"She is not an ʿ*Abid*"
Meanings of Race and Blackness in a Community of Slave Descendants in Southern Tunisia

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Abstract

The ʿAbid Ghbonton are a black community of slave descendants who live in southern Tunisia next to their former masters to whom they were tied under a fictive familiar bond and for whom they performed jobs occasionally for free in the post-abolition period. Nowadays, they are no longer professionally exploited, but continue to suffer from socio-economic discrimination. Being racialized as blacks because of their lack of Arab origin, they are not only relegated to socially inferior jobs but also subject to widespread racism, epitomized by the strict social rules that prohibit marriages between former masters and former slaves. Tracing the history of racialized slavery and post-abolition dynamics in Tunisia, this article analyzes the socio-cultural meanings that the ʿAbid Ghbonton accord to race, colour and blackness. It shows how race and colour attribution have changed over time among the ʿAbid Ghbonton and argues that the recently occurring normalization of mixed marriages has given a renewed importance to physical factors relative to genealogy.

Keywords: race, slavery, blackness, slave descendants, Tunisia

Introduction

"She is the friend of Marwa. She is a Ghbonton, but not an ʿAbid one",[1] said Zeira, a colourfully dressed middle-aged woman, while we were sitting on the patio of a one-storey cement house in Gosbah, a village in the pre-desert, arid environment of Southern Tunisia. While ʿ*abīd*[2] (sing. ʿ*abd*) means "slaves" in Arabic, Zeira was not referring to the judicial status of

slaves, since slavery in Tunisia was abolished in 1846: on the contrary, she was deploying a precise historical category. She used the term ʿAbid to indicate the lineage name of a Southern Tunisian tribe in order to emphasize the contrast ("she is a Ghbonton, but not an ʿAbid one"). The ʿAbid Ghbonton is the name of the lineage of slave descendants to which she herself belongs.

In Gosbah, where I carried out my field research between 2014 and 2016[3], the ʿAbid Ghbonton live alongside the Ghbonton, their former masters, but on the less fertile and less watered part of the land. At the end of the nineteenth century, the ʿAbid Ghbonton officially parted from the Ghbonton lineage, which they were believed to have served as slaves for a long time. After their manumission, they remained bonded to them in a client relationship under a pre-Islamic institution known as walaʾ. Walaʾ provided a fictive familiar tie to their former masters that entailed keeping the name of their former masters' lineage and adding "slaves" to it, but also doing sporadic domestic chores for their masters with no pay. In Zeira's imagination, the term ʿAbid refers not only to the post-abolition relationships between the two lineages, but also to their chromatic difference: the Ghbonton are white and the ʿAbid Ghbonton are black. Indeed, the term ʿabd is also used as a synonym of black. Even though black and white refer to socially-constructed colours, blackness is an everyday concern for the ʿAbid Ghbonton. With her remark, thus, Zeira was positioning a person in the highly hierarchized social universe of Southern Tunisia, marked by the historically-based triangulation between blackness, slave-descent and socio-economic marginalization.

In this article, I unpack the various features, meanings and stereotypes that shape the racial constellation of the terms ʿabd and "black" giving particular attention to the ways in which they are evoked and mobilized in the everyday lives of the ʿAbid Ghbonton. Mainstream academic scholarship on racial dynamics in the African continent has generally tended to treat "race" either as an extrinsic category imposed during the colonial conquest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or as a response to Western hegemony (Mamdani 2002), thus de-emphasizing long-standing historical and socioeconomic processes which trace a hierarchization of humanity back to ancient times. In the past decade, however, a growing number of historical and anthropological works on the questions of race, blackness, and slavery in West Africa and North Africa have begun to challenge this assumption (see, for example, Hall 2011 on Sahel, El Hamel 2013 on Morocco), showing how ideas of race in these countries are deeply rooted in the history of pre-colonial slavery.

Following these theoretical insights, I trace in the first part of this article the history of slavery, race, and colour, but also consider carefully the role of post-abolition and contemporary dynamics in shaping current ideas of race and colour. In the second part of this article, I illustrate the social meanings of race, colour, and blackness among the ʿAbid Ghbonton by tracing how these emerge in everyday life situations and conversations.

Classic works on race in the Middle East interpret social constructions of blackness mainly as a matter of absence of Arab lineage (El Hamel 2013) or as a question of class (Blin 1988) rather than, merely, colour. My ethnography complicates these theories by demonstrating how the ʿAbid Ghbonton's ideas of blackness can be understood as a social category that deploys a language of biology and physical appearance as a marker (Wade 2015). These ideas include various overlapping genealogical, historical, social-economic, and religious factors such as their slave ancestry, their absence of genealogical origin (*aṣl*) and lineage, their inferior social and occupational positions (class), their black skin, alleged immoral qualities (impiousness, violence, inclination to crime, females' sexual availability), and their lower educational status.

Whereas the current debate, globally, tends to euphemize blackness as ethnicity, I suggest that both post-abolition and contemporary dynamics in Tunisia have contributed to the blurring of racial distinctions and to a number of race-evasive strategies, adopted in order to downplay persistent forms of racism around marital alliances, but which were counterbalanced by an increasing emphasis on skin colour. To develop my argument, I compare historical and contemporary forms of racialization in Tunisia, focusing on the community of the ʿAbid Ghbonton. Analyzing their marital strategies, in particular, I argue that the ways in which racial differences are inherited today have undergone consistent changes – which did not happen in the past when slavery was still in force – giving women a more prominent role in the transmission of "race". My research was, in fact, aimed at bridging past phenomena of slavery with contemporary forms of its legacy, which reverberate mainly in the racial ideas the ʿAbid Ghbonton construct on themselves and on others. With this aim, I combined different methodologies, in order to inquire the past (analyzing pre-existing literature and archival documents) and the present (spending a prolonged period living in the slave descendants' community).

Slavery, race and blackness in Tunisia

Constructions of "race"[4], and specifically of blackness, in Tunisia followed specific pre-colonial paths and, therefore, imposing North-Atlantic racial

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4   Bruce Hall (2011) argues that even speaking of "race" in the Arab world may be confusing, as the term itself came undoubtedly with the first contacts with Westerners. He

categories to understand them would be misleading and inappropriate (Walz, Cuno 2010). Contrary to the "one drop rule" prevalent in North America[5], in which one drop of "black blood" determined the person's race and was extremely difficult to wash off (Smedley 2011), or the emphasis on colour prevalent in Brazil (Wade 2015), "race" in the Middle East, and in Tunisia in particular, was a socio-cultural construct inherited vertically according to patrilineal lines, as for Arab descent. Unlike the historical experience of slavery and post-slavery in North America, no distinct *de jure* colour divide ever developed (Brown 1967; Botte 2000): indeed, quite the contrary. For example, the Islamic institution of concubinage created a high degree of *metissage* and many opportunities for upward mobility. Beyond genealogy (his/her kinlessness and absence of an Arab ancestry) blackness also intertwined with status, occupation and physical appearance (not only skin colour, but also other bodily features such as nose shape and hair texture). More than mere colour (Blin 1988), thus, blackness was connected to the status of "geo-cultural outsider" (Jankowski 2010), and acquired over time cultural meanings that are also connected to slavery.

Tracing the history of enslaved black people in Morocco from early in the Islamic period until the early colonial period (1912-1956), Chouki El Hamel (2013) shows the deep association of blackness with slavery. He argues that blackness in North Africa was linked to the absence of an Arab lineage and low social status more than to real, epidermic characteristics (corroborating the analyses of Lewis 1990 and Hall 2011). In particular, he argues that the overlap between slavery and blackness was definitively codified in the seventeenth century with the creation by Mulay Isma'il (1672-1727) of the "Black Army" (ʿAbid al-Bukhari) to consolidate his reign and the ʿAlawite dynasty. To do so, he forcibly conscripted and enslaved all blacks on Moroccan soil, including freed blacks and *Haratin*[6], thus definitely giving the association black/enslaveable a theoretical codification

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notes that if certain words (*qawm*, people/nation; *qabīla*, tribe) can be used as an imprecise replacement of the term "race", there is neither a direct translation of the word "race" nor a specific word that is theorized and historically constructed: see Hall 2011. Similarly, Chouki El Hamel (2013, p. 98) argues against applying Western notions of race to Islam and to Moroccan history, but also mentions the word *ʿirq* is used as the translation of "race" in contemporary literature.

5   It is not my intention to juxtapose the North Atlantic and the North African systems of racialization of individuals as mutually exclusive but, undeniably, when slavery was in force both in the Americas and in Tunisia, racial ideas were identified and performed following different rules For example, historical research has shown how Islamic ideas on race were passed on to the Spanish and Portuguese, who in turn informed racial hierarchies in the New World through the institution of slavery, see Sweet 2003.

6   The term *Haratin (sing. hartani)* is generally translated as "freed blacks" or "free blacks". El Hamel (2013, pp. 109-113) defines them as descendants of the autochthonous agriculturalist population originally living in the fringes of the desert.

(Hunwick, Powell 2002). As El Hamel notes (2013, p. 13), for the first time in the history of North Africa, an official decree specifically targeted the black population, implying their duty to serve as slaves and thus setting skin colour as a precise social marker. The atrocities they perpetrated among the Moroccan population, since they were used as "shock troops", occupying territories and oppressing a resentful Moroccan population (Meyers 1977, p. 440), poignantly affected Moroccans' perception of blacks, intertwining blackness with negative stereotypes such as aggressiveness and violence.

In Tunisia, the triangulation slavery/social inferiority/blackness long precedes the French occupation (1881), dating to the Islamic conquest of North Africa (from the seventh century onwards) (Hunwick and Powell 2002). According to Bernard Lewis (1990), racial prejudice against the blacks and justifications of their enslavement drew power and legitimacy from the spread of Islam, overlapping with other sources, such as the Ancient Greek environmental theory and the Hamitic myth. Islamic references to races, however, are difficult to justify. The Quran is often quoted as the colour-blind Holy Book, since it clearly states that all people belonging to the *umma* (Islamic community of believers) are equal, regardless of any phenotypical difference.

In Tunisia, the slave trade reached its apex under Ottoman rule (1574-1881). Slaves were imported from sub-Saharan Africa and Circassia (today, the region of Russia on the north-eastern shore of the Black Sea), but were also taken in raids in the Mediterranean Sea or given as a tribute to the Arab rulers. Both black and white-skinned people were enslaved (Mrad Dali in Botte, Stella 2012). This two-tier nature of the Ottoman slave system, "black" and "white" (Toledano 1998), created a racial hierarchy within the Tunisian slave system itself, with black slaves at the bottom of the social ladder and with the term *'abd* attached predominantly to them. White-skinned slaves, called *mamālīk*, were traded from Eastern Europe or captured by corsairs and made up a class of "elite slaves" employed as concubines, eunuchs, military officials, court dignitaries and treasurers. These elite slaves could attain extremely high rank and had opportunities to be invested with honorary functions and high social class (*mansib*, see Mrad Dali 2005). In contrast, the black slaves shipped through the Sahara, called *'abid*, were relegated to socially inferior and physically demanding jobs, in agriculture and the domestic domain, which contributed to the establishment of a stereotypical link between blackness and physical strength. Black female slaves could also be employed as concubines.

As mentioned above, the institution of *concubinage* left a profound legacy in Tunisia. At the outset of the Muslim conquests, under the Umayyad caliphs (661-750 AD), the spread of a patrilineal and patrilocal system in North Africa established the paternal line as the vector by which race was inherited (Lewis 1990). Therefore, black-skinned concubines, whose status

could blur easily into that of wives,[7] could be integrated into the master's lineage. They were, in fact, purchased in order to procreate, and the children born from their relationship to the master were inserted into the father's lineage, which entailed free status and white race, even if their dark skin colour acted as a visible social marker. Concubines, therefore, contributed greatly to the racial absorption of black individuals into the host society. Islamic law granted to the mothers, the *ummahāt al-walad* (the mothers of the child) certain rights, such as the right not to be sold and the right to be manumitted on the death of their master (Hunwick and Powell 2002)[8].

Contrary to "race-kinship congruity" (Wade 2012), which assumes that both parents contribute physically to the child they conceive together, then, patrilinearity in Tunisia could convey the chance of upward social mobility and accounts for the minor visibility of Tunisia's black community today (Wright 2007). Black slaves in Tunisia, indeed, were generally more integrated than those in other countries and this may have led to a quicker genetic absorption by progressive intermarriage from generation to generation, beginning at the very moment when the slave trade came to an end, but also before abolition, principally thanks to the institution of *concubinage*.

Abolition and its aftermaths

Tunisia was the first country to abolish slavery and the slave trade in the Middle East and in the Ottoman Empire, and the decision was an internal one from within the Husaynid ruling dynasty, that is without direct pressure from Western countries. The abolition of slavery in Tunisia is conventionally dated at 1846 (see Haven 2006, Montana 2013). After abolition, however, slavery continued covertly into the twentieth century, and certain regions remained untouched by the Beylical decree. The far-seeing decision by Ahmed Bey (1835-1855) met fierce resistance, especially in southern Tunisia and in the countryside, and slaves continued to be widely employed in agricultural labour (Montana 2013). At the same time, classic forms of slavery continued to resonate in the lives of individuals, who suffered enduring and painful forms of discrimination by virtue of their slave ancestry.

Former slaves often remained in the households of their former masters as domestic servants, *wuṣfān*, (pl. of *wassif*), in some areas up to very recent

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7   On the role of wife and female slave in West Africa (Ghana) see also Brivio 2017.

8   Some concubines became so influential as to be considered like wives, and many rulers, for example Ahmed Bey of Tunisia (1835-1855), who abolished slavery, were born to a concubine captured on the island of San Pietro by corsairs in 1798, together with her sisters. Her name was Lella Djenatti, see Haven (2006) and Martini (1861).

times (for example, in the southern island of Djerba). Otherwise, slavery in the South slowly morphed into free peasantry or into other institutions. The most common post-abolition institution is that of *wala'*, a pre-Islamic patronage relationship in which freed slaves adopted the family name (*nisba*) of their former masters, often adding ʿ*abid* or *Shuwāshīn* to it. The former masters and the former slaves remained tied by a fictive familiar bond, which relationship entailed the ex-slave acquiring part of his/her master's social status (Hunwick and Powell 2002; El Hamel 2013), but s/he also had to perform occasional tasks for free, agricultural or domestic. This phenomenon lasted far beyond the post-abolition phase and in some cases led the former slaves to follow their former masters to the big cities (Mrad Dali 2005).

In urban Tunisia and in the North, privately-owned black slaves often ended up in situations of deprivation, impoverishment, vagrancy, prostitution, and peddling, since economic retrenchment prevented them finding jobs as domestic servants in the middle-upper strata of society (Montana 2013). Despite having been emancipated from slavery-like forms of labour, they suffered the painful legacy of slavery in the form of discrimination, disempowerment, and marginalization. As a consequence, non-whiteness began to be structurally linked to poverty, and to other stereotypes such as sexual excess[9] and vulgarity, inclination to crime, especially stealing and raping, violence, laziness and ugliness. The crystallization of these meanings around licentiousness and disreputability onto slave descendants, which was later extended to black people in general, went along with the socio-cultural construction of blacks as outsiders (Jankowski 2010), and thus "less pious Muslims" (Scaglioni 2017).

After Tunisia gained its independence (1956), the nation-building process initiated by Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987) stressed that all Tunisians belonged to a common Arab, Muslim and Tunisian past. This strategy proved functional to the projection of an image of Tunisia as a peaceful and stable country where racial (as well as religious or linguistic) minorities were silenced and rendered invisible (Pouessel 2012b). As a consequence of this policy, which continued under Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), no official statistics have ever been compiled, since counting diversity meant mapping inequality and deviating from the artificial "cultural monolithic nature" imposed on the country (Poussel 2012b). Today, unofficial statistics suggest that 15% of the population being black is a too low number[10].

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9   According to Dalenda and Abdelhamid Larguèche (1993), today around 10% of prostitutes in Tunis are of slave descent.

10   The number is indeed high, but its computation is inevitably flawed by the fact that it encompasses also mixed races and neglects emic self-descriptions.

Whereas discussion of race and racism had long remained a taboo topic, the legacies of the silenced history of slavery continue to affect the lives of black people. Even though not all black Tunisians come from a past of slavery (Larguèche 2003; Blin 1988), the overlapping of the labels "slave" and "black" remained ingrained in popular thinking and still affects today's black Tunisians. Contrary to Louis Blin's (1988) claim that "the absolute identification existing in North and South America between the black race and slavery never happened in the Muslim world" (Blin 1988, p. 24, *my translation*), the term "black" came to be synonymous with "African origin" and "slave", not only in Tunisia but also in countries such as Libya (Morone 2017) and Algeria (Blin 1988).

Although Tunisia has long presented itself as being colour-blind, discrimination based on skin colour is a frequent everyday reality. Dark-skinned Tunisians are underrepresented in universities and in the political arena (Pouessel 2012a,c), and interracial marriages are still a hard-to-fight taboo, especially in the South, where even public spaces seem to be divided along a colour line. Black Tunisians' limited access to secondary education also leads to lower social and occupation levels, and thus lower economic status. In spite of this shameful "culture of silence" (El Hamel 2013), black Tunisians are reported[11] to suffer painful discrimination and violent racist attacks, and racism exists without an explicit category of "race". They are called *kaḥlūsh* (blackie), *'asmar* (brown), but also *waṣīf* (servant) and even ʿ*abd* (slave) is shamefully whispered behind a black person's back. Crucially, both *waṣīf* and ʿ*abd* indicate an inferior social position more than a racial connotation.

After the 2011 uprisings that overthrew the former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), a lively debate on issues of racism and racial discrimination flourished. The Association for Equality and Development (ADAM) and *M'nemty*, the first two associations to emerge in post-revolution Tunisia committed to the eradication of racism and racial discrimination, denounced the existence of an institutional colour-coded racism and initiated a struggle to introduce a law punishing racist acts and words. Crucially, slavery remains central to their discourses and claims, and they commemorate the anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Maha, a black rights' activist, told me: "The connection to slavery is still present…here. Now they (the blacks) are called 'oh *waṣīf*' (servant) and they tell you 'oh, you come from Africa!' As if Tunisia was on another continent".

This debate, however, tends to speak of an "ethnic minority" rather than of a "racial" one (Poussel 2012b, 2012c), thus running the risk of essentializing the category of "black Tunisians", as if they were bearers of specific

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11   https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2016/6/10/tunisias-dark-history-of-racial-discrimination;   http://www.tunisia-live.net/2014/02/28/tunisias-sub-saharan-african-students-face-racism-red-tape/

cultural traits – euphemizing race as ethnicity is a global trend that started after World War II (Wade 2015, cf. Introduction). Far from being culturally distinct from the majority of the population, black Tunisians are linguistically, culturally and religiously homogenous with white Tunisians. After the renegotiation of post-slavery relations (due, for example, to neoliberal openings under Ben Ali, the burgeoning performances of the touristic sector in the 1980s, and emigration), few markers are left to identify their alleged diversity, most of them being physical features. Moreover, even the notion of a "black Tunisian community" is far from being a homogenous category within its borders, since it comprises different actors with different historical and social trajectories behind them.

In the next section, I show how ideas of "race" in the community of the ʿAbid Ghbonton (Southern Tunisia) today combine elements inherent in the history of racial slavery (mainly negative stereotypes) and contemporary new lines of racial transmission. Let me first introduce the ʿAbid Ghbonton and their historical case.

The ʿAbid Ghbonton

The ʿAbid Ghbonton were probably manumitted by the Ghbonton at the end of the nineteenth century, and as often happened in Southern Tunisia, they remained bonded to them by a *wala'* relationship, continuing to do sporadic domestic chores for them. However, they have no memory of their slave past, although they admit that "blacks were doing work for the whites…here. But it was a long time ago", as an old member of the community told me[12]. Some ʿAbid Ghbonton even deny a slave past since it is largely perceived as a painful and shameful stigma. Most probably, the ʿAbid Ghbonton are descended from slaves traded along the Ghadames route, connecting the ancient Empire of Kanem Borno with the Southern Libyan region of Fezzan, passing through the Libyan oasis of Ghadames (Savage 1992). According to Mohammed Jouily (1994), originally all groups belonging to the Ghbonton (both the ʿAbid and the non-ʿAbid) were part of the larger *qabīla* (family, big tribe) of the Ouarghemma, which is one of the largest tribes in the South-East and shared the same *shaykh* (chief) in 1893. Later, the French General Leclerc was asked to request that the President separate the tribes, a "division which was about colour" (Jouili, 1994, my translation). Each *ʿarsh* (tribe) (pl. *ʾurūsh*) – a term which is commonly deployed by Tunisians themselves in its French version *tribu* – vehemently asked to be led by their own *shaykh*, one for the whites and one for the blacks. The decision was also probably due to some incidents reported to

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12   Interview with Houssein, Gosbah, May 2016.

the French officials, when some *Shuwāshīn*[13] – a term that originally referred to the ʿAbid Ghbonton and which was generally accepted by the French officials – Ghbonton attacked other non-black members of the other tribes. The officials accepted the indigenous tribal separation more from a desire to control the unruly ʿAbid Ghbonton, than from a recognition of a colour divide (Jouily 1994).

Today, the ʿAbid Ghbonton comprise around 5,000 individuals and are divided into three tribes (*ʿurūsh*). Their oral legends tell the story of three brothers who were wandering in the South and who originated their tripartite social system. The absence of a founder, which in the Maghreb is often a *marābuṭ* (holy man), is whispered with a profound sense of shame because it places their community on a lower social ladder (Jouily 1994) and arguably points to their kinlessness and thus to their slave origin. The absence of a clearly traceable founder and genealogy, and thus of an origin (*aṣl*), mirrors the absence of honour (*sharaf)* and consequently of moral and religious authority (see also Nevola, this volume). For example, they are no longer exploited professionally, but they continue to be confined to socially inferior and morally ambiguous jobs, such as singers and musicians at weddings. They also experience in their everyday lives the enduring legacies of slavery in the forms of severe racism, geographical marginalization, and social and political discrimination.

Within the two lineages, the ʿAbid Ghbonton and the Ghbonton, strict endogamic rules prohibit marital alliances between the same lineages. As a general rule, thus, the ʿAbid Ghbonton do not get married to Ghbonton. The ʿAbid Ghbonton's limited access to women outside their community adds to the scarcity of other resources such as water and jobs. In turn, social discrimination disadvantages them on the professional and social levels. The ʿAbid Ghbonton suffer from a number of negative stereotypes: they are considered by the neighbouring white tribes to originate from Sudanic Africa. As with many other black Tunisians, they are often referred to as *ifriqiyīn* (Africans), a term that white Tunisians would never use to define themselves (see also Menin 2016, this volume). In the neighbouring town of Sidi Makhlouf, public spaces inhabited by the Ghbonton are divided along colour lines, and whites rarely socialize with blacks in cafés or mosques, let alone private spaces.

The ʿAbid Ghbonton's social and chromatic blackness is primarily an ascription from the outside, an ascription which is largely accepted and can-

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13   *Shuwāshīn* is not synonymous with *ʿabid*. Both the terms *negroes* or *Shuwāshīn* appear in documents dated 1892, drafted by French authorities during the years of the Protectorate, to refer to native blacks, mainly descendants of freed slaves. The term *ʿabid*, on the other hand, points to a more recent origin. See Bédoucha in Cartier (1984), Mrad Dali (2005), Montana (2013), Scaglioni forthcoming.

not be disentangled from their slave ancestry. In the following sections, I will try to unpack the meanings locally accorded to blackness and the ways in which the ʿAbid Ghbonton evoke and mobilize ideas of "race" and colour on the level of aesthetics and marital alliances in their everyday lives.

Meanings of blackness among the ʿAbid Ghbonton

The words of Zeira, with which I opened this article, suggested that the term ʿAbid is further fraught with a series of connotations attached to the ʿAbid Ghbonton's slave past: as a lineage name, as a post-emancipation client relationship between former masters and former slaves, and as the lack of genealogical origin (*’aṣl*). The ʿAbid Ghbonton refer to this term in their lineage name with little shame, although they do not draw a direct relationship between their name and a slave past, which is perceived as a painful stigma. "We are called ʿAbid because we sing at weddings" an octogenarian singer told me,[14] and his words reminded me of a popular expression in Tunisia, *ʿarīs bil ʿabid* ("wedding with the slaves"), which is a wedding with the musical accompaniment of traditional black musicians. The ʿAbid Ghbonton, indeed, developed a musical genre, *tayfa*, which is played by some male members of their society at weddings, both in Gosbah and outside (Ben Abdeljelil 2003).

The term ʿAbid also indicates the racial connotation and skin-colour of the ʿAbid Ghbonton. The ʿAbid Ghbonton racialize themselves as blacks and the Ghbonton as whites, thereby intertwining their ancestry with a colour-coded distinction. Black and white are commonly used by both lineages: while the Arabic term *abyaḍ* is used for whites, a number of terms describe different nuances of blackness: *’asmar* (brown), *noir* (in French, black) and *Iswid* (in Arabic, black). Both in the privacy of their households and when they gather in cafés, however, Ghbonton can use *Iswid* and ʿ*abid* to refer to the ʿAbid Ghbonton, while they employ the Arabic term *’Iswid* ("freemen") to refer to themselves, thus indicating the ways in which the "bitter legacy" (Bellagamba, Greene, Klein 2013) of slavery continues to shape the relationships between the two lineages. At times, the Ghbonton use the term ʿ*abid* as an insult.

My interlocutors often evoked this multifaceted chromatic imagination. In everyday lives and conversations, black and white are evoked, along with their moral dimensions that are informed by historical phenomena such as slavery, but which also in turn inform racism and the perception of blacks. As mentioned above, blackness is often associated with a set of negative stereotypes such as their seemingly exogenous origin (or lack thereof) and some physical

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14   Interview with Mabrouk, Gosbah, May 2016.

and moral traits – physical strength and violence, inclination to crime, especially stealing and raping, and lack of an orthodox and pious religion (Curtis IV 2014) – whereas whiteness is accorded social prestige, beauty, purity and chastity. One day, while I was sitting in a café in Gosbah with a group of Abid Ghbonton youth, they discussed the question of racism. Stressing the extent to which blackness is accorded negative meanings in everyday language, Majid, a 20-year-old ʿAbid Ghbonton blacksmith, complained: "In Tunisian you even say, what is *Barça* [the Spanish football team] doing? White or black [meaning, is it winning or is it losing]?"[15] In Majid's words above, blackness is associated with failure and whiteness with success.

Racism interlaces negative stereotypes with varying domains, such as occupational level and gender. According to Brunschvig (1965), pre-Islamic traditions, various interpretations of the different Islamic schools and everyday practice have all established a social hierarchy of jobs within the Muslim world. Blacks in Tunisia are traditionally employed in socially inferior jobs, such as musicians[16] and blacksmiths. Even though the ʿAbid Ghbonton take great pride in their musical performances at weddings, their songs reveal traces of their slave past (Scaglioni forthcoming). In one song collected by Ben Abdeljelil (2003), the bride is said to "climb up a palanquin, that with a nice saddle, and it is a black [*waṣīf*] who leads the animal", while the man is referred to as "the man of our mistress [*lella*]" (p. 375). Yassin, a young man from Gosbah who refused to follow the career of his father, a respected and talented wedding singer, explained his decision by saying: "Whites look for us at weddings because they want to be praised by us. Sometimes we even sing [to the bride] 'look how lucky you are, to get married to such a white man'!"[17]

The social inferiority which leads to the ʿAbid Ghbonton performing low-status jobs is structurally and historically connected to their lessened moral and religious authority, which is ascribed to the whole community – for example, "we even sing" said Yassin although he does not sing at all. Their lack of an orthodox and pious religion hails from their perceived "outside" origin, from sub-Saharan Africa, since slave raids took place usually in non-Muslim African lands, so being a slave came to be connected to being an unbeliever (Hunwick, Powell 2002)[18]. Their kinlessness or, more precisely, their absence of an Arab origin (*ʾaṣl*), translates into the absence of honour and into impiousness (see also Nevola, this volume), which often equates to a greater inclination to crime, a transcultural construction

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15   Interview with Majid, Gosbah, October 2015.

16   For example, Al-Ghazali associates musicians with toilet cleaners, Ihyāʾ, ed. Caire 1933, t. II, p. 76, as quoted in Brunschvig 1965.

17   Interview with Yassin, Gosbah, May 2015.

18   This does not apply solely to Tunisian blacks. Recently, for example, black refugees escaping the 2011 Libyan crisis and sheltering in refugee camps in Southern Tunisia were reported to have been victims of racist attacks by local Tunisians, who questioned their

attached to blackness (Shelby 2005). Thus, the ʿAbid Ghbonton have to struggle with all these prejudices daily, juggling with the label of slave descendant and with the preconceptions attached to it, like dishonesty, aggressiveness and lack of morality. For example, a few years ago, Ramzy, an ʿAbid Ghbonton young man from Gosbah was – probably wrongly – accused of having stolen some cash from a minibus driver of the white Ghbonton tribe, who rushed to Gosbah screaming that the *ʿabid* had stolen his money. The ʿAbid Ghbonton were appalled by the accusation, since Ramzy was a "respectful and religious man, with a long beard"[19]. The youths reacted unanimously, scornfully rejecting the accusation, and even went so far as to accuse the minibus driver of defamation, an official complaint which got nowhere.

The negative stereotypes accorded to blackness have deep roots. From the pre-abolition figure of the concubine to the post-abolition form of the prostitute, the triangulation between (freed) women slaves-blackness-sexual availability has remained ingrained in popular racial thinking. In post-abolition times, in the North and in the coastal cities, indeed, freed female slaves ended up in brothels, lacking the affiliation and protection which would allow them to navigate Tunisian society. Nowadays, many black women, especially those who live in Tunis, complain of being sexually harassed on the street because of their skin colour. ʿAbid Ghbonton women feel safer within their community, whereas outside it they perceive men as threatening, as they feel they consider them as "sexually accessible". A less strict adherence to Islamic moral rules is attributed to them, because they are considered "less piously Muslim". A middle-class, non-Ghbonton black journalist from Zarzis, in South Tunisia, confirmed to me the presence of negative racial prejudice marking the daily experience of ʿAbid Ghbonton women: "They [men on the street] catcall me saying 'Hey you, blackie, do you want to have sex with me?' I sometimes feel like my body is public"[20]. However, from my observation, at least in the countryside, the ʿAbid Ghbonton women behave in a conservative and highly religious way, similarly to their white rural female counterparts.

If the ʿAbid Ghbonton are racialized as black from outside, the dynamics of colour and racial attribution within their community reveal them to be more complex than the dichotomy white versus black suggests. In the two following examples, blackness is connected to both genealogical origin and low status. While I was discussing the issue of race with an ʿAbid Ghbonton shopkeeper in his mid-forties, he told me that "black and white are not…

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religious belonging, confident that they were sub-Saharan Christians, due to their skin colour (Scaglioni 2017).

19   Interview with Hasan, Gosbah, June 2015.
20   Interview with Houda, Tunis, June 2016.

colours for real"[21] and that some ʿAbid Ghbonton can have a lighter complexion than their alleged white counterpart but still remain "socially blacks". However, since he was running one of the three little shops in Gosbah, he was considered by his fellow countrymen as "more white than black", although nobody would challenge his social status as "black". Similarly, Zohra, an illiterate female ʿAbid Ghbonton farmer, highly concerned about her blackness, which she perceived as ugly and tried to mitigate with skin products, argued that what makes a person "black" is the fact that she/he "comes from blacks"[22] (*jāy min al-sūd*). While these examples seem to support the classic argument that physical features and skin-colour are not central in the definition of a person's "social colour" and that it is the absence of Arab antecedents and of origin (*aṣl*) that renders a person black (Hall 2011; El Hamel 2013), local marriage dynamics show that phenotype, and skin colour in particular, have acquired a renewed importance in recent years (see also, on Morocco, Menin 2016, p. 15). Moreover, social status is a fundamental element to contradistinguish racial categories amidst the ʿAbid Ghbonton. The shopkeeper manages to enlighten his complexion by accumulating economic – and social – capital within his community, confirming that whiteness is a socio-cultural construct which, in the ʿAbid Ghbonton's eyes, stands for success. Similarly, the perception of whiteness is intertwined with the educational level of individuals. Zohra, the woman particularly concerned with her appearance, used to tell me that out of her four daughters, Shaadia was the "whitest", admitting that "she was the only one who went to high school".[23]

Given the gendered spatial separation between men and women in Gosbah, I spent most of my time during fieldwork with women. Like Abu Lughod's experience in the Egyptian Western Sahara (1986), my positioning – a female, foreign researcher – gave me access to a sphere which is usually hidden from the outsiders' eyes. This provided me with deeper insights into racial dynamics, because my intensely envied whiteness was frequently brought up in conversations. Other topics I had a privileged access to were marriage alliances, being marriage a frequent topic in Gosbah's women's discourses, highly romanticized and sought after. I explore marital choices and strategies in the next section.

Aesthetics of blackness and marital choices

"Whites do not get married to blacks" people often say to explain that marriage between the ʿAbid Ghbonton and the Ghbonton is socially in-

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21   Interview with Omar, Gosbah, December 2015.
22   Interview with Zohra, Gosba, February 2015.
23   Interview with Zohra, February 2015, Gosbah.

terdicted and breaking this rule is highly disapproved. The avoidance of slave descendants in marriage choice, especially by their former masters, is the most enduring stronghold of the legacy of slavery in Southern Tunisia. As in Tunisia, in general, isogamous marriages, that is marriages marked by equality of status between the spouses, are extremely common and sought after, white families do not want black spouses for their children. A racial motive, along with the generally lower socio-economic status of blacks, renders interracial marriages uncommon although, lately, mixed marriages are being increasingly normalized in the big cities and on the coast. In the countryside, moreover, it does happen that impoverished white families agree to give their daughters to blacks, although the phenomenon is still unusual and prompts surprise and gossip. Therefore, "whites do not get married to blacks" is an oversimplification of a much more complex reality, and this ideal was called into question even inside Gosbah when the ʿAbid Ghbonton – significantly only men – started marrying white-skinned non-Ghbonton women some twenty years ago. It did not happen, however, without a certain resistance from the kins of these women, who were, however, concerned more about the poverty that marks life in Gosbah than about the stigma associated with slave-descent. For example, Selma, a white-skinned woman in her mid-thirties, originally from a village near Mednine and whose husband is from Gosbah, recalled: "My brother was worried [about my marriage] because Gosbah is not a nice place to live in"[24].

Although the majority of these women do not belong to the Ghbonton lineage, there is also one exception: Souad, a white-skinned woman belonging to the Ghbonton. Some ten years ago, Souad met Ragheb, a black Ghbonton man, on the river dividing the two communities while they were herding sheep. They fell in love and decided to get married. Usually, the ʿAbid Ghbonton claim to prefer endogamy, if not "affinity" (*muṣāhara*), which is marriage within the same sub-tribes, insofar as these marriage strategies keep tribes together. The level of consanguinity is estimated at around 25% in the rural Tunisian population (Ben M'Rad, Chalbi, 2006) and marrying external individuals may create conflicts (Jouily 1994). Although marrying with the consent of the families or tribes, which is usually approved by the *shaykh*, is the socially sanctioned and preferable choice, elopement marriages[25] are an integral aspect of life among the ʿAbid Ghbonton. These marriages are celebrated secretly and hastily, and later recognized officially by the family members. Given the firm opposition of her family, Souad had no choice but to run away from her parents and seek shelter in Gosbah to marry Ragheb and since then she has lived in the ʿAbid Ghbonton territory. However, her relocation in her husband's territory is not simply the application of the patrilocal

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24   Interview with Selma, 35 years old, Gosbah, April 2015.
25   On elopement marriages in Pakistan, see Marsden 2007.

pattern prevalent in Tunisia. After her elopement and marriage, her family rejected her and refused to have any contact with her children. Even though Souad was aware that she was going against her family's will, she probably did not expect such a harsh reaction on their part. By marrying Ragheb, indeed, she not only broke the isogamy rule, but also married an ʿabd, a descendant of former slaves, and therefore encountered a "social death".

Some twenty years ago, the ʿAbid Ghbonton (only men) started reaching out to other lineages in the surrounding area to look for brides and got married to non-Ghbonton white-skinned women. In general, in Tunisia, families are reluctant to give a daughter in marriage to a stranger – whether from another village, another lineage or another country – and marriages with non-Muslims were outlawed until 2017. While this preference is mainly connected to the patrilocal system, which entails that the bride abandons her household to live in her husband's, there are other factors. First, the custom of mahr (that is the transfer of money from the groom to the bride) is a fundamentally important operation in the establishment and consolidation of relationships between the ennesb (families related through marriage). The amount of mahr is calculated on the social status and personal qualities of the bride, and is first offered by the groom and then negotiated with the girl's father. This Islamic institution was banned under Bourguiba, who replaced the mahr of his wedding with the payment of a symbolic one dinar (currently 0,30 Euro), because he regarded it as a purchase agreement and, therefore, as an objectification of women. After the "one dinar system" was dismantled but also before that, the ʿAbid Ghbonton and many rural communities have continued the old tradition, because it is still an essential tool in creating alliances between families.

The second custom is the kafāʾa,[26] an Arabic term translatable as "equality" and used in Islamic jurisprudence in connection with marriage and marital compatibility. In the Islamic context, and therefore in Tunisia, kafāʾa was applied especially to women rather than to men, in order to prevent daughters from dishonouring their families. The desire to keep women and resources within the family has led to a very high rate of consanguinity, a phenomenon that skyrockets in the Tunisian countryside.

Arguably, exogamous marriage among the ʿAbid Ghbonton involved only men because they put much effort in finding a white-skinned partner, which represented the possibility of upward social mobility. Usually, impoverished white families are more willing to give their daughters to black men, but in Gosbah there are also foreigners, that is women coming from neighbouring countries (e.g. Algeria), who met ʿAbid Ghbonton men when they were working abroad. Coming from the outside, they tend to overlook the local

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26   On kafāʾa see Lewis (1990) and for a study on the percentages of consanguineous marriages in Tunisia see Ben M'Rad et Chalbi (2006).

dynamics of their slave ancestry. Getting married to white women enhances the social status of the ʿAbid Ghbonton in the eyes of their fellows, who tend to envy them for the supposedly "more docile nature" of their brides.

If endogamy is preferred to keep the "tribal fabric" tight, younger generations of ʿAbid Ghbonton were in fact already favouring non-Ghbonton, exogamic partners in 1994, when Mohammed Jouily conducted his ethnographical research in Gosbah. Jouily (1994) claims that young people overlooked "colour and origin" and privileged instead "educational and professional levels"; they viewed marrying white-skinned girls as a way of getting out of "marginalization and neglect" (Jouily 1994, my translation). It did not happen, however, without a certain resistance from the white women's families. For example, Ahmed, an ʿAbid Ghbonton man who got divorced from an ʿAbid Ghbonton woman, joked: "I want to marry a white woman but…their family. They don't want! I want an orphan!"[27]

When I interviewed the mixed couples of Gosbah, all the white women told me that their families were initially reluctant to accept their marriage. As is usual in Tunisia, these couples met their husbands at weddings or through familiar and friendship networks. However, they did not elope to get married since the women's families agreed to the unions, though everyone told me that, at the beginning, things were far from easy. The brides' family, especially the male members, frowned on the decision of their daughters or sisters to marry an ʿAbid Ghbonton. As in the case of Selma discussed above, the reluctance and worries on the part of the brides' families related more to the poverty of Gosbah than to the stigma attached to their lineage.

Most of these women, a dozen nowadays, come from Mednine, especially neighbouring Djerba, but some come from abroad, which means not only Algeria or Libya, but also Europe. The growth of the tourist sector in the past few decades, indeed, has led many ʿAbid Ghbonton to work on the island of Djerba as hotel attendants or barmen, and many got acquainted with foreigners whom they later married. If marrying a white-skinned woman gives the husband great prestige, marrying a Western woman is considered the peak of a man's ambitions in life, as it enables him to migrate and look for a better life and job opportunities abroad.

These changed social dynamics have contributed to the transformation of local ideas of "race" and physical markers such as skin colour, hair texture, facial features etc., have become increasingly important in the definition of a person's social colour within the community of the Abid Ghbonton. Nowadays, the ʿAbid Ghbonton are extremely concerned about their appearance and their alleged blackness. In particular, women envy other women's whiteness and try to conceal their blackness with whitening cosmetic products. This emerges clearly from the conversation I had in Spring 2016

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27   Interview with Taha, Gosbah, May 2015.

with Hilel, a thirty-year-old woman who lives in Gosbah. Hilel's father is an ʿAbid Ghbonton man who married an Algerian woman, who is racialized as white. Even though Hilel belongs to her father's lineage and hence she inherited his social colour, she is considered as white by her fellow villagers. Indeed, with a complexion which is between white and olive-coloured, she appears whiter than many girls in Gosbah, probably also due to her massive usage of beauty products and foundation. However, when she walks down Sidi Makhlouf's streets, amidst the Ghbonton, she is regarded as black due to her genealogical origin and lineage name, which carries social meanings and kinds of blackness which are difficult to wash off. In 2015, Hilel married a black ʿAbid Ghbonton and had a baby. She was very concerned about the appearance of her one-year-old baby girl and worried that she might turn out *samrā* (brown).

My conversation with Hilel illustrates how blackness, in the ʿAbid Ghbonton's mixed offspring, is not a racial connotation inherited patrilineally in a monolithic way. On the contrary, it is expressed by contextual physical markers, which intertwine with lineage.

> Hilel: Do you like my baby girl?
> Marta: She is very beautiful.
> Hilel: Does she look like those in Gosbah?
> Marta: I don't know what you mean.
> Hilel's mother: For God's sake, tell her no! No, no!
> Marta: No!
> Hilel: Does she look like her father?
> Marta: I have never met her father!
> Hilel's brother [laughing]: The father is like that! [pointing at the grip of a coffee pot, which was of an intense black].
> Marta: I think she resembles you, especially her straight hair.
> Hilel: Mom! Mom! Have you heard what she said? She has straight hair, not curly hair!
> Marta: But even with curly hair, she would be very beautiful.
> Hilel's mother: You see! It is not a problem; she is telling it!

The obsession of Hilel about her baby shows how being an ʿAbid Ghbonton means having certain physical characteristics, as her question – "does she *look like* those in Gosbah?" – clearly suggests. The essentialization of being ʿAbid Ghbonton means, for Hilel, having dark skin and curly hair. The possibility of *growing or not* with these characteristics suggests that there is a gap between "social colour" and racial attribution. Far from being inherited monolithically, racial connotations and "race" are increasingly defined by the ʿAbid Ghbonton in terms of colour and other physical markers. Moreover, the pattern of patrilinearity seems to be diluted, and women have acquired greater importance in the transmission of the blackness of offspring. Indeed, although Tuni-

sian society is still patrilineal, women now have the possibility of transmitting racial changes. As mentioned we saw, Hilel is racialized as white because her mother is white, and because her skin is whiter than other ʿAbid Ghbonton. Crucially, this happens *in spite of* her father's blackness, but only *within* the ʿAbid Ghbonton community. Among the Ghbonton, indeed, she continues to be racialized as black. Similarly, Hilel's daughter has some chance of not growing as a brown (*samrā*) if her skin remained light, *even though* her father is "black as the grip of a coffee pot".

Also, nowadays ʿAbid Ghbonton, able in recent decades to marry white people outside the Ghbonton lineage, forge a new niche for children born from mixed marriages, which are considered neither black nor white. The more recent racial understanding of *metissage* contrasts with the strict patrilineal pattern, which was an inescapable vector to classify people while slavery was still in force.

A particular emphasis on the skin colour of the children of mixed couples is also expressed by Mohammed (see above the marriage between Mohammed and Selma). Mohammed describes his three children as white because they have a white mother, whereas to me they seem to be a range of browns, with the last one nearer to black and the first one nearer to white. Like Hilel, Selma is constantly checking on her children, and especially on the girl, to spot some features connected to blackness, such as dark complexion and curly hair. For example, while she was combing her hair, Selma told me timidly: "You see, her hair is growing and it is curly. She is becoming a *samrā*"[28].

These examples show that the ʿAbid Ghbonton racialize themselves as black because of their black descent, and that marriage interdictions, imposed by the Ghbonton, use colour and slave ancestry to define and distinguish the two communities, notwithstanding the physical colour of the ʿAbid Ghbonton. Blackness refers here to their lower social position and to their slave history, which remains shameful and unspoken. Within their community, however, the ʿAbid Ghbonton distinguish various nuances of blackness, maintain high hopes for their offspring and put considerable effort with whitening creams into concealing or lightening their blackness. These race-evasive strategies also comprise exogamic marriages, which are regarded as a chance of upward mobility, washing off the stigma attached to slavery.

Conclusion

Contemporary racial dynamics within the community of the ʿAbid Ghbonton, and in Tunisia more broadly, cannot be understood without consider-

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28   Interview with Selma, Gosbah, December 2014.

ing the legacies left by the centuries-long history of racialized slavery. By the rule of patriliniarity and Islamic law, children born to a black female slave and her master were considered legally free, provided that the father recognized the children, and were included in his lineage, although their skin colour acted as a visible marker of their origin. This created a highly nuanced chromatic landscape in Tunisia, which made the black community of slave descendants less visible than it is, for example, in North America. Classical theories of race (Lewis 1990; Hall 2011; El Hamel 2013), however, have always placed a strong emphasis on genealogical origin, pushing colour to the background. Current dynamics of racial intermarriage in Gosbah have altered the equilibrium between colour, genealogical origin and the slave past, and ideas of "race" seem to have acquired a more marked emphasis on bodily features, which outweighed the progressive dilution of slaves/masters descendants' relations.

For the ʿAbid Ghbonton, colour plays a key role in how they define themselves, since the marital pool available has widened, including white women. However, white women are not descendants of the ʿAbid Ghbonton's former masters, but low-status non-Ghbonton Tunisian women or foreigners not acquainted with, and involved in, the local hierarchies. Although these mixed marriages, which involve a black husband and a white wife, have opened novel paths of upward social mobility for the ʿAbid Ghbonton and have created a specific niche for mixed children, who are neither solely black nor solely white, these strategies remain limited to the lower echelons of society. Similarly, other internal race-evasive strategies, such as the use of skin-whitening products with which women comply with hegemonic beauty standards (white skin, soft hair), have little effect. For all the effort the ʿAbid Ghbonton put into concealing their blackness and that their children's bodies, they are still racialized as "socially black" from the outside.

These colour-evasive stratagems are said to have always existed, but little evidence has survived to our times. However, colour as a marker has recently gained a new importance because it has counterbalanced the dilution of the patrilineal system, which was an inescapable factor in the transmission of "race" in the past (El Hamel 2013). The white women married to the ʿAbid Ghbonton, indeed, do play a role in the transmission of their whiteness to their children, contrary to the classical pattern in force under the institution of Islamic slavery. For the ʿAbid Ghbonton, "race" and blackness still bear the profound legacy of slavery, which takes the form of negative stereotypes attached both to the skin colour and to the stigma of slave descent. Coalesced under post-abolition institutions, some racial conceptions about blackness survived covertly up to the present day, such as disreputability, sexual excess, aggressiveness, and ugliness.

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