on beliefs about the “remote vampirism” of which the three slaves were accused. About the slaves themselves, documents and testimonies said very little. Even their names were uncertain.

Certainly speakers of Hassaniya Arabic, purchased from other Bishan in southwest Mauritania where they are said to have already been accused of witchcraft, the three

1 Senegalese National Archives, Dakar (ANS) BGR (107). The archive documents reproduced later in the chapter are from this file.
2 Thesis in Social Anthropology and Ethnology, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, under the supervision of Pierre Bonte (CNRS, LASE, Collège de France), titled “Construction symbolique et sociale de la hiérarchie : noblesse, statut et état pour les Abi Baski (Mauritania).”
4 Mauritanian National Archives, Nouakchott (ARIM) F1-75. This was correspondence between the governor of Mauritania and that of French West Africa, as well as with lower-level authorities. The most important documents were transmitted to the French West African governor. Access to the archives was particularly difficult, and I would like to acknowledge the kindness of Hayetna Ould Siddi Hayba, assistant director of the National Archives in Nouakchott.
5 A dialect of Arabic spoken by the Bishan, an ethnic group characterized as Moorish in colonial writing. They inhabit western Sahara and Mauritania and extend into neighboring countries.
slaves were owned by Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, a notable of the religious qabila* of the Ahel Barkallah. They were two brothers (Hamadi and Soulim) and a sister (Zénabou), apparently in the prime of life who, I was told, had been a great beauty. Suspected, among other things, of having bewitched Cheikh’s son, Sid Ahmed, the three were reportedly put to death in early October 1928. Great caution should be exercised regarding the scattered and uncertain evidence regarding their case. Information collected at the time, if not distorted in memory, seems to have undergone reconstruction intended to orient colonial investigations. Besides, the administration was not really interested in learning more about the three slaves, or about their possible practices of witchcraft or their origins. Indeed, it showed more interest in the accused than in the victims. The probable extinction of this family at the time of the events made their perpetuation in memory genealogy impossible. Here as elsewhere, subordinate groups are left in history’s shadow. But their memory is inscribed in geography: a place name, le-Mdenet el-Abid (slave hill), is said to be the site of the execution and burial of two of these slaves, but also in this case, their identity is not certain.

REMOTE VAMPIRISM

As a first step, it is necessary to explain Bizian beliefs about magic, particularly the remote vampirism that led to the death of the three slaves. Many varieties of magical practices are known in Mauritania: divination, relations with the jinn,2 proprietary rites, protective objects, and so forth. Not all of these are socially condemned. The major religious figures are also known for their supernatural powers, first among them baraka, in part inherited, in part acquired, which gives its holder blessing, protection, and fortune of divine origin that his disciples may hope to acquire through contact, perhaps indirect (an item of clothing, the dregs in a glass), or even through incantation (this is true of the Ahel Barkallah as a whole). Some families are known to possess a sir (secret) that has been handed down, which gives access to various supernatural powers (this is true of the family of Abd El Aziz Ould Cheikh Mohamed El Mam). Still others are hajarab and have the ability to produce talismans (hajib) for specific magical actions. There is a distinction between hajib al-kabir (large talisman) and hajib al-kabir (black talisman), one of Islamic inspiration (notably through the use of verses from the Koran), unlike the other. Finally, there is what is considered witchcraft (sir), although it is condemned by Muslim orthodoxy because it is maleficent.18 It is impossible to know what were the magical practices of the accused slaves, or even if there really were any. Both archives and recollections carry only the label of “witchcraft.”

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2 Testimony at the time as well as present-day testimony, all acknowledging constraint, is very contradictory on the subject.
3 Malicious gossip is the primary source on witchcraft is also true of Western Europe: “Unfortunately, we know less about what the sorcerers and witches themselves believed than what they were thought about. Possibly witches and sorcerers had more complicated emotions and systems of beliefs than those who believed in them. And this makes them even more difficult to study.” J. Caro Baroja, The Witches and Their World, trans. O. N. V. Glendinning (Chicago, 1934), 249. It therefore seems inappropriate to conclude, following E. A. McDougall, that such beliefs were “evidence of slave resistance against an oppressive master society.” E. A. McDougall, “Slavery, Sorcery, and Colonial Reality in Mauritania, c. 1910-60,” in C. Yué and T. Stigun (eds.), Agency and Action in Colonial Africa: Essays for John E. Flinn (New York, 2001), 71. I would incline toward the contrary view, that it is a manifestation of the fear of the masters of an overthrow of the social order, which would occur if slaves began to control the fate of those who dominated them.
4 The verb is sir, sir (fear off, remove, extract). In the south, more common is massa, massa (suck) for the same practice, and the person doing it is called massa.
5 This does not make it possible to make an absolute distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, in Evans-Pritchard’s terms. One unconscious and inherited, the other voluntary and acquired. E. Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande (Oxford, 1937). In the case considered here, people seem to have believed rather in a possession or a gift. A piece of written testimony mentions that some slaves are “destined” for sir (letter of Ahmed Ould Mohamed, previously cited). In addition, Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz is said to have attempted to eradicate the evil with a hajab (statement of Mohamed Ould Batta, Nouakchott, January 13, 2000, presented later).
imported from black Africa are reputed to be remedies for curing medull or means of identifying the sella to return the blood. Blows and torture are then customary, even if a threat may be sufficient. If the accused survives, an attempt is made to drive him off, and in the past, if he was a slave, he was sold. But a sella may die before he has given back the blood, and it is sometimes said that he may be unable to return it. Accusations are sometimes made against blackmailers and against Haratin, but primarily against slaves. In the past, most recently acquired slaves were easily suspected because they both had the lowest status and were most foreign in the area. Women seemed to be particularly targeted, although the accusation was often made against an entire family. Some regions and camps were reputed to be infested with sella.

AN IMPORTED BELIEF?

Although Berber society harbors many magical practices and belief in witches’ evil spells, several indications suggest that the specific belief in sella is imported. One witness says that before this event, sella was unknown in the region (Ahmedou Ould Moni, later in the chapter). How does it appear to be a belief originating in the Maghreb? In his detailed research on magic in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, Edmond Dousté does not mention any form of vampirism. But the belief is found in black Africa, and among the Zabalan, black populations have the reputation of being powerful sorcerers.

In the earliest known description of sella, Ahmed Lemin ech-Chingiti reports the prevalence of this type of witchcraft in the towns of the area of the Bani Zabalan in the nineteenth century, particularly in his town, Tidjikja. The residents called on an exorcist from black Africa, probably from the Niger valley, to counter the practices of their Bamba slaves. He identified them by humiliation and proceeded to eradicate their power by causing vomiting. But because the practices continued, the suspects were massacred, which, according to the author, sharply reduced the number of cases. Always in the nineteenth century, there is a very interesting description of beliefs in forms of vampirism farther west, among the Wolof of Senegambia. The book describes “soul eaters” thirsting after blood and acting invisibly. What is particularly instructive is that the people convicted of being sorcerers were made slaves and sold to the Moors of the desert. But although sella appears to be part of beliefs existing further south, since the nineteenth century it has been adapted to the ways of life and beliefs of the Saharan.

A link has been made between vampirism and shortages of meat, an essential food source for nomadic herders. Some evidence suggests a connection between episodes of famine and accusations of sella. It turns out that food shortages brought many slave owners to sell off their slaves. Instead of recognizing the economic reasons for such sales, it was frequently believed that they were a way of getting rid of the cause of misfortune. Further, because a slave sale was a consequence of famine, people were inclined to believe the slave himself was the famine’s cause. This derives from a vision of the world in which the search for a solution to a problem is reduced to the search for and neutralization of an agent, a person responsible. In addition, as Ann McDougall has pointed out, sella shares with the everyday evil eye (‘ayn) some common characteristics: action through the gaze and the motive of envy or jealousy. Slaves were not the only ones suspected of such practices. Blacksmiths, traditionally accused of witchcraft, were also held in suspicion, an adaptation of the belief to older patterns. More generally, changes in the persistence of patterns of local political domination were largely interpreted in terms of magical practices, at least by religious groups who feared that sella might lead to a reversal of the existing social hierarchy.

Colonial administrators sometimes echoed these beliefs in sella, which seemed particularly prevalent in southern Adrar in the 1930s. In his 1938 “political report on the subdivision of Anar,” Busquet devotes two pages to a “note on witchcraft,” and observes that in southern Tengad, these cases of remote vampirism have overshadowed all other questions. Hajiib had worked out remedial practices, but executions were frequent, with female slaves as the principal victims. Hesitating between repression and permissiveness, Busquet points out the dilemma faced by the colonial administration: “Here too, political and administrative considerations conflict. Should we pretend to adopt the beliefs of the Moors or repress all violence against these alleged witches and simply deny their existence?”

Frequent in the past, sella is now in the process of disappearing. These changes are probably connected to the end of the slave trade, which produced a scarcity of new slaves of unknown origin with unfamiliar customs. It may also be related to improvements in food and sanitary conditions and to the progress of education. The affair under consideration seems to have been the first that came to the attention of the administration. Out of the large amount of information that has been gathered, I have chosen to present three documents from the archives and excerpts from two interviews. Before, however, I will describe the course of events.

16 The Haratin are a social group of dependents, reputed to be of slave origin but free, traditionally employed in agriculture and small animal raising.
17 There is a persistent rumor that blacksmiths are the descendants of Ieves.
18 This idea is developed by E. A. McDougall, “Slavery, Sorcery, and Colonial ‘Reality’ in Mauritania,” The Journal of Modern African Studies 14 (1976): 23–41. However, the veracity identifies witchcraft in general with the particular case of sella.
19 E. Dousté, Mariage et religion dans l’Africain du nord (Algiers, 1903). He does mention the belief in witches flying on broomsticks, who suck blood, in Khobar in Arabia, Magie et religions, 51.
20 This belief is shared farther north: “Blacks are generally thought of throughout the Maghreb as particularly adept at witchcraft,” Magie et religions, 34.
21 A. L. C. Chenggiaci, Et Waiz, trans. Mourad Tchekiat (Saint Louis du Sénégal, 1933). Anna McDougall’s article includes a summary of this passage in English. The author speaks only of sib (witchcraft) in his description, never of sella (vampirism). The passage (personal communication from Abdul Wedoud Ould Cheikh, April 2000). It is probable that his audience of eastern Arabs (the Arabic original was published in Cairo) would have understood the second expression. Tribel-Bilbaham means the land of the Billaham, an expression designating the territory occupied by Hassaniya-speakers, roughly from the Gedaref in southern Morocco to Tinni in Mali and Saint-Louis du Sénégal.
22 Abdul P. D. Bohar, Esquisse abdégale (Paris, 1955), 31/57. Thanks to Alice Bellagamba for this reference.
24 Busquet does not distinguish between sib and sib. Many passages from this document have been translated into English by E. A. McDougall, “Slavery, Sorcery, and Colonial ‘Reality.’”
26 One case of the execution of a Haratin for that reason was reported less than ten years ago.
27 The cases of witchcraft in Adrar and Tagant known to the administration since 1900 and catalogued by Anna McDougall do not seem to clearly involve sella before 1934, with the possible exception of a case in 1922.
HOW THE EVENTS UNFOLDED

The correspondence between various administrative bodies shows that reports of what happened to the two slave brothers and their sister climbed the administrative ladder in the following way. In late October 1928, Mohamed Ould Ely, chief of the gubla of the Ouled El Lab, designated by the French administration, informed the commander of the circle of Adrar23 of a widespread rumor in northwestern Mauritanian (Agenèir and Inchin) concerning the execution by Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, an Abul Barkallah notable, of three of his slaves accused of witchcraft. The location of the events was not yet clearly established, but it was at the junction of three territorial administrations:24 the circles of Trarza, Adrar, and the Baie du Lévrier. Battalion commander Dufour, in charge of the administration of Adrar, entrusted the investigation to the neighboring administration of Trarza, in this case to the Nomad Group led by Lieutenant Génin. Génin went to the region where the events had occurred and conducted some discreet interrogations of witnesses. He reported the information he had gathered and his conclusions in a report dated November 19, 1928 (presented in full later in the chapter). On November 25, the commander of the circle of Adrar sent a telegram to the governor of Mauritania briefly setting out the facts. He informed him that the protagonists would soon be coming to see him and asked his superior which administrative body was authorized to pursue the investigation.

In his November 30, 1928 political report, Capt. Bouquet, commander of the circle of the Baie du Lévrier, the territory where the events had occurred, mentions the affair.25 On December 1, the governor of Mauritania radioed the circle of Adrar that the circle of the Baie du Lévrier had administrative authority. In January, various participants were brought before Capt. Bouquet in Port-Étienne to present testimony. Two of them were interrogated, one as an accused (Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, whose report is reproduced later), the other as a witness (his nephew, Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz), on January 29 and 30. Chotou, of the government of Mauritanian, heard the testimony and expressed concern about the consideration owed to Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz. In a letter to his subordinate on February 2, 1929, his letter crossed one from Bouquet dated February 3 reporting the interrogations conducted at Port-Étienne, in which, he said in a February 8 letter, Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, “as well as those who accompanied him to Port-Étienne, were treated with all appropriate consideration.”

Embarassed by the number of people involved, including the chief of the neighboring gubla of the Ouled Bou Sba,26 Bouquet referred back to the governor of Mauritania before rendering any judgment. In addition to transcripts of interrogations, he attached to his letter various letters in support of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz (a translation of one, from Ahmed Baba Ould Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz, Cheikh’s nephew and official

head of the Abul Habiballah, is presented later in the chapter). The governor of Mauritania, for his part, received tribal delegations favorable to the accused at Saint-Louis.27 Then, on February 18, the governor of Mauritania, who postdated the events to January 1929, brought the affair to the attention of the governor general’s office for French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française or AOF) in Dakar. He sent most of the documents28 and, setting out political reasons, asked for authority to “stop the pending judicial action.” This was granted in a letter from Carde, of the Directorate of Political and Administrative Affairs, on March 13, 1929, which suggested that the only sanction against the murderers be a “particularly harsh warning.” This decision was transmitted to the circle of the Baie du Lévrier in a letter dated March 25, 1929. As far as I know, there is no trace of the certainly oral reprimand.29

The event, which allegedly occurred in early October 1928,30 was attested by the French administration in November. The AOF governor general was officially informed in February 1929, and in late March the case was closed. Six long months of investigations and debates were needed to finally dismiss what might have led to a troublesome trial.

SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To grasp the complexity and delicacy of the affair, it is necessary to have a sense of the context. By the late 1920s, France had been present in Mauritanian for about thirty years. After a lengthy and conflict-ridden relationship between the colony of Sénégal and the various Bistah gubla moving through the Sahara, it occupied Trarza in 1902, founded Port-Étienne in 1906,31 and gained a foothold in Adrar after a large-scale military campaign. But it still had incomplete control over vast desert regions. Armed resistance to the colonial administration did not come to an end until 1934. Tijir, where the events took place, is a 400-mile-long corridor wedged between two ranges of dunes running from northeast to southwest, Aziz and Akchar. The region was traversed at long intervals by Nomadic Groups, military units mounted on camels, more intent on marking their presence felt than conducting effective policing. The camel-riding populations were administered by the three circles of Adrar (Askar), Trarza (Boutam), and the Baie du Lévrier (Port-Étienne). A military post then under the jurisdiction of Adrar, Askar, although closer, was located 100 hard miles from the site of the murders. The Spanish border, on the other side of which another part of the nomadic population

23 The circle was the lowest-level administrative region of the colony of Mauritania to which the listed gubla or groups were attached. The administrator in charge of a circle was usually called a commander, even if he was a civilian.

24 At the time, the region of Inchin was attached to the circle of Adrar. The post of Askar was not made a circle until 1931.

25 I have not been able to locate this document, which is mentioned in another letter.

26 The Ouled Bou Sba are a large gubla of traders, who mostly came to Mauritania in the early nineteenth century, that imposed its presence by arms. For this reason it was in a state of conflict with almost all the gublas of the region.

27 Although located in Sénégal, Saint-Louis remained the capital of Mauritania until the eve of independence.

28 Even though they date the events to early October 1928, was the January date just a mistake? In a preliminary draft, Carde was already writing “in the second half of January.” I have found no satisfactory explanation for this difference in dates.

29 Aside from the files from the Dakar archives (ANS SC651 [107]), which contains the correspondence from the governor general, I consulted Mauritanian archives, in which I located some documents (ARM El-75) containing the correspondence of the governor of Mauritania, but the condition of the files suggests that documents might have been lost or mislaid. Other information may be from the local archives of Nouna (formerly Port-Étienne) and Askar.

30 According to the testimony of Mohamed Ould Batta later in the chapter, it is possible that the execution happened around August.

31 Military control there was long limited to the peninsula of Cap Blanc. An edited book on this port city on the border with the former Spanish Sahara is now in preparation: Nouna; Foumene et informes de la "capitale économique" mauritanienne (provisional title). B. Adoque (ed.)
penalty is the prerogative of the magistrate alone, and as an exception to the owner of the guilty party if he is of servile condition, unmarried, or married to a slave. That is the case here.' In any event, this fact led the administration to avoid a public trial where the contradiction between colonial and Muslim law might come to the fore, which would be politically harmful.

Next came the question of responsibility. The person directly responsible was identified by the administration as Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, seconded by his two sons, Mohamed Nami and Sid Ahmed. But the general opinion among the population was that he was not only a guilty party but also a victim. His son was the one who was chiefly affected by their witchcraft, but as the governor general of the AOF pointed out, taking account of property rights over slaves in Muslim law: "There is no doubt that in the eyes of the Moors, in this case the real civil harm was suffered entirely by the current owner of the victims, that is, by the principal co-perpetrator of the attack." Moreover, opinions converged in seeing the events less as individual acts than as the effect of collective fanaticism. More than on those directly responsible for the murder, the administrators emphasized the complicity of the entire camp, the Abel Barkallah as a whole, and even the neighboring Ouled Bou Sba. The governor of Mauritania pointed out their lack of full authority over these sahabat on both sides of the border: "In fact, the Abel Barkallah of Port-Étienne, like the Ouled Bou Sba, are protected rather than really 'administered' nomads." If there was fear of the military power of the Ouled Bou Sba and the "prickly" personality of Sid M'Bareck, the leader of the Démoustar cited by name, with regard to the Abel Barkallah, the worry was about the influence of the family of the Abel Abd El Aziz. The governor wrote: "the personality of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz and the religious and political influence his family has acquired in the Sahel, an influence that from the beginning of the occupation to the present has always been put at our service, are worth considering in a region bordering on Rio De Oro in which our political action has not yet produced all the results we expect it to have." He also expressed his worry to the governor of the AOF that repression which was too harsh would be "exploited against [them], if not by the authorities in the neighboring colony at least by dissidents and nomads of the Sahel who are hostile to us."

What sanctions would be appropriate given these political interests? All levels of the hierarchy agreed they should avoid any punishment that might be considered humiliating by Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz. Following the advice of his subordinates, the governor of Mauritania suggested to the governor of the AOF a verbal reprimand of Cheikh accompanied by a collective fine. The Directorate of Political Affairs of the AOF, through Carde, acknowledged that "considering the serious reasons of a political order invoked, it cannot but share [his] way of thinking as to the necessity of there being no judicial consequences of the witchcraft affair." The fine was excluded, because the laws invoked did not apply in this case. Indemnification of the victims' relatives that had been spontaneously envisaged was excluded allegedly because there were none (although that was never established). This was a response to explicit political concerns that might be provoked by the public search for any relatives.

On this border and the way it was perceived over time, see B. Acouque, "L'idée de frontière en milieu nomade," in M. Villani and Cervello (eds.), Coloniasiones et héritages actuels au Sahara et au Sahel (Paris, 2007), i, 351-362.

37 In several documents, the importance given to the support of the Abel Abd El Aziz is evident. The administration seemed to have blind faith in their reliability. But it is hard to know how real this support was. The manipulative skills of these clever politicians, as we shall see, cast doubt on their apparently unshakeable loyalty.
The authorities merely issued a respectful oral reprimand. We have no knowledge of the tenor of what was said to Cheikh. Was he told that he had narrowly escaped a death sentence? We have no way of knowing, but that is unlikely, especially because it was never mentioned in the documents. Based on the information they had gathered, the administrators had opted for a solution that was least likely to cause political trouble. Yet questions remain about the sincerity of the investigation. There is no space here to bring out the contradictions in the facts reported that an attentive reading reveals. They are what induced me to question people who might have preserved memories of the events. At a distance of eighty years, despite failings of memory, the outline of the story takes on a different cast.

I was able to speak to a dozen people whose testimony points in the same direction. I offer two examples later in the chapter: one from the great grandson of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz and grandson of Sid Ahmed (the alleged victim of witchcraft), Mohamed Ould Batta, who told me the story known in his family; the other from Ahmadou Ould Moni, an old man in the region from a nearby qabila, the el-Graa, who knew various people involved in the story. According to various sources, Cheikh was in no way implicated in the murder of the three slaves. At the time of the events, he was in Taza, near 400 miles from the scene. It was his son, Mohamed Nami, who, believing his brother Sid Ahmed had been bewitched by the three slaves, tried to make them give back the blood and then executed them with his rifle. Fearing prosecution by the administration, Mohamed Nami allegedly tried to leave French-controlled territory. Halted in his flight by relatives from a neighboring qabila, the el-Graa, he looked for another way out. It was probably a delegation from the Ahel Habiballah, mentioned at the time of the events, that took charge of working out an account of the events that would have less harmful consequences.

The official version gathered by the administration was thus quite different from the facts remembered. Despite their divergences on many details, understandable given the lapse of time, the general sense of the testimonies—particularly the sole responsibility of Mohamed Nami Ould Cheikh—seems highly probable. To save Mohamed Nami from the wrath of the colonial administration, it seems that a fictitious version of events was developed to which all witnesses, with a few slips, conformed. In his deposition, Cheikh voluntarily assumed responsibility for the death of the slaves, in place of his son. One might assume that it was a way, risky for himself, to mask the illegality of the execution from a Muslim perspective, because only a master can accept the execution of his slave because it is his possession that has been harmed. He may also have known that the administration would not dare punish him, whereas his son was more vulnerable.

What was the strategy used to mislead the colonial administration? On the basis of some indications, 44 I can formulate a few hypotheses. Information available to us in the archives was collected by three military officers: Battalion Chef Dufour in Taza, Lieutenant Génin in the region of Tijri, and Captain Bousquet in Port-Étienne. The known sources of information were: the voluntary testimony of Mohamed Ould Ely (chief of the Ouled El Lab in Taza). Information gathered in Tijri by Lieutenant Génin (particularly from Mohamed Abdallahi Ould Mohamed Ould El Aziz and from some unnamed Ouled Bou Sba, presented later), the interrogations of Cheikh Ould El Aziz (presented later) and again of Mohamed Abdallahi Ould Mohamed Ould El Aziz conducted in Port-Étienne in late January 1929, the undated letters of support from the accused from Ahmed Babs Ould Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (nephew and nominal chief of the group to which the principal accused belonged), 45 from an assembly of important notables of Adrar (including the emir), and from Mohamed Ould Khalil (chief of a part of the powerful qabila of the Rgheblat.

Finally the governor general of Mauritania received delegations of Rgheblat, Ouled Delim, and Ouled Bou Sba—that is, the preponderant qabila of the Sahel still partly in conflict with French authorities, as well as the emir of Trarza and sheikh Sidr of the Ahel sheikh Sidr, an influential religious qabila of Trarza close to the colonial administration, who had come to "intercede on behalf of Cheikh Ould El Aziz and his accomplices." In addition to the statements of all the Ahel Habiballah, it was also necessary to turn to testimony from figures outside the group in order to substantiate the official version of the facts. That is where relations established with their warrior taimid turned out to be decisive. The Ahel Barkallah mobilized their networks of allies, dependents, and relatives. Mohamed Ould Ely, of the Ouled El Lab, informed the commander of the circle of Adrar, and the Ouled El Lab were the closest allies of the Ahel Barkallah. According to the testimony of Ahmadou Ould Moni, 46 Cheikh Ould Moukass of the Ahel Laghzal informed the commander of the circle of Port-Étienne, where he represented the el-Graa, and he used his influence to delay the outcome. The Ahel Laghzal were taimid very close to the Ahel Abd El Aziz. It also seems that a central role was played by his relatives from a family of the Ahel Bourrig (el-Graa) in preventing the flight of Mohamed Nami into Spanish territory, which certainly would have designated him guilty in the eyes of the colonial administration. Finally, written testimony came first from Mohamed Ould el-Khalil of the Rgheblat, who was the personal taimid of Cheikh Ould El Aziz, but also from the emir of Adrar, whose family had long enjoyed the ritual protection of the Ahel Barkallah. In addition, the warrior qabila were on good terms with the Ahel Barkallah, who had no reason to fear harmful statements from them and could expect support from most of them. The same thing was true of the neighboring religious qabila (Ahel El Ali) of the Kherem, El Ad; El Mocar, Ahel Mohamed Salem, Ida Ou Ali, and Smadik, who joined their support to that of the emir of Adrar. Only the Ouled Bou Sba had tense relations with the Ahel Barkallah, and, rightly or wrongly, the Ahel Barkallah tried to protect themselves by discrediting the testimony of the Ouled Bou Sba. This is why Mohamed Ould el-Khalil wrote in his letter that "the Ouled Bou Sba heightened the accusations because of their enmity against the Ahel Abd El Aziz." The Ahel Barkallah also implicated the Ouled Bou Sba in the affair (according to the statements of Mohamed Abdallahi Ould Mohamed Ould

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38 Some remarks on this issue are in the notes to the documents presented later.
40 According to Mohamed Ould Batta (testimony later in the chapter), he was engaged in the getna (date harvesting) in Adrar, which would place the events in or around August 1929.
41 See the testimony of Mohamed Ould Batta later in the chapter.
42 See the testimony of Ahmadou Ould Moni, Jieffiray (Aghreut), January 10, 2005, presented later in the chapter.
43 The administration’s investigation and the oral reprimand seem to have left no traces in memories.
44 See particularly the testimony of Ahmadou Ould Moni later in the chapter.
45 One of his letters sets out the jurisprudence concerning slaves’ witchcraft (presented later), the other warns against "slanders."
46 See the testimony of Ahmadou Ould Moni later in the chapter.
47 Who was then Sid Ahmed Ould Ahmed Ould Ahmed Ould Ala.
48 We know nothing of the statements made at the time by the members of this qabila. A delegation nonetheless did come to support the Ahel Barkallah (probably because of internal divisions) according to the governor of Mauritania.
Abd El Aziz and of Cheikh, presented later in the chapter), although no current informer remembers their presence. Finally, the two Tendras mentioned as present during the events by Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz (presented later) were his brothers-in-law, the maternal uncles of Sid Ahmed and Mohamed Nami. By neutralizing discordant voices, this was the way in which the Abel Barkallah prompted the construction of an official version of the events for the colonial administration.40

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What conclusions did Lieutenant Génin reach? What were his sources?
2. Why is the testimony of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz contained in the archives to be read with caution?
3. What does Ahmed Baba Ould Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz try to bring out in his letter?
4. What can be said about what Cheikh and his son Mohamed Nami thought of the danger posed by the three slaves, according to the testimony of Mohamed Ould Batta?
5. How does Mohamed Ould Moni bring to the fore the action of his qabila in defense of the interests of the Abul Abd El Aziz?

TERMINOLOGY

Bizhan (eg. Bithani) - Ethnic group called also Moors inhabiting the whole western Saharan. It designates particularly people of free ascendance.

Hajab - Tulsman product by a hajibe.

Harrati (eg. Hartani) - Statutory group of reputed slave origin but free, in a clientelist relationship with their master. It can also be a euphemism for slave ('Abd).

Hassas or Arab - Noble statutory group of warlike honor.

Hashamiya - Arabic dialect spoken by inhabitants between Goulmimine (Morocco) to Saint-Louis (Senegal) and Timbuktu (Mali). It is the vernacular language in Mauritania and Western Sahara.

Qabila (pl. qabili) - Tribe in the sense of patrilineal family group, which refers to a common ancestor.

Self - Specific sorcery made by a selfal (pl. selfale) who sucks from a distance the blood of a maddal, his victim.

Sib - Witchcraft practiced by a sibbar (sorcerer).

Tlemid (eg. Telmíd) or students, disciples. For Zuaya, people following them, as well as free dependents who pay a variable tribute and warriors recognizing their supernatural power.

Zuaya, Tolba, or Mhabin - Noble statutory group of religious values, more commonly known as marabouts in the colonial terminology.

40 Doubt remains as to the administrator's ignorance, particularly that of the governor of Mauritania, regarding the artificial construction of the Abel Barkallah's defense. The embarrassment of the colonial authorities over the question of slavery suggests that they may have been showing accommodating stance. See Acloque, "Embaras de l'administration coloniale."

DOCUMENTS

1. Génin Report

Tifariss 1928 November 19, 1928
Mauritania
Nomad Group of Trarza
No. 639 A
Copy

Report of Lieutenant Génin, commander of the Nomad Group of Trarza;
Concerning murders committed in the camp of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz.

Toward the end of October 1928 the rumor spread through the nomadic tribes in Ageniri and Inchiri that Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, of the tribe of the Abel Barkallah, had put to death three of his servants accused of practicing witchcraft. This information was conveyed by Mohamed Ould Ely, chief of the Ouled El Lab,41 to the battalion chief commanding the Adrar circle,42 who charged me with conducting an investigation.

I went to Ageniri and the Tiijit43 to question, without prior warning, the witnesses to the events. In particular, I collected the statements from two Ouled Bou Sba notables44 and from Mohamed Abdallahi Ould Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz, nephew of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz.

From these statements and various information reaching the Nomad Group, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. With respect to the facts themselves, no doubt should remain.45 In early October in a camp located to the west of Bou Rabah, two servants of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, named Hamadi and Souélim, and a female servant named Zénabou, accused of practicing

40 For clarity, names of places and persons have been uniformly presented in the form most common in the colonial period. This is also the case for the dates. Tifariss is located north of Ageniri, more than 100 miles northeast of the site of the events.

41 Abbreviations have been replaced by complete words. Nomad Groups were mobile camel-mounted military units that marked the colonial presence in desert zones. Trarza is the region in southwestern Mauritania occupied by the French since 1902.

42 In this document, which is typewritten unless otherwise indicated. This copy made in Port-El-Haim (established in 1906 on the Nomad-Bilou Peninsula) was one of the seven documents initially sent to the central administration of Mauritania in Saint-Louis du Sénégal, transmitted to the governor general of French West Africa in Dakar.

43 Ageniri is the coastal dune region Cape Timiris, an extension of the dunes of Amaar. Inchiri is the rocky plain of the Aalji region in south-eastern Amaar that in 1901 gave its name to a circle.

44 The Ouled El Lab were a small warlike qabila, separated from their Ouled Delem cousins whom they led in the late nineteenth century and close allies of the Abel Barkallah.

45 The Adrar is the mountains range southeast of Sable, the large northern coastal region of Trav el-Bizah. It was made into a circle in 1909, following a difficult military conquest.

46 The Tiijit is the long valley located between the lines of dunes of Amaar and Amaar, running 300 miles from northeast to southwest.

47 The persons questioned from this qabila remain unknown.

48 Génin's conclusions are the same as those reached by various administrators in their letters, despite blatant contradictions, particularly as to the unfolding of events, that came out in the depositions. See later in the chapter.

49 Bou Ghabra on current maps, a well in the extreme southwest of Amaar.
witchcraft, were put to death. 66 Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz beat Hamadi to death with a pestle; his elder son Mohamed Naimi killed Soufliim with a pistol, and his second son Sid Ahmed killed the female servant with a rifle shot. No one doubts of denying these facts; their notoriety is so great they cannot be questioned.

2. Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz did not commit these murders entirely willingly. 67 Not that he was held back by a feeling of pity or respect for the laws, but because his avarice made him aware of the loss of wealth represented by the death of his servants. He resisted, hesitated, and acted only after having been urged on by his relatives, friends, and neighbors, and especially being threatened by the Ouled Bou Sba nomadic warriors in the region. 68

3. All those who did not take part in the murder but nonetheless encouraged it hastened to deny their responsibility by stating that they opposed the murder with all their strength, but they were not listened to. We can be sure that each of them will say "Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz acted entirely alone. The servants are his and it's his business." 69

4. The Ahel Barkalikiah are so afraid of reprisals from the Ouled Bou Sba that they prefer to bear alone the consequences of their actions and not to denounce the participation of the Ouled Bou Sba. Mohamed Abdallah, who made the frankest statement, decided to speak only after having made protestations of his wish to harm no member of another tribe, to denounce no one, to not be the cause of friction between his tribe and the neighbors. 70 He does not like Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz or his cousins, with whom he has often had disputes, and would be happy to affirm his influence on the tribe 71 of the Ahel Habiballah by taking charge of the settlement of this affair, 72 but although he conceded to me that the Ouled Bou Sba had driven the Ahel Habiballah to murder, he will probably dare not repeat his deposition in contradiction to warriors who could bring their anger to bear on his tribe.

5. No one who witnessed the murder or heard about it has shown the slightest feeling of fright, regret, or pity. They all say they are convinced that the servants were witches, that they had caused the death of several people, that they had the power to steep the blood of their victims, and that for that reason they had to be done away with. 73 They invoke Muslim law, traditions and customs. No one has the feeling that a crime was committed. They only worry about the reactions of the French authority.

To sum up, we are in the presence of an act of collective fanaticism responsible for which must be shared by all the notables in the region where it happened, whether marabouts or warriors. 74 But the principal instigators of the murder were the Ouled Bou Sba, in particular Sidhi M'Barak, 75 whose threats overcame the reluctance of the Ahel Habiballah.

Signed: Génin
Certified copy
At Port-Étienne, 30 January 1929,
Circle Commander
(Bousquet’s signature)

2. Transcript of Interrogation of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz

January 29, 1929

Interrogation of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz

January 29, at 9 AM (?)

66. Administrative documents repeatedly use the term "witch" (sourier), whereas vampirism, although identified with witchcraft, was clearly differentiated for the Bitenhs.

67. This sentence is underlined in the margin. The words "marabouts" and "warriors" adopt an indigenous distinction between the Zebe tribe of native doctors, who do not bear arms and justify their position through religious authority, and the "Arab" who acquired their position by arms. The two groups, who have different codes of honor, consider intermarriages to be permissible. Captain Bouquet in Port-Étienne and the lieutenant governor of Mauritania limited responsibility for the murders to the Ouled Bou Sba notables (warriors, at least as far as the colonial administration was concerned) and the Ahel Barkalikiah (marabouts).

68. Sidhi M'Barak Ould Ahmed Baba, chief of the Dimoune, principal warrior group of the Ouled Bou Sba, was well enough known to the administration for it to be unnecessary to use his full name.

69. Handwritten.

70. Many types of spelling and punctuation mistakes, made because of the direct transcription of the interrogation, have been corrected for greater clarity. Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz was the principal person accused of the three murders. He was initially summoned to Atari like the others involved. But because it established that the events took place in the territory of the circle of the Baie du Lévrier (Telegram 924A, Mauritania to Atari Circle, December 1, 1929, ARIM E 1/75), he was heard by Port-Étienne by Captain Bouquet. Learning of his questioning, Governor Chateau of Mauritania wrote in a telegram (no. 403 P, February 2, 1929, ARIM E 1/75) to his subordinate to "treat him with consideration and to urgently inform [him] of [his] opinion about the political repercussions of this affair and what the solution it would be appropriate [to] come in." In reply (no. 1632, February 5, 1929, ARIM E 1/75), Bouquet offers reassurances: Cheikh, "as well as those who accompanied him to Port-Étienne, have been treated with all the requisite consideration. All continued to enjoy complete freedom. In my opinion and for the reasons set out in my letter 147/P previously mentioned, this affair should be settled by making the Ahel Barkalikiah understand, without offending them, that in the future they will have to refrain from such acts."

71. The next day at the same time, his nephew Mohamed Abdallah Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz, who had already been heard by Génin, was questioned. I will point out the most important divergences...
QUESTION: You are indicted 67 for having, in early October 1928, in the immediate vicinity of Boul Dieri, in the region of Azefall, 68 in the circle of the Baie du Lévrier, killed by your own hand a person named Hamadi Ould Abdi El Moula 69 and contributed to the death of two other people: Souelim Ould Abd El Moula, Hamadi's brother, and a woman named Zénabou, sister of the two others, all three in your service. What do you have to say in your defense?

ANSWER: Hamadi, Souelim, and Zénabou were my servants. I purchased them about thirty years ago 70 from Mohamed Delimene Ould Abdallah of the Idelkoub group (Abel Barkallah). 71

About six years ago, some witches in the service of the Abel Mohamed Salem a marabout tribe of Adrar, were sentenced to death by the djema 72 of the Abel Mohamed Salem for having practiced witchcraft. 73 Before they were killed, the convicts were questioned, 74 and confessed that the servants of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz, Hamadi, Souelim, and Zénabou had initiated them into these practices.

At that time, my father, the venerable marabout Abd El Aziz was still alive and asked me to kill my captives. I refused. My father said that since that was so I should leave the camp with my servants, which I did. 75

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67 This is the only point at which there is a suggestion of a judicial proceeding against Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz. The transmittal letter (no. 14 B, February 3, 1929, ANS G86(175)), were not questioned.
68 The father's name of the slaves appears only three times in the whole document: twice in the interrogation, once in the transmittal letter (no. 14 B, February 3, 1929, ANS G86(175)). The spelling is different: "Ould AB EL MOULAYA, "OULD AB EL SOYLA, " and "OULD AB EL HOVLA." The appellations "Abd el..." is usual for Muslims. It means "slave of..." and is followed by one of the ninety-nine names of God. It is not reserved for slaves. Cheikh Ould's father's name "Abd el Aziz," "slave of the Beloved," or of his nephew Mohamed "Abdallah," "slave of God," are two examples. It might be "Abd el Moula," "slave of the Lord," which is used the clearest spelling. In today's testimonies, neither name nor first names are known.
69 Thirty years earlier, the French were not present in Masdarina. Repression of the slave trade, particularly enforced after the law of December 12, 1905, was thus not applicable if the transaction has taken place before that date. The statement may have been taken in order to account. That possibility is bolstered by the fact that they were in the prime of life in 1928 and, according to Mohamed Ould Batia (see later in the chapter), the fact that they had been returned for witchcraft before their purchase. It is hard to imagine young children being tortured for that reason. Moreover, some remember that the events took place shortly after their arrival (Ahmedou Ould Moni, presented later).
70 This is a mistake. "Abel Barkallah" had separated from the Idelkoub in the seventeenth century. They were thus two independent, albeit related, groups.
71 A djema is an assembly of notables of varied composition that meets to make common decisions working toward a consensus.
72 Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz sets these events back "about ten years."
73 The word is ambiguous. It may suggest the use of torture techniques called the question. It appears later in the same ambiguity.
74 Cheikh's father, Abd El Aziz Ould Cheikh Mohamed El Mami, died at the very beginning of the twentieth century. There is certain confusion here between him and Cheikh's brother, Mohamed Abd El Aziz, chief of the Habilahou group, who died in 1926, which agrees with the statement of Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz.
75 According to Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz, three or four years earlier, the three slaves "were again accused of stealing the blood of two Ouled Bou Sba of the family of the Abel Sidi Béchir" then of causing the death of Mohamed Ould Ahmed (Abel Meke) and of Minita (Aminata or minta [daughter of JF] El Haj Omar (Abel Maouloud) of the Abel Barkallah and of Toiybare Ould Mohamed Abd El Moula of the Idelkoub.
76 This account of events is confirmed by Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz, who concluded: "Hamadi dragged himself to Sidney Ahmed, who told us that Hamadi had given him [his blood, but no one saw the blood. Hamadi died a few moments later from the blows he had gotten from all of us." According to Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz, it was following another application of the gris gris that Sid Ahmed accused Souelim.
77 The mistake here is obvious: Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz was the brother of Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz. He did have a daughter named Fatimatu. Their death was attributed to these three slaves by Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz.
78 Another mistake: Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz was the brother of Ahmed Baha Ould Mohamed Abd El Aziz. Mohamed Abdallah said he had been sent to his uncle to "tell him that he absolutely had to kill the three witches." He also said he arrived three days before Cheikh returned from his trip. According to him, Sid Ahmed complained that his blood had been taken. To the demand to give back the blood, Zénabou "answered that she had already given her back part, that Hamadi had not given his back." Hamadi had run away and only returned with Cheikh and Souelim three days later. The administration did not seem to have any doubts of the presence of both throughout the events. The delegation was probably sent after all of this in order to present a common version of events.
79 These were Cheikh's brothers-in-law, uncles of Mohamed Nami and Sid Ahmed.
300 Benjamin Acloque

Salem Ould Abidine, El Hareitani Ould Sidi Béchir, Ahmed Baba Ould El Mami, and many of the Borkaraille, among them the chief’s brother named Mohamed Abdallah Ould Abd El Aziz, Mohamed Sidamine, Ahmed Maraba, El Boukari Ould Mohamed Mahmoud, Sidati Ould Ahmed Ha, Mohamed Labdos, Abd El Aziz Ould El Boukari, El Boukari Ould Sid, and others, almost all the notable of our group, that three servants were killed.

The three servants were struck simultaneously by me and all the others until they died. We used sticks; the three servants were tied and lying on the ground. When they were dead, my sons Mohamed Nami and Sid Ahmed, the first with a pistol, the second with a 74 rifle, each fired one shot into the corpses of Hamadi and Souëlâm.

Q: Were Hamadi and Souëlâm already dead when your two sons shot them?

A: Yes, that is certain. They had already been dead for two or three hours when my sons shot at the corpses of Hamadi and Souëlâm.

Q: Don’t you regret the act you committed and have been charged with that cost the life of three of your servants?

A: Yes, I regret the death of my three servants because it deprives me of a considerable source of income. But what they did deserved death. It is our law that our fathers taught us. We only obeyed their will and the will of God. We are not reprehensible.

Q: Were you asked to kill your three servants?

A: Yes. My nephew, chief of the Borkaraille and Sidi M'Barek, chief of the Ouled Bou Sba, particularly insisted, and in short all the Borkaraille and Ouled Bou Sba notable demanded the death of my servants insistently. I was forced to surrender my servants to the vengeance of my brother, chief Ahmed Baba, Sidi M'Barek, chief of the Ouled Bou Sba, and all the notables. I admit that I hit the servants myself, I was angry at them. But everyone who was there hit them as I did.

98 These were the only three people outside the Habiballah whose presence was confirmed by the statements of Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz.

99 These were probably the members of the delegation of Habiballah sent by the chief of the group Ahmed Baba mentioned earlier.

100 The two versions diverge seriously. According to Mohamed Abdallah Ould Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz, the death of the slaves was not decided on; it was the result of beating them to make them confess. Hamadi first, then at nightfall “Souëlâm did not want to confess to being a witch; he died from the blows we struck him with.” When the others went out to pray, Mohamed Nami Ould Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz fired a shot into the corpse of Souëlâm. It was not until two days later, after Sid Ahmed suffered a relapse, that the presentation of the ghirgha led him to designate Znabou. “Like her brothers, she protested that she was not a witch; she was beaten until she was dead.” Again taking advantage of a prayer, this time it was Sid Ahmed who fired “a pistol shot into the corpse of Znabou.” These differences were not picked up by the colonial administration.

101 This assertion did not convince the administration. Sid Ahmed and Mohamed Nami were considered co-perpetrators of the murders to the same degree as Cheikh.

102 This argument carried some weight. In his testimonial letter, Captain Bouquet wrote: “It is also appropriate to take into account the fact that they all believe they are covered by Muslim law and that they acted as their ancestors would have acted” (no. 14, February 3, 1929, ANS SGRH (107)).

103 In reality chief of the Habiballah group of the Borkaraille.

104 Neghew.

105 This accusation caused conviction in the administration. Captain Bouquet, for example, wrote that if the “original” guilty parties were Cheikh and his two sons, that this was “an act of collective fanaticism”; “the principal instigators were the Ouled Bou Sba, in particular Sidi M’Barek, whose threats overcame the reluctance of the Borkaraille” (no. 14, February 3, 1929, ANS SGRH (107)).

301 Witchcraft and Slavery

Port-Franc January 26, 1929

Circle Commander (signature of Bousquet)

3. Letter from Ahmed Baba Ould Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz (Translation)

In the name of God the merciful, may he grant his blessing to his generous prophet Mohamed.

Greetings to the Honorable Governor Gaden.

I inform you that the Most High decreed witchcraft and slavery as the fruit of some of our captives. We have deeply examined this question with the marabouts of the Ahmed Mohamed Salem, Ahmed El Figha Khattat, and other learned marabouts. We have found in our laws only their execution. We tried to bring them to you, but they refused. We had them executed in accordance with the word of God (Great and Powerful) and that of his prophet (may God’s blessing be upon him). A Moorish proverb says: “The Ahel Barkallah should not be wrongly suspected for the love they bear to captives.”

Previously, the French did not prevent us from inflicting, as we did, the punishments provided by the law.

We would like to leave us in the tradition of our father (may God pardon him). Ahmed Baba, son of his sheikh, Mohamed Ould Abd El Aziz Ould sheikh Mohamed El Mami (may God pardon all of them).

(undated)

4. Account of an Interview in English of Mohamed Ould Batte, January 13, 2009, Nouakchott

My grandfather was Sid Ahmed Ould Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz Ould sheikh Mohamed El Mami. He and Mohamed Nami had the same mother, Fatimetou Mint Mochtari.

Cheikh Ould Abd El Aziz owned many things, many slaves and camels. He had his own camp even though his brother Mohamed was chief of the Habiballah. Mohamed
Nami was the oldest of Cheikh's sons; he also had his own camp, whereas Sid Ahmed stayed with his father.

One day when Cheikh was in the south at the camp of a family of the Ideikoub, cousins of the Ahel Barkallah, he saw them torture slaves accused of stealing people's blood. They might have killed them, but they couldn't or wouldn't, so they kept on torturing them. Then he bought the whole family for nothing, for two tent poles. He made a hajib for them and it was said that he made them safe. Then he brought them back to Tiris.107

They stayed there for a long time without causing anyone any harm. But one day Sid Ahmed fell ill. Many people said they were the ones who had stolen his blood. Cheikh was then at the geno in Adrar and Mohamed Nami was in charge of the camp. Mohamed Nami had horses, guns, all that.108 He took them and demanded that they give back the blood. They started to give back the blood and it was said that Sid Ahmed was feeling better and better. But seeing that Mohamed Nami realized they were dangerous, they took them away and shot them.

The story we know in the family says that he was alone. Sid Ahmed also used rifles, but Mohamed Nami didn't need anyone. It is said that he took them not far from the tent and he shot them in the plain sight of everyone. People then said to him: "You shouldn't have killed them, they haven't given back all the blood. Sid Ahmed is better, but it's not over." But the fact is they were dead. Sid Ahmed was better, but after two days, he fell ill again. Then his health improved and so on. Later there were problems to be solved with the slaves in Inchiri; Sid Ahmed went there and that's where he died. He is buried in Aikjouj. He must have been around thirty; that was around three or four years later.

When Cheikh came back from the geno, he criticized Mohamed Nami for killing his slaves: "How can you say they stole his blood when I made a hajib for them and they must have been safe? What happened is bad." I heard that Cheikh was angry at him because they were not his slaves and they thought they were safe. But he wasn't there.

5. Account of an Interview in Hassaniya of Ahmedou Ould Moni (El-Graa, Ahel Laghzal), January 10, 2009 in Joffriyat (Agnet)110

I have been told that Mohamed Nami went south and brought back two slaves and a female servant to the camp that is now called for that reason Le Mdenet El Abid.112 Mohamed Nami had a brother who was very dear to him. Sid Ahmed Ould Cheikh, who shortly after their arrival suddenly had noosebleeds that caused his death. It was said that he had been bewitched113 by the slaves. They noticed that after the slaves came several residents of the camp fell. That coincided with the visit of a woman who was familiar with that kind of witchcraft, zelli, because the residents didn't know about it at the time. The visitor told them that what was happening resembled the effect of zelli, because after the slaves came the residents of the camp were devastated.

There was an El Graa (Ouled Mehlbel, Ouled Melhel) named Hamadi Ould Saguti who also was bewitched. Mohamed Nami threatened to kill the slaves with his gun to force them to cure him. Because of those threats they restored him to life.

I knew Hamadi Ould Saguti personally, and it is true that he was cured of zelli. But he spent the rest of his life having a crisis every Friday during which he lost consciousness...

When he sensed the camp was in danger, with Hamadi Ould Saguti, Mohamed Nami took the two slaves and the female servant to Le Mdenet, and they shot them. The shots killed one slave and the servant, but one of the slaves ran away. They chased him and shot him to death under a tree, an atri. The graves of the slaves, whose location I know very well, are on Le Mdenet for one of the slaves and the servant, but the one who was shot under the atri is buried there. After this, Mohamed Nami decided to emigrate.114 He took a harat115 and headed north. He joined an El Graa family named Ahel Boutrig, and then went on to Morocco for fear of the French.

In the family of the group of Ahel Ahmed of the El Graa that he joined were two men, Abd El Aziz Ould Boutrig and his brother Lemiad. At that time the camp was not far east of Erzział116.

When Mohamed Nami told the two brothers he intended to emigrate to Morocco, they advised against it. They told him that if he did, they would follow him and abandon their territory. They were very attached to him and asked him to stay for a while to see what was possible.

One of the Ahel Boutrig went to Nouadhil117 to see Cheikh Ould Moukan118 who was then very valiant. Cheikh went to see the French and went to great pains to persuade the French not to put him on trial and not to bother him. Finally Cheikh secured Mohamed Nami's pardon. He then returned to his camp.

106 A hajib is a talisman of Islamic inspiration or not made by a specialist to obtain a particular magic effect. See Introduction.
107 This is a vast plain with famous pastures in northern Assail, mainly in the formerly Spanish zone.
108 Date harvest that took place in July and August in regions with easings, the occasion for festive gatherings. The events, therefore, took place two or three months before the colonial administration thought they had.
109 The custom among the Zweya groups, including the Ahel Barkallah, was to be unarmed. Horses, as well as rifles, are warrior objects associated with the Ahel nobility.
110 The translation (into French) was made by Fanida Mimi Haiib and Ahmed Mouloud Ould Ehti, in the presence of Hélène Arnaud. My interlocutor said he got this information from his father and from Hamadi Ould Saguti, who will be mentioned later.
111 This interlocutor is the only one who attributes ownership of the slaves to Mohamed Nami. He does not even mention his father, Cheikh.
112 The hill of slaves.
113 The verb used (zelli, zelli) is translated as "extrachs." See Introduction.
114 The verb used (hajib, hajib) refers to the Prophet's flight to Medina from the domination of the polytheists in Mecca, the origin of the Muslim calendar (Hegira). It is the word used in Mauritania to designate the flight from colonial domination to unoccupied territory. The Spanish did not travel through the territory granted by treaty until after 1594. See Adolpe, "Le défilé de lesteur," 132, 133.
115 Harat (pl. Harats) designates a freedman or an assimilated foreigner in a clientelist relationship with his master. He belongs to the category of the damaa. It can also be a euphemism for slave.
116 Located in the Tahlaa (south of Assail). 65 miles north of the site of the events, Erzział was 60 miles south of the border with Spanish territory. It was also on the road to Port-Étienne.
117 The post of Port-Étienne was always known to the Bithian by the name of the peninsula, Nouadhil, now the name of the city.
118 Cheikh Ould Moukansse of the Ahel Laghzal represented the El Graa qadis before the colonial administration in Port-Étienne. He was very influential there. The Ahel Laghzal were damaa (religious disciples) of the Ahel Abd El Aziz, the family of Mohamed Nami Ould Cheikh.
SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READINGS

ON THE EVOLUTION OF SLAVERY IN MAURITANIA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD


ON THE QUESTION OF WITCHCRAFT


B e n j a m i n A C L O Q U E , 2 0 1 3

Witchcraft and Slavery: Accusations of Remote Vampirism — The Colonial Administration of Mauritania Investigates the Execution of Three Slaves (1928-1929) —

in Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene & Martin A. Klein (ed.)

African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade
Cambridge University Press
pp. 282-304.