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Jean Robin

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MOORS AND CANARY ISLANDERS ON THE COAST OF THE WESTERN SAHARA

JEAN ROBIN

THE COASTAL WATERS of the western Sahara, between the 19th and 24th parallels, are among the richest in the world in fish. Their abundance was catalogued in the course of Professor Gruvel's ¹ mission in 1905, and it has been the subject of subsequent research. In spite of a life remote from seafaring ways, the Moors or "Beydanes," the great camel-owning nomads of the region, have never been unaware of these resources; they have even been the issue at stake in frequent tribal squabbles. It is true that the ocean waters have never been exploited in person by the warriors of bedouin or "hassane" stock, the gun-bearing aristocrats, or by the holy men or "zwaya," the marabouts called by Islamic law to a life of prayer and study. Both these classes have, however, claimed suzerainty over the small fishing clans, of Berber or negroid origin, called "Imraguen" who have from time immemorial gathered the harvest of the coast. In addition, special mention should be made of the little tribe of Ahel Laghzel, an independent community which bears arms; these people fish for their own benefit certain stretches of the Baie du Lévrier.

Nowadays, the most important centres inhabited by the Imraguen fishers are, from south to north: Lemhayjerat, to the south of Cap Timiris (or Mirik), inhabited by the vassals of the Tendgha marabouts (Ahel Bouhoboyni); Memghar, in the immediate vicinity of Cap Mirik, inhabited by the former vassals of the warriors Oulad Seyid of the Trarza; R'Gueyba, at the tip of the Presqu'île de Thila, inhabited by the vassals of the Barikallah marabouts (Habiballah); several areas (N'Teychott, N'Tesseut, Ajouer, Foum el Trig, Iwik) in the zone of runnels and mud-holes lying between Cap Iwik and the southern tip of Île Tidra and Île Serenni, inhabited off and on by fishermen most of whom are vassals of the Oulad Bou Sba, a tribe claiming to be *chorfa* or descended from the Prophet; Arkeys, near Cap el Freh, Al Zas (at the cape of the same name) and Île d'Arguin, occupied temporarily by the vassals of the Barikallah marabouts (Habiballah). Finally, the shores of the Baie de l'Étoile, Baie du Cansado and Baie de l'Archimède, subdivisions of the great Baie du Lévrier, were and still sometimes are exploited on their own behalf by members of the Ahel Laghzel tribe; while those of Dakhla, in the bay of Villa Cisneros, are the customary fishing grounds of the Oulad Tidrarin, vassals of the famous warrior tribe of the Oulad Delim. The fresh water essential for the maintenance of these settlements is carried in water skins on pack camels from the nearest wells, which are often many kilometres away.

These same areas of the Baie du Lévrier and of the Banc d'Arguin, apart perhaps from a stretch between Cap el Freh and Cap Mirik which is more or less un navigable, have been frequented for a long time past by fishing fleets from the Canary Islands, and particularly by the seafaring people of Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria. For centuries, therefore, this Atlantic seaboard has been the meeting place of two peoples, two languages, two religions, two civilizations and finally of two quite distinct fishing techniques.

The technique of the Canary Island fishermen resembles closely methods used on

¹ Gruvel A., and R. Chudeau. 'A travers la Mauritanie occidentale de Saint Louis à Port Étienne.' Paris, Larose, 1909-11.

the Atlantic coasts of Europe. The most traditional method involves the use of big sailing ships, schooners, "dundees" and cutters (*balandros*), with smaller satellite boats or "lanchas," resembling the dories once familiar on the Newfoundland banks. The tackle may take the form either of ground lines or of great seine nets (*filets droits*),¹ of which the mesh varies according to the fish to be caught; it would be pointless here to go into more detail. The object is to catch with nets shoals of courbines, of bonitos, or of mullet—or, with the line, sargus and diagramma. These fish are brought by the smaller boats to the mother-ship, gutted and salted on board, and then taken to the Canaries. There they are dried and sold in the markets as courbines and bacalao.

The first known description of the time-honoured technique of the Imraguen is to be found in an account by the Portuguese traveller Valentim Fernandez (1506-7).² There is no question here of putting to sea, which is not surprising when one considers how totally bare of timber for boat-building, or for any other purposes, is the Sahara. Lieutenant Lotte made a special study of this fishing technique in "Coutûmes des Imraguen;"³ so also did Lieutenant Revol in his "Étude sur les fractions d'Imraguen de la côte mauritanienne."⁴ In spite of this more up-to-date information, the most ancient, the shortest and incidentally the most graphic account of the Imraguen fishermen, is well worth quoting:

"The nets with which the 'schirmeyros' Azeneques catch fish are made from thread manufactured out of the roots of trees, that is to say from a bark which is peeled off, beaten and carefully processed, and finally spun into a thread. These nets are as much as a fathom wide and five long. They are attached to rods pointed at each end, as big as a staff. The floats of these nets are pieces of wood of *Figueyra do inferno*. The nets are weighted by balls of fired clay, dried in hot ashes and pierced. The men go two and two to fish, each carrying a net wrapped round his staff in the way I have described. When the moment comes, they tie their two nets together, and, as soon as they see the fish, they approach from either side, letting the net unroll gradually between them until they reach the shore. This takes place in the shallow water, hardly knee-deep, and at the time of day when the heat is at its height, because the fish are then, as it were, drugged by the warmth of the water, which is in harmony with that of the sun. They carry a harpoon in the right hand to spear the fish when, in trying to escape the net, it leaps in the air. It is thus that they fish."

The bark, here described as used in making the nets, is that of an *Asclepidaceae* called *Leptadenia spartum* (or *titarek* in the vernacular) while the wood of which the floats are made is that of the *Euphorbia balsamifera* or *afernan*.

The Imraguen are above all interested in catching mullet, a fish of which both the flesh and the roe are especially prized by the Moors. This roe, which is marketed and eaten as botargo (poutargue) is carefully detached and put to dry in the

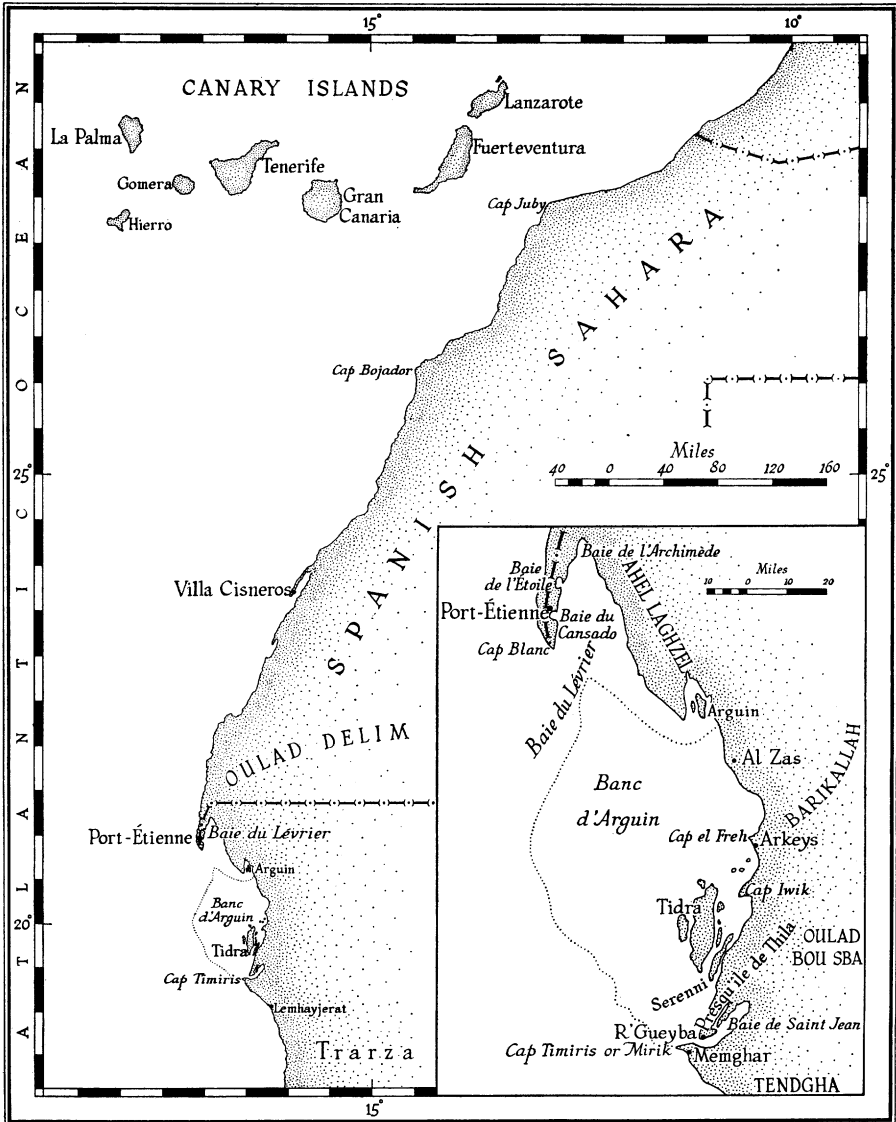
¹ The *filet droit* is the simplest of all fishing nets, and the following definition of it is given by Ed. Le Danois in 'Le grand livre de la mer et des poissons' (Union Européenne d'Éditions, 1953, Monaco, Tome II, p. 23: "Les filets droits sont des nappes de coton ou de lin, teintées en bleu par du sulfate de cuivre (pour le sardine) et mesurant de 30 à 40 mètres sur une hauteur de 10 mètres; la ralingue supérieure est liée, et la ralingue inférieure lestée de quelques plombs pour maintenir le filet en position verticale."

² Published by M. P. de Cenival and Th. Monod, under the title 'Description de la Côte d'Afrique de Ceuta au Sénégal.' Paris, Larose, 1938.

³ *J. Soc. des Afric.*, 7 (1937) 40.

⁴ *Bull. Com. A.O.F.* 20 (1937) 179.

sun on straw screens, while the fillets are taken off the bone and also set to dry, without salt. A trade is carried on by caravan with the interior and the noble families of the protecting tribe came to the Imraguen settlement to take a cure consisting of a diet of fresh fish and fish oil, both rich in vitamins.



So keen has been the competition in the past between the Moorish and the Canary fishermen, so far removed are the two peoples in origin, in technique and in civilization, that it is not surprising that social contacts between them have been rare. But it would seem that a *modus vivendi* was tacitly established on either side of an ideal fishing line, corresponding approximately to a depth of about 1 metre

50 below the lowest tide mark. This separates the fishing grounds which can be exploited by the Imraguen technique from those exploited by the Canary Islanders. This "gentlemen's agreement" must quite often have been violated: so much so, that one of the manifestations of contact between Canary Islanders and Moors in the past was the exchange of gun shots—the Moor, weapon in hand, sullenly keeping the Canary fisherman at a distance from "his" fish.

Nevertheless, peaceful relations developed up to a point. The Canary sailors needed to make a landfall from time to time, if not for provisions and fresh water (of which the Saharan coast, apart from Île d'Arguin, is notoriously bare), then at least to dry and repair their nets, to scrub the ships' bottoms, and to net bait from the shore. Permission to disembark was given by certain of the Moorish tribes, against a payment of dues or *horma* payable in fish and in *ogifo*, as the Canary men call the maize semolina which is the basis of their diet, and for which the Moors have a fancy. Some of these dues for services rendered persist today and perpetuate links forged in the past between certain Moorish tribes, notably the Ahel Laghzel or the Barikallah, and certain fishing families from the Canaries.

In 1905 an event took place which had an immense effect on the region. As a result of the mission of Professor Gruvel (see above) the French administration decided to establish on the Baie du Cansado (an inlet of the Baie du Lévrier) a military post and a fishing station stocked with equipment for distilling sea-water. Thus originated, in 1906, by a simple governmental decree and on a desert coast totally without fresh water, the town of Port Étienne, a human creation out of the void. The establishment of Port Étienne had both political and economic results. Once Port Étienne had been established as a military post, the local inhabitants learnt that it was no longer a question of regulating one's own quarrels at pistol-point; and the pacification of the region, virtually undisturbed except by the *rezzous* of 1924 and 1927, went a long way towards establishing an atmosphere favourable to more sustained and profitable contacts between the Moors and the Canary Islanders.

The establishment of the post of Port Étienne also resulted in important developments in the form of local industries which, since they concern the salting and drying of fish for export, have created an important market and a profitable outlet for the activity of both local and foreign fishermen. These industries, however, because of the interruption of the First World War, did not really begin to be important until 1921, the date which saw the inauguration at Port Étienne of the "Société Industrielle de la Grande Pêche" (S.I.G.P.).

In order to man its installations, this powerful firm found it necessary to recruit its own crews. It commanded a fleet which it manned and officered (except for certain French metropolitan officials) with Masters and crews from the Canary Islands, with whom it was thought wise to mix some natives to be trained. The firm soon had two small units under the command of "beydane" captains; they did not belong to the clans of the tributary Imraguen, but to the warrior caste itself. They were Nagi ould Mouknas, of the Ahel Laghzel tribe, and Cheikh Ould Ayé of the Oulad Delim.

Shortly before the Second World War the S.I.G.P. was nevertheless constrained, under pressure of outside circumstances, to give up running its own ships. It confined its activities from then on to buying from independent ship-owners and fishermen the fish needed to keep its plant in operation. The contacts between Moors and Canary Islanders were kept up, but under modified conditions. The end of the war provoked a renewal of activity at Port Étienne, marked by the establishment of

new industries and of an important plan of public investment for the equipment of a fishing station. Today, 3000 or more Canary sailors man the modern fleet, largely motorized, which pays its seasonal visits to the Baie du Lévrier and the Banc d'Arguin. A small fleet based on Port Étienne has also been built up by Canary immigrants. In this way, a race of hardy fishermen has at last achieved, by peaceful means, a foothold on that Saharan coast where for so long the natives have been hostile. Scores of little units—*balandros* and *lanchas*—are now based on these shores and play an appreciable part in the economy of Port Étienne.

The "beydanes" have not been slow to take advantage of this new situation. Quite early on, the Imraguen adopted the more efficient cotton thread to replace *titarek* (*Leptadenia spartum*) in making their nets. Apart from this improvement, their fishing technique has remained the same down to the present time. But they have learnt how to salt fish, with the result that in addition to their traditional markets for dried but unsalted fish, they have acquired the new market of the Port Étienne industries, giving preference to one or the other, according to the price rates obtaining.

The noble nomads who were allied to the fishing families of the Canaries, through the small services rendered by them against dues paid, saw their customary resources growing modestly. They hit on the idea of making a profit in the off season by watching over the small boats usually left behind by the Canary fleet at the end of the season at a tariff of 25 pesetas a month. For a similar consideration they would look after the sheds of gear, drying screens and other equipment which might otherwise have been abandoned when fishing was over for the year. The chiefs and notables made a more paying thing out of their traditional rights over jetsam. But these are only the crumbs of the cake: the Moors suffer from the drawback (if they wish to extract the maximum profit from these new circumstances) of not being themselves a sea-faring people. To benefit fully, they must have the means to buy boats, and this lack was remedied by administrative action as recently as 1951. At this date, the Société Indigène de Prévoyance de la Baie du Lévrier was founded—an organization for mutual aid to which all the native inhabitants of the region may subscribe and which plays the rôle of a maritime bank. Each member wishing to acquire from a Canary Islander a small ship (*lancha* or *balandro*) for his own use, receives from the Society the necessary money advance and agrees to repay it from the products of his fishing, plus a small interest, over two years. The member is trusted to have the good sense to have himself taught the double *métier* of sailor and fisherman, if he has not done so already. The Société de Prévoyance also undertakes, for a certain consideration, and with the help of a shipwright, the slipping and repair of the *lanchas* of its members.

The boats thus acquired are used in different ways, according to whether their proprietors belong to an Imraguen community or wish to adopt the technique and the *métier* of the fishermen from the Canary Isles; the latter is the case with individuals belonging to the warrior caste of "hassane" origin, whose gun has become, with the pacification, an honorary emblem or a hunting weapon, rather than a means of livelihood and a social necessity. The Imraguen who, as we have seen, stick to the traditional style of fishing, use their boats to fetch and carry between their encampments—Arguin, Îles Tidra and Serenni, Presqu'île de Thila, Cap Mirik, etc.—and their principal markets at Port Étienne. They come into the port with their fish, cut up and salted, and with the botargo which they offer for sale; and they return home with the goods, and sometimes with fresh water, which they buy for their own domestic use in the shops and depots of the town.

The aristocratic warriors, fallen from glory in a society where war is neither permissible nor of any practical use, still prefer in their hearts the life of the camel-owning nomads; they enjoy its liberty of movement and feel a legitimate pride in their traditional way of life. But one must live: what is more, one must survive droughts, epidemics, locusts and the train of famine which they bring. It is fully realized that those amongst them who become sailor-fishermen are laying up a valuable insurance against these risks: once a boat is purchased, it is only a matter of using it efficiently and of making it pay dividends in the form of fish—this is where the Canary Islander comes in useful. Generally, the first crews manning the *lanchas* bought through the Société de Prévoyance are mixed, the new Moorish shipowner taking on board at least one Canary sailor from whom he will learn the art of sailing and seamanship, the art of using lines and bait, and occasionally the *filet droit*, and how to look after his boat; he must be taught, too, the different operations of cleaning fish—gutting, filleting and salting. The profits are apportioned according to the type of contract usual in the region, depending on a system of shares, to be apportioned between the owner of the boat, the crew and, on occasion, the owner of the net. The share of the Canary Islander is augmented by a bonus, more or less generous according to the extent to which the Moorish master wishes to keep in with his often more highly skilled partner. As soon as he has become owner of his ship and has learnt the job, the native fisherman is generally anxious to acquire a *filet droit*. If he is more concerned with being an owner than a fisherman, he will usually follow the approved practice of signing on a mixed crew, whose Moorish element will be chiefly concerned with preventing the Canary partners from any unreasonable cheating of the owner!

Fifteen or so *lanchas* or *balandros* of small tonnage have been bought by the “beydanes” with the financial help of the Société de Prévoyance in the first two years since its foundation. One would often be in doubt at first sight about the racial affinities of the crews, if the Moors did not cling from habit to their long hair, of which they are very proud. Although they remain faithful to the flowing and shapeless Mohammedan robes for feast days and holidays, they wear on board the cotton shorts or trousers and jerseys which are the sailor’s uniform all over the world.

It is certainly extraordinary to people who know the Sahara and the ways of its camel-owning folk, to see how many of these dyed-in-the-wool nomads are capable of adapting themselves to the seafaring economy of Port Étienne, so soon as they find it to their interest to do so. The surprise of the experts is still greater when they learn that those who take best to a life afloat are definitely not the subject people, despite their age-long connection with the sea, but their traditional warrior masters, known far and wide as the finest flower of Bedouin civilization. It is one of those unforeseeable phenomena which results from the evolution of an archaic society under the practical impact of colonization.