

## **The Hemeila Riddle: Genealogical Reconfigurations of Pre-colonial Encounters in South-Western Mauritania**

### ABSTRACT

This article will focus on a seldom-considered aspect of Saharan social contexts: the incorporation of European / Christian characters into tribal sociopolitical frameworks. Supported by data from my fieldwork, I will discuss the contemporary arguments portraying a mid-seventeenth-century woman, Hemeila, whose mother is locally recognized as a European, most probably of Iberian origin. These two women are presently incorporated in different genealogical narratives from southwestern Mauritania. The research dealt with in this article also relates to discussions of social hierarchy discussions familiar to Mauritania's Arabophone populations, with a particular focus on groups holding a "religious" (*zwaya*) status. Additionally, this article also discusses the role of the anthropologist as a producer of social facts, which, in this context, has led to a direct intervention in the reassessment of Saharan historical traditions.

### INTRODUCTION

It is now well-established that tribal structures comprise malleable forms of social aggregation, particularly in the Maghreb and in the Saharan contexts dealt with in this article, where one can distinguish "foreign" as well as "allied" structures that, together with a pervasive genealogical idiom, form a *qabila* (Arabic, "tribe"; cf. Bonte et al. 1991, Cleaveland 1998, Lindner 1982, Ould Cheikh 1985, 2014). This article will focus

on a somewhat different and much less frequently considered aspect of this debate: the incorporation of European/Christian characters within Saharan socio-political tribal framings. Supported by data from my fieldwork, I will discuss contemporary portrayals of Hemeila, a seventeenth-century woman recognized as the daughter of a European of Iberian origin, who continues to be integrated in different Arabophone social contexts from southwestern Mauritania.<sup>1</sup>

With a particular focus on groups holding a *zwaya* (religious) status, this article also relates to the discussions of social hierarchy familiar to Mauritania's Arabophone society (Bonte 1998; López Bargados 2003; McDougall 2010; Rebstock 2011; Stewart 1973).<sup>2</sup> These religious groups were closely associated with pre-colonial Euro-Saharan trading activities on the Atlantic coast and along the Senegal River delta (Ould Cheikh 1991), and this ancestral relationship continues to inform narratives involving Saharans and their reputedly European interlocutors. While this article deals primarily with historical Euro-Saharan relationships,<sup>3</sup> in a broader sense it is also concerned with localized genealogical debates among different southwestern Mauritanian *qabila*-s. This

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<sup>2</sup> Part of the Saharan community of Hassaniyya speakers, the *zwaya*, together with the *hassan* (warriors), compose the *bidan* populations of “noble” or “free” status. (*Bidan* is a plural form of the word for “white.”) This society also includes various groups of tributary status, with a clear emphasis on the *haratin* population (of slave descent), which presently forms a demographic majority. I avoid using the term “Moorish” that usually describes the whole of these populations in English, as it does not in fact exist in Hassaniyya and is of very recent (colonial) use in Mauritania.

<sup>3</sup> European presence in Mauritania dates from the mid-fifteenth century, with the construction of the Arguin castle on a small island situated to the southeast of the present-day town of Nouadhibou. This location was uninterruptedly used by the Portuguese from 1445 to 1633 (Freire 2011). For an historical overview of Arguin, see Monod 1983.

article will thus resurrect an expression by Meyer Fortes, dating back to the “segmentary age” of anthropology: “It is when we consider the lineage from within that kinship becomes decisive” (Fortes 1953: 32). It is precisely such an exercise that I feel compelled to develop through the study of Hemeila and her matrimonial itineraries.

During my fieldwork in Mauritania (2002–2015) I was often confronted with Hemeila. Being Portuguese in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania was reason enough for many of my interlocutors to lead me to local traditions that included *nsara* (Christian) characters associated with the region’s pre-colonial past. Hemeila, in particular, became a frequent topic of discussion, mainly among the *zwaya*-status families with whom I was working. While I was initially indifferent to what I considered to be minor or simply anecdotal exchanges, the fact that Hemeila was repeatedly brought up during my fieldwork transformed her into an actual research topic. I decided to interrogate her genealogical dimensions, and began to actively connect different tribal structures which I had previously observed autonomously. Rather than treating Hemeila simply as a fabled woman of European origin within a Saharan social context, Hemeila will here serve to link different southwestern Mauritanian tribal structures, attesting to the socially and historically intricate web defining this region’s Arabophone populations. In this sense, I will mainly explore the intra- and inter-tribal arguments that consolidate Hemeila’s culturalized representations, which clearly surpass the reading of genealogical discourse mainly as a complement to kinship-centered analysis (Ho 2001, Sahlins 2013, Shryock 2007). The significance of the roles attributed to Hemeila and her mother suggests a need for further questioning of the character of gendered discourses in Saharan Arabophone societies, and may have fruitful repercussions for similar research in the wider Muslim world.

Additionally, this article will also discuss the role of the anthropologist not only

as a participant observer but effectively as a producer of social facts, due to an unanticipated turn of events which led to my direct intervention in the reassessment of local historical traditions.

#### THE FATHER, “A MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES”

The narrative grounding the presence of the Idaw al-Hajj *qabila* in southwestern Mauritania (where Hemeila was born) starts with a voyage undertaken by one of the tribe’s ancestors, al-Amin ould Najib, to North Africa or the Iberian Peninsula sometime in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. All oral and written sources assume that al-Amin never returned to the Sahara, being lost either somewhere in Morocco; in the European fortifications along the North African coastline, beyond Morocco; in Gibraltar, in the Iberian Peninsula; or, according to the version most widely held at present, somewhere on his way to Mecca. This traveller is nevertheless said to have initiated the profitable trade in gum arabic between the Idaw al-Hajj and Iberian agents along the Senegal River delta (Freire 2013: 119-20). Al-Amin is reported to have guided the *nsara* (Christians) to the Senegal River, providing them with a letter to be given to his brother Atjifagha Awbak who, from then on, became responsible for the Euro-Saharan trade which developed on the shores of the Senegal River (Webb 1995a: 110). It is also accepted, and easily proven by contemporary Idaw al-Hajj interlocutors, that al-Amin left descendants in the Sahara, who today continue to identify him as their “father.”

In southwestern Mauritania some oral traditions allude to the fact that al-Amin had only one son, Mukhtar (Webb 1995a: 109-11), but the more widespread versions claim that he had two or even three sons. In my interviews with the most respected Idaw al-Hajj local historian and genealogist, Ahmad ould Sidi Muhammad (d. 2009; cf.

Tapper 1990), he named Maham, Mukhtar, and Ahmad Mailud as al-Amin's three children (Freire 2013: 169). While different Idaw al-Hajj oral traditions indicate that Maham was the eldest son of al-Amin, today's tribal leadership<sup>4</sup> claims that al-Amin's firstborn son was, in fact, Mukhtar. The more recent genealogical charts—or “private histories,” as Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh (2013) calls the contemporary trend of “commissioned” genealogies in Mauritania—portray Maham ould al-Amin as a minor figure, or, in fact, as “a man without qualities,” as is stated in Ould Hamdi's (n.d. [*circa* 1970]) genealogical essay on the Idaw al-Hajj, as well as the “official” version of events currently publicized by the Idaw al-Hajj leadership.

The present claiming of Mukhtar as al-Amin ould Najib's firstborn—despite the existence of different versions of this history (notably al-Yadali's)<sup>5</sup> that contradict it—displays an eminently cynical use of the past by current tribal leadership. The denial of a leading role for Maham removes him from the order that presently legitimates the *qabila*, placing another character in his stead, along with his descendants: Mukhtar and the Awlad Mukhtar (Sons of Mukhtar).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Associated with the Awlad Mukhtar (Sons of Mukhtar).

<sup>5</sup> Al-Yadali was an eighteenth-century author (d. 1753) who established the *zwaya* version of Saharan history, as opposed to the *hassan* hegemonic order. His famous *Shiam al-Zwaya* was later adopted by the French colonial school, creating a partition between the “honest” *zwaya* and the “irascible” *hassan* (cf. Ould Babbah 1990, in Arabic).

<sup>6</sup> One version of this plan, details of which were collected by James Webb, is very clear on the “mukhtarization” of the Idaw al-Hajj: “About 400 or 500 years ago the Ulad al-Mokhtar came to this region. The first to come was the father of the Ulad al-Mokhtar, who was named Najib. He settled in the village of Tigumatin. [...] The first individual to trade gum to the Europeans was Atfagha Awback Ould Najib, but the responsibility for dealing with the Europeans did not remain in his hands. When his brother Al-Amin had first set off for the Maghrib, Al-Amin's wife had been pregnant with a son, Al-Mokhtar; and these trade responsibilities passed to his son upon his maturity. The direct descendants of Al-Mokhtar Wuld al-Amin Wuld Najib continued to exercise authority in Trarza gum affairs up until the nineteenth century” (Webb

The memory of Maham ould al-Amin is not preserved in writing, and is essentially established through oral tradition in non-Idaw al-Hajj spheres. In this case the “calligraphic order” (Messick 1993) through which a political/genealogical statement is consolidated (Dresch 1990: 258) or even “canonized” (Goody 2000: 119-0; see also Brenner 2001; Hanna 2007; Lovejoy 2012) over time seems to contradict what Saharan oral tradition conveys and, in fact, complicates to the extreme. In this particular example, oral traditions in southwestern Mauritania go so far as to describe Maham as a translator who acted as a mediator between the Idaw al-Hajj and their European trading partners sometime in the late sixteenth century (Freire 2013: 170).

This “genealogical amnesia” (Peters 1960) regarding Maham “the translator” and the progressive imaginative use of genealogies (Shryock 1997) portraying Mukhtar, transform the latter into the legitimate heir to the *qabila*’s prosperity, after its sixteenth-century reinvention in southwestern Mauritania (in close contact with European commercial agents). Mukhtar ould al-Amin is a normalized figure, one who lacks moral density and cannot be identified with a particularly noble act. Nevertheless, he is presently positioned in line with the rest of the tribe’s patriarchs. In contrast, Maham’s role between the Idaw al-Hajj and its European partners is never emphasized. No mention is made of how he might have established contact with the *nsara* traders with whom he supposedly worked, or where he might have mastered the foreign languages that would make him known as a “translator.” Maham is in fact considered to be a “corrupt” character (according to present-day representations) for two reasons: first, he acted as a privileged interlocutor (translator) in Euro-Saharan trading operations, and second, he consummated a marriage with a woman identified as a Christian. (The latter will be discussed further below.)

It is important nevertheless to highlight the versions of this story that attribute a significant role to Maham ould al-Amin. In neighboring tribal spheres such as the Awlad Daiman, which continues to carry on the memory of Maham, the current Idaw al-Hajj version of events is overtly questioned. In this case, Maham is known through his daughter Hemeila, the Idaw al-Hajj woman who married one of the more influential patriarchs of the Awlad Sidi al-Valli, a faction (*fakhd*) of the larger Awlad Daiman *qabila*. In this particular context Hemeila is always referred to as “Hemeila mint Maham ould al-Amin ould Najib.”<sup>7</sup> The traditions associated with this woman have been passed on from generation to generation, and presently she is much better known than her father. In fact, Maham’s only special merit seems to have been that he fathered Hemeila, as one reads in the genealogy of the Idaw al-Hajj by Ould Hamdi, mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, before focusing on Hemeila and her genealogical representation, we should also consider what is presently known of her mother.

#### THE MOTHER, *IA NASRANIA*

Even if presently excluded from the Idaw al-Hajj genealogies, the character of ‘Agiga meen Barmi—Hemeila’s mother and Maham’s wife—is still clearly identifiable among the Awlad Daiman, the *qabila* which Hemeila was married into. The *al-Ansab al-Awlad Daiman* (a respected genealogical charter for the populations of southwestern Mauritania) states that Maham’s wife was “‘Agiga mint Barmi, a Spaniard, or a

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<sup>7</sup> Hemeila is in fact a very uncommon name. Etymologically, the connection to the Arabic root “hml” allows a number of possibilities: “the one who was taken”; “the forgotten”; or “freed, like a camel from a herd”, as suggested by the Saharan scholar Muhammad al-Chennafi (personal communication). Focusing on standard Arabic, Hans Wehr’s dictionary contributes other possibilities: “[...] to be bathed in tears”; “to neglect”; “to omit, leave out; to disregard, fail to consider or notice, overlook, forget; to cease to use, disuse [...]” (Wehr 1980: 1034).

Portuguese” (Ould Emmain n.d.: 14). Among the Awlad Baba Ahmad (another Awlad Daiman faction),<sup>8</sup> oral tradition also refers to ‘Agiga as a *kitabia*, a term referring to the Ahl al-Kitab or “People of the Book” (Christians and Jews); this adds the possibility of her being Jewish to an already intricate genealogy. In addition to these Jewish, Christian, and European links, some oral traditions of the Awlad Daiman also describe ‘Agiga as a *bafuria*, referring to the Bafur people thought to inhabit Mauritania before the arrival of Islam.

Resuming a fastidious debate in Saharan history, this use of the *bafur* title subsumes ‘Agiga within a broad category and a dubious genealogical project. The association with the Bafur declares an origin that could indiscriminately be Iberian, sometimes Jewish, or Berber, and one that might even be associated with superhuman qualities. ‘Agiga’s consignment to a *bafur* sphere thus points to a vague and confused past (most probably pre-Islamic; Ould Cheikh 1985: 157; Mauny 1961: 458). *Bafur* is also a term that, without being overtly pejorative, casts those associated with it into a genealogical haze that, when compared to groups holding a “legitimate” Islamic (usually meaning Arab) ancestry, disqualifies them from an ancestral connection with the Saharan territories.

A much clearer reading can be made of the term *nasrani*, which also appears in

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<sup>8</sup> The Awlad Baba Ahmed have been identified as inhabiting southwestern Mauritania since the mid-seventeenth century. They are presently composed of 3,800 individuals, with a traditional *aire d’influence* extending from the northern outskirts of the town of Mederdra to the southwestern periphery of Boutilimit, in the north. They are included in the Tachumcha tribal confederation, and are part of the Awlad Daiman *qabila* (Marty 1919: 194-5). By the mid-seventeenth century the Trarza Emirate was formed in present-day southwestern Mauritania (Curtin 1971; Ould Sa’ad 1989), and it was precisely with the first of its emirs (Ahmad bin Daman, d. *circa* 1631) that the Awlad Baba Ahmed eponym came into prominence, thus consolidating a genealogy and their present *zwaya* status (Norris 1969: 499; Freire 2014: 430-3).

the oral tradition around ‘Agiga: it is obviously associated with Christianity, and oral traditions overwhelmingly declare that ‘Agiga meen Barmi was a Christian. This is the thesis that is commonly presented in the tribal spheres her daughter Hemeila married into. This association is nevertheless always concealed by the Idaw al-Hajj,<sup>9</sup> probably confirming the doubts that some authors have raised concerning the authenticity of their Arab genealogical credentials, and their eminently Berber background (see Leriche and Ould Hamidoun 1948: 465).

According to my Idaw al-Hajj interlocutors, I would be better off directing my questions about Hemeila to the Awlad Sidi al-Valli, not them. The fact that Hemeila was married to a member of that group should, they suggested, mean that the Awlad Sidi al-Valli possessed a better knowledge of such matters, thus moving this genealogically “polluted” figure away from themselves. For the Idaw al-Hajj, Hemeila and her mother ‘Agiga are also related to Maham’s elimination as a significant genealogical character. The current Idaw al-Hajj leadership does not value any kind of “intimate” relationship with the European merchants who were nevertheless key in their economic success. The Idaw al-Hajj’s undisputable connection with European agents is currently displayed with reserve, and mainly expresses the commercial astuteness and regional prominence of the Saharan partners of this venture. As for the more intimate aspects of this relationship, although these most certainly existed, such facets were never discussed with me.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On the the amplitude of genealogical discourses and its long term objectives, see Engseng Ho (2001).

<sup>10</sup> One element which has been the focus of considerable debate in anthropological theory is the separation of economic and social spheres in “primitive societies” (Sahlins 2004: 181). The Idaw al-Hajj leadership seems to make such a claim about separate spheres. As I show below, this position nevertheless helps to reenforce the effective presence of a “generalized order” “where a clear differentiation of spheres into social and economic does not appear” (ibid.: 182).

With so few indications relating to ‘Agiga meen Barmi it is important to work around the etymological possibilities that this name might hold. The name ‘Agiga—as well as Hemeila—is used very infrequently in present-day Mauritania, and its etymology is generally associated with the term ‘*aqiqa*, a precious stone with healing properties, included in various Saharan ornamental objects. The exploration of this etymological thread points, surprisingly, to the pre-colonial European presence on the Atlantic coast of the Sahara. The ‘*aqiqa* stone is, in fact, identified as a valuable product imported to the Sahara by European merchants from the sixteenth century onwards. It is mentioned in Duarte Pacheco Pereira’s *Esmeraldo* (published in the early sixteenth century), and included in various Portuguese trading lists of this period: “*alaquequa*” (Vogt 1975: 633) is one variant spelling found here, as is “*alaqueca*” (Godinho 2008: 333, 336-8). Valentim Fernandes also refers to the *alaqueca* as one of the products exchanged at the Arguin castle (off the Saharan Atlantic coast): “The merchandise the Portuguese have there [in Arguin] are [...] red coral in round beads, *alaquecas* are worth much” (Cénival and Monod 1938: 141).<sup>11</sup> Magalhães Godinho includes the *alaqueca* alongside wheat and silver as the most valuable products exchanged along the Saharan coast (Godinho 2008: 333). Might one then associate the proper noun ‘Agiga with the remarkable stone that Portuguese merchants traded in the Sahara in the sixteenth century?

As for the name “Barmi,” three hypotheses can be suggested: the first links it to the south, and to the Waalo kingdom; a second relates Barmi to the nebulous *bafur*; and

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The fact that Maham—a trader who worked with Europeans—is currently denied a noble genealogy by the Idaw al-Hajj tribal leadership does not bring into question his role in the economic development of the *qabila*, but, instead, suggests a pronounced effort to redefine the political, economic, and social spheres of the Idaw al-Hajj, as well as the character of their regional (and in fact, transnational) alliances.

<sup>11</sup> All translations from the Portuguese are mine.

a third links it with the Tuareg, to the east. The Wolof connection can be found, *inter alia*, in Jean Boulègue's *Le Grand Jolof* (1987): "[...] each of these [Wolof] kingdoms should simultaneously be attached to a royal *geño* and a royal *meen*, called *garmi*" (Boulègue 1987: 58, my translation). *Meen garmi* was then a Wolof noble matrilineage (*idem*: 62), thus allowing a risky rapprochement between "Agiga meen Barmi" and "Agiga meen Garmi" (see also Barry 1985: 240).

A second hypothesis associates the name "Garmi" with the *bafur*. Pierre Bonte mentions this tradition and, in developing the senses of the term, links Garmi with the Adrar region of Mauritania and subsequently with the southern margins of the Senegal River:

Les Bavûr auraient été refoulés de l'Adrâr par les Lamtûna. Au cours de leur fuite, ils traversèrent le Sénégal et refoulèrent vers le sud (...). La fille du roi des Bavûr avait été faite prisonnière par les Lamtûna. Son père voulut la racheter, mais elle était enceinte de l'un des vainqueurs. Elle rentra chez elle et accoucha d'une fille appelée Garmi que son grand-père, le chef bavûr, sans enfant, maria avec un de ses lieutenants. C'est dans la lignée de cette princesse Garmi et toujours par voie utérine que furent désormais choisis les princes wolofs du Dyolof et du Cayor [...] (Bonte 1998: 197).

A third hypothesis permits to consider a much more distant eastern connection, associated with the Saharan hinterland and with the Baguirmi sultanate in Chad. Houdas and Delafosse's translation of the *Tarikh El-Fettach* (1981) point to this etymology: "برماوى c'est-à-dire 'Baguirmien'; Barma est le nom donné généralement en arabe aux habitants du Baguirmi et a ce pays" (*idem*: 194). Claudot-Hawad suggests yet another reading for the expression *bagermi*, here related with Niger's Tuareg populations:

(Lorsque) certains traits sont empruntés à une autre culture et juxtaposés ou substitués aux siens propres, on devient *bagermi*: ce terme s'applique par exemple à un Touareg qui vit en pays haoussa et mélange les deux cultures sans en avoir encore réalisé une synthèse originale; [...] les termes de *Bagermi* ou *Bagarmi* et de *Tekrur* ou *Takrur* apparaissent d'un point de vue touareg comme des concepts identitaires qui ne sont ni ethniques, ni géographiques, mais se rapportent à des paliers de croisement culturel et à des fonctions d'intermédiaires entre les sociétés. Cependant, ils ont été donnés dans différents manuscrits arabes anciens, provenant des bibliothèques de l'Afrique de l'ouest, comme des *noms propres* désignant soit des régions, des territoires et parfois des villes, soit des peuples à la localisation et aux contours souvent flous et contradictoires (Claudot-Hawad 2001: 147-8).

These possibilities, rather than affirming an undisputable conclusion, expose 'Agiga to different—non-European—spheres, underlining the fact that her present genealogical ascription is generally said to be simply *nasrani*. Nevertheless, all three hypotheses can be reconciled with the history of the Idaw al-Hajj (where 'Agiga is said to have married), even if the Wolof and the Bafur connections suggest a greater plausibility. Globally, two fundamental aspects should be emphasized: first, 'Agiga's current, almost hegemonic, association with a Christian origin (despite etymological threads that point to other directions); and second, the fact that her marriage to a prominent Idaw al-Hajj patriarch is presently hidden—or simply erased—from this *qabila*'s "official" genealogical narratives.

#### WHO WAS HEMEILA? AND TO WHOM WAS SHE MARRIED?

Chronologically situated in the mid-seventeenth century, Hemeila is today an highly esteemed figure in the three different spheres where she is presently acknowledged: the Idaw al-Hajj, the Awlad Sidi al-Valli, and the Awlad Baba Ahmad (the latter two being

part of the larger Awlad Daiman *qabila*). Hemeila is described as a “special woman,” not simply because of her enormous wealth, but mainly because of her intelligence and character. Much more than an anodyne genealogical pawn, Hemeila is, in fact, regarded as a female role model, particularly among the Awlad Daiman *qabila*, where she was married (and latter divorced). A large proportion of the Awlad Sidi al-Valli, and notably their women, identify as descendants of Hemeila and continue to value their “mother’s” unyielding position when her husband decided to remarry:

Hemeila’s descendants—a majority of this village’s women—are known to be terribly jealous because Hemeila was replaced by another woman (of servile origin). She chose, nevertheless, to leave her husband. Hemeila decided to completely forget everything that was masculine. A well, if it had a masculine name, she would not drink from.<sup>12</sup>

Taiman mint Haimin, Taguilalet (SW Mauritania), October, 2006.

Hemeila’s importance is also related to the War of Sharbubbah (1644–74).<sup>13</sup> Her son al-Valli, born out of her marriage among the Awlad Sidi al-Valli, was a commander in these battles (Norris 1969: 514) and, to the present, his descendants claim that it was due to Hemeila’s intervention that al-Valli’s wealthy Idaw al-Hajj uncles decided to support this campaign. At the end of the war (1674), Hemeila is also said to have played

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<sup>12</sup> It should also be noted that the descendants of Ibrahim (al-Kuri’s son in his second marriage) value above all the paternal role that ensured that all of his children had the same kind of education, with no distinction being made regarding the more or less “noble” origin of their mothers. Gender issues in Mauritania, and particularly the public role of women, have been a topic of interest in this region at least since Ibn Batuta’s Saharan journey (mid-fourteenth century). Regarding contemporary approaches to this topic see, for example, Fortier 2012, 2003; Tazuin 1981.

<sup>13</sup> This three-decade war continues today to mark the partition between *zwaya* status populations and their *hassan* (political) “masters.” Both the Awlad Daiman as well as the Idaw al-Hajj were allied with the *zwaya* (defeated) party in this war (Leriche and Ould Hamidoun 1948: 525).

an important role in supporting the children orphaned during Sharbubbah.

Two fundamental facts summarize what is known about Hemeila “al-Hajjia” (of Idaw al-Hajj origin): she married al-Kuri ould Sidi al-Valli (leader of the Awlad Sidi al-Valli), and she was the mother of al-Valli ould al-Kuri ould Sidi al-Valli (d. 1689, in Leriche and Ould Hamidoun 1948: 466).

Faced with the significance bestowed upon Hemeila (particularly among the Awlad Daiman), one is surprised by the fact that neither her filiation, given that both her parents are the subject of dubious genealogical speculation, nor her different matrimonial projects are uniformly understood. In justifying the genealogical complexities associated with Hemeila, many of my interlocutors claimed that, in contrast to the prevailing paternal filiation, “maternal lineage is not really relevant these days.”<sup>14</sup> If this indeed is the case, and many maternal lineages have, in fact, been lost to time due to a lack of interest in conserving them,<sup>15</sup> how is it possible that Hemeila continues to occupy such an important place in present representations of the region’s history? If one can understand the ignorance of Hemeila’s ancestors among the *qabila* where she was married, among the Idaw al-Hajj this question is scarcely comprehensible, as she was born there and returned there after her divorce. Hemeila might have been forgotten by the Idaw al-Hajj once she left to marry outside the tribe, but, paradoxically, the Idaw al-Hajj continue to prize their alliance (*‘assabiyya*) to the Awlad Sidi al-Valli precisely because of this marriage.

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<sup>14</sup> The form that representations of Hemeila and ‘Agiga take in the southwestern Mauritanian context can be tentatively linked with other related propositions, notably from the Adrar region of northern Mauritania. Nevertheless, the research that I have conducted in this region does not allow me to effectively present a structured debate over this matter, as the inclusion of European female characters in Adrarian genealogies - if acknowledged -, was a research topic which was resolutely avoided by my interlocutors in the Adrar.

<sup>15</sup> Supporting the Saharan “marked switch from semi-matrilineal kinship nomenclature to that of patrilineal eponyms” which H. T. Norris (1986: 44) dates back to the XVth century. See also Freire 2011: 58-9, and Ould Cheikh 2001: 158.

Problematizing one of the classic themes in the study of North African tribal structures, Hemeila's exogamic alliance also sheds doubt on the regional application of the model of preferential endogamic marriage.<sup>16</sup> Hemeila's marriage to al-Kuri validates an alternative strategy to the "thoughtful and proper" marriage to the father's brother's son (Barth 1954: 167; see also Khuri 1970). Hemeila's marital journey to the Awlad Daiman does not conform to the norm, and prevents this model—which is known to be applied in this region—from being regarded as prescriptive. However, more than three centuries stand between Hemeila's marriage among the Awlad Sidi al-Valli and the present day, and diverse oral traditions report this event in different ways; thus we may not effectively know its definitive characteristics. When seen either as part of an alliance between two different tribal structures, where advantages not exclusively associated with this marriage were negotiated (see Fuad 1970; Keyser 1974; Peters 1967: 274), or as a particular arrangement located in time and space, in what Pierre Bourdieu (1972), among others, has called "political marriage," the event is nevertheless most noteworthy.

In addition to her significance in southwestern Mauritanian inter-tribal affairs, Hemeila and her matrimonial strategies continue to be debated within the same *qabila*. Two autonomous fractions of the Awlad Daiman dispute a particular "use" of this woman: among the Awlad Baba Ahmad, Hemeila is significant because of the marriage of Maimuna, who is presented as Hemeila's daughter, to one of the group's patriarchs; whereas among the Awlad Sidi al-Valli, as we have seen, Hemeila's importance is due to being married to and then divorcing one of the group's patriarchs, which led to the birth of a male descendant.

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<sup>16</sup> Past or present examples of other Idaw al-Hajj women marrying outside the tribe continue to be very rare (Webb 1995b: 462).

Among the Awlad Baba Ahmad, it is said that one of the group's patriarchs, Muhamadin ould Baba Ahmad, married Maimuna mint Hemeila mint 'Agiga.<sup>17</sup>

Hemeila had a daughter and a son before her marriage to al-Kuri. I do not know anything about the son, but her daughter Maimuna was married here, to Muhamadin ould Baba Ahmad. They did not have any children. Hemeila was the only Idaw al-Hajj to be married among the Awlad Daiman. She was then married, for a second time, to al-Kuri ould Sid al-Valli, and they had a son: al-Valli ould al-Kuri ould Sidi al-Valli.

Ahmadu ould Hmaiada, Igerm (South-Western Mauritania), November 2006.

Ahmadu ould Hmaiada, a Awlad Baba Ahmad informant well-known for his proficiency in genealogical matters, affirms that Hemeila had been married once before espousing al-Kuri, from the Awlad Sidi al-Valli. This first marriage of Hemeila was supposedly consummated with a presently unknown Idaw al-Hajj relative of hers. The daughter born from this marriage is nevertheless acknowledged in the Awlad Baba Ahmed as the wife of one of the *qabila*'s patriarchs. This heterodox version pushes the Awlad Baba Ahmad closer to Hemeila, and hence to the Idaw al-Hajj, thus clearly affronting a much more consolidated tradition that regards al-Kuri as Hemeila's first and only husband. According to this version, the Awlad Baba Ahmad were the first of the Awlad Daiman to establish a relationship with the Idaw al-Hajj, rather than the Awlad Sidi al-Valli. Paradoxically, the claim which stresses the possibility that Hemeila also had a "traditional" endogamic marriage is generally unknown, or conspicuously refuted

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<sup>17</sup> This genealogical statement is particularly surprising, as the genealogies presently liable to be publicized are overwhelmingly associated with masculine filiation. In Mauritania, genealogies are today a strongly gendered construct, where female characters are rarely incorporated, and much more often omitted. Most times the mothers of important male figures are not mentioned, with special attention being clearly devoted to the preservation of the names of male ascendants (see Whitcomb 1975: 403).

by most sources in southwestern Mauritania.

This proposition also states the coexistence of two antagonistic models regarding Hemeila's marital experiences: a first marriage in the Idaw al-Hajj (probably to her patrilateral parallel cousin), and a second one in a distinct tribal universe (the Awlad Daiman). This possibility assumes a compromise that validates the application of both marital options.<sup>18</sup> Hemeila's example confirms the flexible use of matrimonial strategies among Mauritanian transhumant communities (cf. Caratini 1995), where the classic "preferential marriage" model was tested side by side with a more "political" option.

#### A CEMETERY IN SOUTHWESTERN MAURITANIA

Attempting to gather all the available data regarding Hemeila, I decided to visit the cemetery of Tindallah,<sup>19</sup> where Hemeila's grave is identified by the Idaw al-Hajj. This isolated site bears the curious distinction of being located precisely at the geographical center of the Idaw al-Hajj's *aire d'influence*, with clearly defined spaces for each of the *qabila*'s families, and where all of them are represented. Hemeila is buried alongside Maham in a spot that, despite the centuries that have passed since their deaths, is clearly marked with large tombstones (contrary to Maliki's theological recommendations of absolute discretion and containment regarding funerary marks, cf. Farias 1967: 828).

On Maham's tombstone one reads: "Maham ibn Mukhtar, known by the name Maham Abubaq."<sup>20</sup> According to all the oral versions that I had access to, the figure

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<sup>18</sup> As observed in Cyrenaica many years ago by Peters (1967: 274).

<sup>19</sup> Located in southwestern Mauritania, 25 kilometers to the north of the town of Rosso.

<sup>20</sup> He was, according to the local historian Ahmadould Sidi Muhammad, cited above, the first Idaw al-Hajj to be buried in Tindallah. On the extended readings associated with funerary rites and tomb inscriptions, see Fortier 2010, Scholler 2004, and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias' seminal *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles, and Songhay-Tuareg History* (2003).

lying next to Hemeila in Tindallah is her patrilineal parallel cousin and, if we follow the diverging Awlad Baba Ahmad version of events, possibly her first husband.

Back in Nouakchott (160 kilometers away from Tindallah), I confronted the Idaw al-Hajj leaders (here kept anonymous) with what I had found in their cemetery. I was surprised to have been able to find Hemeila's tombstone so easily, in a very old cemetery where most graves were hard to identify. There were, however, significant differences between the stone celebrating Hemeila and that of Maham. Hemeila's tombstone has a recent inscription written in the cement, while Maham's inscription has been virtually erased from his centuries-old stone. Aware of my concerns, my Idaw al-Hajj interlocutors informed me that Hemeila's tombstone was placed there, some years ago, by the imam of a neighboring village. This was supposedly a routine operation, involving the replacement of an old stone that had been broken during a particularly harsh *khريف* (the "rainy season" in southwestern Mauritania, between the months of July and September).

The author of the recent funeral inscription on Hemeila's tombstone, Ahmad al-Karim al-Zaiad, also resided in Nouakchott; trying to resolve the question of Hemeila and the two Mahams (ould al-Amin and ould Mukhtar), I met with him to ask about my findings in Tindallah. He confirmed that during the 1980s he himself had remade Hemeila's tombstone, "scrupulously copying the inscriptions found on the old one." For him, Tindallah does not belong to the Idaw al-Hajj, and their preponderance in the cemetery is relatively recent, dating likely from the sixteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Concerning my

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<sup>21</sup> According to Idaw al-Hajj traditions, Hemeila and Maham were among the oldest people buried in Tindallah, he told me, but the first man to have been buried there "was a certain Dallah, from an old group known by the name of Guaishid." This is in agreement with Leriche and Ould Hamidoun's (1948: 472) pioneer work: "Tindalha. – Du Zén. 'tin Dhalhen' = celui (puits) des Dhallen."

genealogical research, Ahmad al-Karim al-Zaiad has no doubt that there is presently much confusion concerning the name Maham:

Hemeila's father is Maham ould al-Amin ould Najib; Hemeila's 'neighbor' in Tindallah is Maham ould Mukhtar, her cousin. According to my Idaw al-Hajj relatives, Hemeila was married only once to al-Kuri, of the Awlad Sidi al-Valli.

Ahmad al-Karim al-Zaiad, Nouakchott, October 2007.

It was only a few days after my trip to Tindallah that I fully understood the effective dimension of my finding. The Awlad Sidi al-Valli women, in particular, kept asking me if it was true what people were saying. Had I actually seen Hemeila's grave? Where was this grave located? What was it like? I had treated this issue with reserve, but a comment from a friend revealed my discoveries at the cemetery. Until then I was not aware of the reach of my visit to Tindallah, nor of the impact it would have on the Awlad Sidi al-Valli, particularly the large number of the *qabila*'s women who claim to be Hemeila's descendants. My work was centered on the Idaw al-Hajj, and I had not anticipated that my curiosity would lead to such enthusiastic interest in my research among those in non-Idaw al-Hajj spheres. In fact, the Awlad Sidi al-Valli were unaware of the location of Hemeila's grave, commonly accepting that she might have been buried, or lost, somewhere in the southern margins of the Senegal River, the region to which she supposedly moved after the end of her marriage to al-Kuri, after which she was never heard from again. The discovery of her grave just fifty kilometers from the Awlad Sidi al-Valli village of Taguilalet questioned—and in fact reversed—their established ideas about what had happened to Hemeila. While the Idaw al-Hajj marked her grave in their most important cemetery, among the Awlad Sidi al-Valli nobody knew

where Hemeila was buried.<sup>22</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Hemeila's role in southwestern Mauritania is the subject of significant debate in the region: distinct tribal units dispute her presence, negotiate alliances, and explore political relationships in ways that demonstrate the complexity of Mauritania's Arabophone society. The intricacy of the discussions generated through Hemeila's example should include this case in the debates associated in particular with North African societies, regarding the different idioms allowed **to** in tribal-based social definition.

If research in Saharan contexts remains seductive for scholars interested in the study of Middle Eastern and North African tribal formations, in this article I suggest that such structures are surprisingly permeated by characters identified with a European/Christian origin. These traditions, which are related to pre-colonial Euro-Saharan encounters, are more than simple historiographic details; they are in fact fully integrated with local models and, notably, tribal idioms, that continue to be used in the region.

Regarding this issue, let us consider a suggestion by Pierre Bonte (1987) dealing with the incorporation of Saharan women into agnatic lines. Among this region's Arabophone populations such structures seem to imply the "kidnapping" of women of non-Arab ancestry (mostly, but not exclusively, of Berber descent) by Arab men. I would like to test the application of this model while considering the incorporation of Christian women into groups of Berber origin. Such an hypothesis might prove the adherence to a template of a well-known model (of Arab matrix; see Norris 1982) which

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<sup>22</sup> While preparing for my return to Nouakchott I was informed that visits to Hemeila's grave were already being prepared, and that the sole person responsible for this re-enactment of the *qabila*'s history was the anthropologist, or, in fact, Hemeila's maternal uncle.

was locally redefined: social spheres disavowed of a genealogical connection with the Arabian Peninsula seem to apply a general code (involving not only a fundamental change in the kinship structure, but something more close to an “ideology”) that is recognized as “Arab.” In this hypothesis, the Berber groups generally identified as “givers of women” (“*donneurs de femmes*,” in Bonte’s terminology), replicate a known model while also inverting their own role in this structure. If in the debate between Arabs and Berbers in the western Saharan region the latter are generally the “givers,” with the arrival of European actors groups of Berber origin (or of uncertain Arab ancestry, such as the ones incorporating Hemeila) became the “takers” (“*preneurs*”) of foreign, and in this case European, women.

If, as Pierre Bonte claimed, the more recent Saharan marriage strategies were characterized by the annulling of the feminine space by a masculine (ideologically “Arab”) genealogical project (Bonte 2002: 141; see also footnote 14), ‘Agiga meen Barmi’s marriage into the Idaw al-Hajj could in fact be understood as an assertion of their “masculine” occupation of a feminized territory, composed of European women in this case. Extending this idea to the overall context of pre-colonial Euro-Saharan relationships, ‘Agiga’s adherence to a Saharan social sphere might also affirm a local response to the Europeans’ apparently dominant role (Goody 2006) in the region.

Today the Idaw al-Hajj leadership makes an attempt to “correct” genealogical and ideological charts, guaranteeing an association with the prophetic *nasab* and creating a foundational narrative attached to northern Mauritania, considered to be the cradle of Islamic civilization in the western Saharan region. All of their efforts toward building a “respected” history and an credible Islamic identity notwithstanding, the Idaw al-Hajj are still associated with an intrinsic commercial vocation, which inevitably translates to having had a “promiscuous” collaboration with European agents from the

late sixteenth century to the colonial period. The Idaw al-Hajj's own portrayal of these relationships presents the *qabila* as a cosmopolitan group that once had advantageous exchanges with European interlocutors—as long as these encounters do not imply intimate or genealogical expressions of identity. In a famous debate articulating the connections between trading culture and historicity, Marshall Sahlins wrote, “trade does not imply the same solidarities or obligations as communion. On the contrary, trade differentiates the parties to it, defines them in terms of separate and opposed, if also complementary, interests” (Sahlins 2004: 38). This idea could indeed illustrate the ambiguities inherent in the definition of transcultural commercial relationships as presently discussed by the Idaw al-Hajj (see also Lydon 2009; Searing 2003). Their historical interactions with Europeans are presented as strictly commercial agreements that do not encroach on any other, perhaps more intimate, aspects relating to the local framing of the group. And it is probably this that explains their present-day concealment of Hemeila, Maham, and ‘Agiga as valuable genealogical characters.

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More effort in connecting your paper to wider debates on gender and beyond strictly regional context.

I find your reference to Sahlins intriguing and I remember that Sahlins made a similar point elsewhere by drawing upon Levi-Strauss' *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (In *Stone Age Economics*). You might find it useful (or not).

I was wondering if you had any illustration or a photo.

Please enter your responses to the comments made by the referee(s) in the space provided. You can use this space to document any changes you made to

the original manuscript. Please be as specific as possible in your response to the referee(s).

#### Comments to the Author

I still see this paper targeted at an audience familiar with the literature and context of the southwestern Sahara and Mauritania specifically. More effort needs to be made to explain the (what are usually seen as) **unusual specificities of gender in this context**. Again, Ibn Khaldun or Paulo de Moraes Farias could be cited **to situate matrilineal descent, the relatively public nature of women as social beings** in this context, and the Touareg or bidan contexts. : I have included the references to Moraes Farias' work (which I had forgotten...). I've nevertheless connected them with tomb epigraphs and regional history. Gender and matrilineal descent have been signaled in the work of Corinne Fortier and Aline Tauzin.

“This kind of discourse can easily be linked with the Berber figures of Zaynab (the wife of Marrakesh's Almoravid leaders Abu Bakr ben 'Umar and Yusuf ben Tashfin), or the much more famous Kahina (the Berber woman who resisted the early Arab expansion in North Africa during the remote VIIth century) (see **Norris 1982**: 51-3).

The matriarchal, and matrilineal tendency acknowledge in Saharan history, if clearly echoed in Hemeila's case, is here confined to dans l'espace clos du foyer, entendu comme une « petit tradition », « infantile », et « pas sérieuse ». Les « vrais » affirmations de l'histoire sociale du Sahara seront alors consignées par des écrits savants des érudits, de plus en plus porteurs des diplômes académiques maroquins, tunisiens ou saoudiens. Cette prépondérance d'une expérience culturelle dit arabe, gendriifié au tour de formules masculines, semple s'imposer de plus en plus, occupant les espaces du savoir - et du pouvoir - « légitimes » : soit dans l'sphère du politique, du religieux, soit en réalité, dans le contexte familiale, avec l'arrivé, par exemple, du – « moderne » - mariage polygamique comme un projet d'alliance qui est aujourd'hui devenu acceptable en Mauritanie (contre toute la tradition monogame de la région).”

I also wondered, as it seems to be indicated, what other women are remembered to have European or outsider origins in similar ways. The author seems to indicate Agiga and Hemeila are not the only women remembered in this way and a short footnote pointing to others and how they might be similar or different would be interesting. Done: “The form that the representations of Hemeila and 'Aguiga take in the southwestern Mauritanian context can be tentatively linked with other related propositions, notably identified in the Adrar region of northern Mauritania. Nevertheless, the research that I have conducted in this region does not allow me to effectively present a structured debate over this matter, as the inclusion of European female characters in Adrarian genealogies - if acknowledged -, was a research topic that was permanently boycotted/avoided/ hidden by my interlocutors in the Adrar.”

Why does Agiga being remembered as kitabia indicate Jewish, rather than Christian, origins? Why the author preferences the first religious identity over

the second needs to be explicitly stated: In the kitabia reference I state: “thus adding the possibility of being Jewish to an already intricate **genealogical plan** [rever expressão]... In addition to these Jewish, Christian and European links...”. Agiga is overwhelmingly described as a nsarania / a Christian, and in one single case she was mentioned to me as a kitabia. Knowing that kitabia -“people (woman in this case) of the book” - includes both Christians and Jews, I decided to here underline the novelty of this Jewish referential. Throughout the text I do take a “preferential” stance for the Christian identity, which is, as repeatedly mentioned, much more frequently used by my interlocutors in Mauritania, notably through the use of the expression nsara (which excludes a Jewish ancestry).

Even if the author doesn't know why, it would be interesting to hazard a guess as to why Maham was willingly forgotten from some narratives and why his brother, Mokhtar, is remembered to have been the progenitor of the Idaw al-Hajj. It's clear and fascinating that Maham was forgotten but why exactly? Because of his “corrupted” character, as he was a partner of Christians, as stated in page 6: “Maham's role between the Idaw al-Hajj and its European partners is never emphasized. No mention is made of how he might have established contact with the *nsara* traders with whom he supposedly worked, or with whom, or where, he might have mastered the foreign languages that would make him known as a “translator”.”; and page 9: “The current Idaw al-Hajj leadership does not value any kind of “intimate” relationship with the European merchants who were key in their economic success. The Idaw al-Hajj's undisputable connection with European agents is currently displayed with reserve, and mainly expresses the commercial astuteness and regional prominence of the Saharan partners of this bilateral venture. As for the more intimate aspects of this relationship, although these most certainly existed, such facets were never discussed with me.”

This article needs to connect more forcefully to the larger literature on **gender and genealogies** since, again, it seems to be aimed right now at a specialist audience.

Is there space in the conclusion to deal more strongly with the three issues at hand: 1) the place of the ethnographer in forever influencing local narratives; 2) issues of claiming prophetic descent; 3) and a shift from matrilineal to patrilineal descent? Why are all of these arguments coming out of the close reading of the Hemeila tale interesting to those not studying Mauritania?