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Saharan migrant camel herders: Znāga social status and the global age*

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ABSTRACT

In the late 20th century, 300 Mauritanian shepherds travelled to the United
Arab Emirates in order to tend the herds of some of that country's most
prominent leaders. These low-tech subjects of global migration flows were
particularly valued and sought after by their Emirati employers for their
expertise in raising camels. I analyse the forms and consequences of this
migration, focusing on the reintegration of these shepherds into Mauritanian
stratified tribal spheres following their return to the Sahara. The possibility of a
change in their social status (after a financially rewarding experience in the
Gulf) will be a central theme of this article. This issue arises from the pervasive
designation of these shepherds as a 'tributary' (*znāga*) group, through the
application of the tripartite social model that, to a large extent, still defines
Mauritania's arabophone population.

INTRODUCTION

The prominence and academic prestige of studies devoted to African
pastoral societies is now lost in a handful of exotic textbooks that date
from the first half of the 20th century. With the notable exception of
some East African contexts, these discussions may now support a
peripheral footnote, generally obscured by harsh criticisms associating
anthropological practice with various colonial projects, or replaced by

the contemporary prevalence of urban settings. This article, however, focuses on an African/Saharan pastoral context: the arabophone population of Mauritania.[1] The particular social landscape that I will endeavour to explore here is centred on a group of camel experts (shepherds, jockeys and camel trainers) who migrated in the late 20th and early 21st centuries to the United Arab Emirates, where they encountered a surprising economic bonanza.[2] This group is known in Mauritania by the term znāga, a designation referring to 'white tributaries' specialised in livestock production, which places them at the lower-status end of the vertical social hierarchy that permeates Saharan arabophone society (Marty 1919; Lériche 1955; Stewart 1973; Ould Cheikh 1985; Norris 1986; Bonte 1990; Baroja 2008 [1955]: 3–58; Hamès 2008; Rebstock 2011). This group constitutes the key focus of this article, which will centre on the local readings triggered by their return to the Sahara during the first decade of the 21st century. Close attention will be paid in particular to the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad, a qabīla (pl. qabā'il; generally translated in English as 'tribe') with a prominent role in this migratory process.

My interest in this subject was sparked by the work I had previously carried out on the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad leadership (Freire 2013: 130–49), during which I repeatedly came across fulsome praise regarding the successful re-incorporation of the tribe's znāga families which had recently returned from the Emirates (the group included about 50 families, totalling approximately 200 people). These formal assertions provided a more inclusive understanding of the group's historical social status, while at the same time signalling the possible overcoming of any restraints to intra-tribal social mobility. Initially I – naively – hoped that I could finally treat a Saharan subject where social 'antiques' such as tribal organisation, kinship-centred relations, the fastidious segmentary literature (Kuper 1982) or genealogical narratives would be nothing more than forgotten details of mere historical significance. In the end, however, due largely to the pervasiveness of social structures which are stratified on a genealogical basis, this preliminary thought proved to be inadequate in understanding the contemporary role played by the znāga population. In this sense, my argument also highlights the interest in an effectively integrated reading of globalised migration experiences. Though centred on a somewhat 'remote' geography, this article does not constitute a marginal note on the cultural singularity of a distant Muslim population. Far from framing globalisation as an eminently high-tech opening up of social and financial flows, this study defends the interest in an ethnographically centred reading of globalised

experiences, which, contrary to what has often been suggested (Werbner 1999; Ong & Collier 2007, should closely relate to 'local knowledge'.

After working in the region for more than a decade, I was surprised that it proved much more difficult to treat social status than other subjects I had previously probed in Mauritania – namely Islam and genealogical traditions. For the first time I had the experience of doors being slammed in my face, my privileged informants being incapable of helping me in any way, and of telephone calls being abruptly terminated the moment I told people about my research interests. Challenging my previous understanding, these elements pointed to the profound tensions still felt over questions directly regarding social status. They underlined, at the same time, an academic urgency in exploring this subject. My efforts, as presented throughout this article, comprise an ethnography that is not easily spelled out, and which sometimes might still seem shrouded in mystery. In this sense, the years I have devoted to this question might well not be evident from the sparse interview material presented directly. It was, in fact, very hard to simply take notes of the many long and repeated encounters I had with different migrants, or to obtain authorisation to make any sound recordings. For these reasons, the ethnography presented here replicates the sensitive and frequently 'obscure' character that this discussion still has today.

The use of the expression *znāga*, though seemingly neutralised by its inclusion in the title of an academic article, must not hide its particularly problematic meaning. In fact, the annotation by Caro Baroja in the early 1950s, stating that the word *znāga* is 'the most heinous insult' in the Sahara (Baroja 2008: 139, my translation), still seems appropriate. During my fieldwork I thus privileged the use of expressions such as 'shepherd' or 'herdsman', and only very seldom did I integrate the expression *znāga* into my interviews. It was, nevertheless, implicit in the topic and understood by the interlocutors I chose to address, as well as recognised through my knowledge of the genealogy of the particular tribe on which I was focusing.

The geographical identity of the south-western Saharan arabophone population is defined, above all, by its flexibility. This quality largely derives from their use, up to a few decades ago, of extensive nomadic routes. The people concerned understand, in a maximalist view, the area between Guelmim (in southern Morocco) and the Senegal River margins, to the west, and the area between the Atlantic Ocean and Timbuktu, to the east, as their territory. In a restricted sense, this area can be circumscribed to the political borders of the current Islamic Republic

of Mauritania. If we consider, for example, the recent development of a 'Saharawi' political structure and identity,[3] or the permeability of the southern and eastern frontiers of Mauritania, the region's population seems to continue to be committed to territories of very imprecise boundaries. This mobility of Saharan populations is today replicated, too, in different contemporary regional migrations (de Bruijn & van Dijk 2003; Choplin 2008; Ciavolella 2008), and even in a transcontinental extension to North America, Western Europe, Southern Africa or China, where Saharan communities are already recognised.

This social and geographical porosity of the western Saharan region and its populations is the backdrop for the persistent addition of the prefix 'trans-' to the word Sahara. The excessive use of this term has been recently discussed by McDougall & Scheele (2012), who stress that this label has provided a description of the Sahara and its populations mainly as a 'crossing', resulting from an intense exchange of goods and Islamic knowledge (Marfaing & Wippel 2004; Lydon 2009; Austen 2010).[4] As argued throughout this article, the understanding of an eminently Saharan social and cultural sphere that transcends the transcontinental focus is long overdue.

SAHARAN MIGRANTS IN THE EMIRATES

In the first few months of 1982, 30 Mauritanian shepherds travelled from Nouakchott to Abu Dhabi as part of a programme to recruit labour specialised in camel husbandry. Some years later it was agreed that their families would be allowed to join them, and in 1986 a new party of about 300 migrants (all of them directly or indirectly linked to pastoral activities) flew to the UAE. This group was hosted by the Emirates army and initially accommodated in a military camp. They were later relocated to the town of as-Samha ash-Sha'abīa, which was specifically conceived to receive them and which would be the base for the Mauritanian expatriate community in the Emirates (Ould Ahmed Salem 2007: 34). On top of a US$ 400 per month salary, these shepherds were offered free medical care, education and housing, with sanitation, electricity 'and even air conditioning', absolute novelties for most of them. Some years later, the number of Mauritanians in the UAE had risen to 4,000,[5] and Mohamedin ould Ahmedu (from the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad tribe), who enjoyed a privileged relationship with Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan al-Nahaīan (founder of the modern United Arab Emirates, and its leader from 1971 until his death in 2004), had become the acknowledged leader of the *znāga* community. Today, however, fewer

than a dozen Mauritanian shepherds remain in the Emirates, and all the men previously conscripted into the army and police force have also returned to Nouakchott. Following the death of Shaykh Zayid in November 2004, his heirs soon lost interest in camel production, and a swift return to the Sahara was arranged for these low-tech agents of the global migration processes.

As we know, an overwhelming part of the identity narratives and genealogical traditions of the western Saharan arabophone population reclaim an ancestral connection with the Arabian Peninsula, most of which results from bonds with Arab characters who were supposedly established in the Saharan confines some centuries ago (Norris 1962). Oddly enough, and here reversing this initial east-west transit, Mauritania's 'Bedouin' ('pastoral') credentials continued to be recognised in Arabia. When in the early 1980s Emirati officials decided to recruit workers in Mauritania, the country was seen by wealthy Arabs as a place where they could still experience some sort of a 'return to the wild', where they could spend time hunting or practicing falconry (Grégoire 2000). It was most probably as a result of this exoticised vision of the Sahara and its populations that Shaykh Zayid, who was aiming at a 'cultural revival' of his country essentially by valuing its 'traditional' camel culture, sponsored the arrival of Mauritanian herders in Abu Dhabi (Khalaf 1999, 2000; Insoll 2007).[6]

One of the protagonists of this migratory itinerary (someone who returned to Mauritania in 2007, after having worked in Abu Dhabi as a camel trainer for more than a decade) is very clear when questioned about the relationship his employers had with camels:

They are great Bedouin ['badu ata'].[7] I think they are even better than the Mauritanians, but as they became rich they stopped working directly with the animals. I am sure that was the only reason why they called us there ... I just wanted to work, and ended up flying to the Emirates almost by chance. When I left I thought I would go into the army; it was only afterwards that I learned that I would be working with Shaykh Zayid's camels. For more than ten years I was there preparing the camels, and the kids who rode them,[8] for racing. (Ould Umar 2012 int)[9]

According to all my interlocutors the recruitment of Saharan shepherds, over a time span of almost two decades, seems to have been promoted by Shaykh Zayid's particular interest in traditional desert culture (Khalaf 1999: 90, 98), a fact currently highlighted in his biographies:

When the young Zayed was growing up, there was not a single modern school anywhere along the coast. He, like his fellows, received only a basic

instruction in the principles of Islam from the local Islamic preacher, although an enthusiasm and a thirst for knowledge took him out into the desert with the Bedouin tribesmen, absorbing all he could about the way of life of the people, their traditional skills and their hard-won ability to survive under the harsh climatic conditions. These early years not only taught Sheikh Zayed about his country, they also brought him into contact with the people (...) When the first geological survey teams from foreign oil companies arrived to carry out a preliminary surface survey of the trackless wastes of Abu Dhabi's deserts, it was Sheikh Zayed who was assigned the task of guiding them (UAEC 2012, accessed 26.4.2014).

In the same tone, a young Shaykh Zayid is also described in Wilfred Thesiger's famous *Arabian Sands*:

I had been looking forward to meeting him, for he had a great reputation among the Bedu. They liked him for his easy informal ways and his friendliness, and they respected his force of character, his shrewdness, and his physical strength. They said admiringly, 'Zayid is a Bedu. He knows about camels, can ride like one of us, can shoot, and knows how to fight'. (Thesiger 2007: 268–9)

Part of the aspiration that Shaykh Zayid had for his country, in a decisive period of its history, was then centred on his 'civilisational' interest in reviving desert culture, and to that end he revitalised an ancient connection with the western Saharan confines. However, here I am treating only the last few decades of the past century and the early years of the 21st century. Today, as fewer than a dozen Mauritanian shepherds still work in the Emirates, the country's most popular sporting activities are football, car racing and golf: 'some call camel racing, falconry, and boat racing heritage sports because they hark back to Bedouin tradition' (Darraj & Puller 2009: 84–5; see also Dresch & Piscatori 2005).[10]

A SAHARAN QABĪLA AND THEIR ZNĀGA

The study of the arabophone western Saharan population has concentrated, as we know, on the analysis of hierarchically structured social configurations. Nevertheless, although the groups positioned at the lower end of this structure have recently become a focus of academic attention (Villasante-De Beauvais & Acloque 2000; Searing 2003; Leroux 2004; Seesemann 2004; Klein 2009; Rossi 2009), very few studies have centred on the *znāga* population treated in this article. Among the reasons that might justify the lack of academic interest in this particular subject, one aspect seems to stand out: the ambiguity of the tributary framing of this population. The *znāga* are to a large extent

responsible for the development of the region's herds, thus creating bonds of great proximity with the owners of these herds. These bonds are, in some cases, centuries old, and cut across a simple professional relationship to encompass, in many cases, a shared genealogical project. Another fundamental aspect, which has probably diverted attention away from this population, has to do with the colour of their skin: they are 'white tributaries' (Hall 2011; El Hamel 2012). Most observers prioritise the region's much more numerous black population of servile origin, the ḥrātīn (Lovejoy 2000; Villasante-De Beauvais & Acloque 2000; Bullard 2005; Lecocq 2005; Wright 2007; Ould Ahmed Salem 2009; McDougall 2010).

But let us now centre on the tribe that played a pivotal role in the Saharan shepherds' migration to the Gulf. The Ūlād Bāba Ahmad, known in south-western Mauritania since the mid-17th century, are today composed of about 3,800 individuals. Their recognised territory extends from the northern outskirts of the town of Mederdra, to the south-western periphery of Boutilimit, in the north. Today, a large majority of the group is permanently settled, either in the four villages they founded in the late 1990s (located 100 kilometres to the east of the capital), or in Nouakchott. The Ūlād Bāba Ahmad are historically included in the Tachumcha tribal confederation, and are also a 'fraction' of the Ūlād Daimān tribe (Marty 1919: 194–5). The informally acknowledged Berber ancestry of this group should trace their roots further to the north of the African continent, but more consolidated historical records detect them in southern Mauritania only from the mid-17th century onwards. During this crucial period the Trarza Emirate was formed in the region (Curtin 1971; Ould Sa'ad 1989; Taylor 2002), and it was precisely with the first of its emirs (Ahmad bin Damān, d. circa 1631) that the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad tribal eponym came into prominence, thus consolidating a genealogy and a status identity that is recognised to the present day as a qabīla (Norris 1969: 499; Hall 2011: 60; Freire 2013: 130–42). Consistent with the structuring of the tripartite model that followed (and is presently recognised), the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad assumed the role of 'religious officiants' (zwāya, or, more recently, 'marabouts').[11]

The vertical structure of the tribe comprises populations of different tributary status: laḥma (tributaries), or znāga (white tributaries, associated with cattle husbandry), m'allamīn ('blacksmiths'), ḥrātīn (descendants of slaves) and 'abīd (slaves). These groups are considered part of the tribal structure, even if they normally have no actual genealogical link with the tribal ancestor, thus being generally – if

euphemistically – described as 'clients' or 'allies'. Even if these groups
lack a noble ancestry, their integration and active participation in the
tribe are not compromised. In fact, this capacity to incorporate 'foreign'
families is often considered a decisive advantage,[12] as a tribe's regional
influence is often paralleled with the number of 'allies' it manages to
recruit. The Ūlād Bāba Ahmad confirm this structure. And if the
direct descendants of Bāba Ahmad evidently constitute a 'noble' group
with privileged opportunities, there are also other ways of successfully
integrating the tribe. According to the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad leadership,
there is only one fundamental prerequisite for the assimilation of
'foreign' families: adherence to the 'ethical' model drawn from the
tribal eponym (Freire 2013: 138–9). It is largely in this sense that one
must understand the presence of families of tributary status in the tribe,
and the subsequent role played by the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad leadership in
the processes that took many of the group's *znāga* (probably numbering
200 individuals) to the UAE in the late 20th century.

Proving the depth of these interconnections, one should note that,
from the first hour, the tribe's leadership decided to take a privileged
view of the 'exodus' of its shepherds to the Gulf. The younger brother of
the tribe's leader was among the first group to leave Mauritania in the
early 1980s, thus serving as a point of articulation between the
expatriate community and the tribal leadership. From Nouakchott, this
structure coordinated the recruitment of new migrants, provided small
loans and even suggested investments (mainly in property) for the
remittances that came from the United Arab Emirates.

Until quite recently the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad, today mostly sedentary,
formed an essentially transhumant community. The severe droughts
that ravaged the Sahara in the late 1970s (Swift 1977; Vermeer 1981)
have accelerated their sedentarisation, consolidating, at a national level,
the exponential development of towns such as Kiffa, Nema and, notably,
Nouakchott. From the distance of a few decades, it is now important to
consider the changes this process may have promoted.[13]

If one focuses on how sedentarisation – incomplete and very recent –
has been implemented, the complexity of the formulas currently
generated is made evident. The sedentarisation of most of the Ūlād
Bāba Ahmad has its clearest manifestation in the founding (in the late
1990s) of the villages of Igerm, Awdach and Habiballash (86, 93 and
105 kilometres from Nouakchott, on the Nouakchott–Boutilimit road)
and of Bir Jud (10 kilometres to the north of Mederdra), which are
recognised as having been built with the proceeds of the migratory
experience of their inhabitants. These communities chose to settle in

the vicinity of the urban centres of Mederdra and Boutilimit, where some have also bought property, and where their children go to school (in fact, the urban and rural spheres suffer from profound demographic fluctuations that follow the school calendar). Nevertheless, the presence of *znāga* families in these towns (among which one must also include Nouakchott) combines husbandry with activities developed in the adjacent countryside,[14] thus confirming an effective articulation between both spaces.[15] Generally, the women and children travel during the weekends to the camps or small villages where the men live, or, conversely, the men rejoin their town-based families over the weekends (replicating, in this case, the pattern once practiced in the Emirates). During the 'wet season' (*khrīf*), between the months of July and September, families usually reunite in the countryside, accompanying their herds for the very limited period of abundance in south-western Mauritania.

Another important aspect concerning the new residential structure associated with these communities relates to the fact that these recently founded villages were established in an area still associated with the tribe's 'traditional territory'. Thus, if on the one hand the *znāga* communities seem to have attained a certain degree of autonomy, they are still, in some way, respectful of a tribal-based social project that continues to frame them. The founding of villages by families of *znāga* status should, nevertheless, raise questions concerning the ties of these families with the 'masters', from whom they are today, in fact, financially independent. Importantly, however, as already stated, these recently founded villages were set up within the tribe's recognised territory, or, more rarely, on its periphery (see Figure 1). This evidence should prove that the relations between groups of *znāga* status and *bīḍān* 'masters' define degrees of association that clearly differ from a simple tributary relationship, which Pierre Bonte has described as relations of 'hierarchical alliance' (1987: 61). As mentioned above, the incorporation of *znāga* families into the tribe occurs fundamentally through their adherence to the statutory model that conjures the tribe's identity. This acceptance of the tribe's ontological programme is followed by a diversity of permanently negotiated arrangements between groups of different status and different kinship strategies, but also on the basis of a shared genealogy that can go back several centuries. These alliances seem, nevertheless, to have been decisively disputed when *znāga* families managed to buy property and to become the owners of significant herds. This process, epitomised in the founding of new villages, is undoubtedly related to the migratory remittances that came from the Gulf.
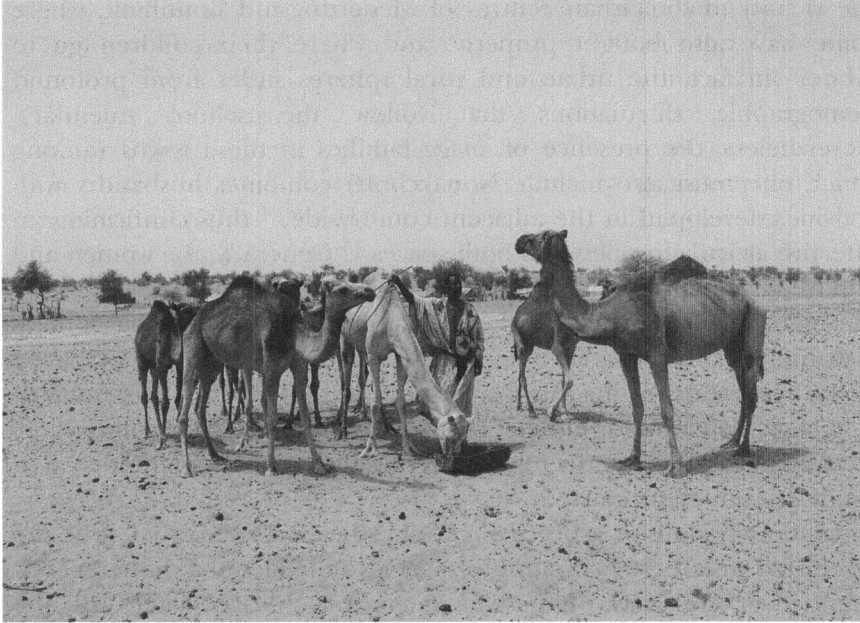
FIGURE 1

After 15 years in the UAE, a Ūlād Bāba Ahmad man, recently returned home, decided to install a new well and resume cattle and camel husbandry in south-western Mauritania. Bir Jud, March 2012. © Francisco Freire.

CAMELS AND ISLAM: THE MALLEABILITY OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Theoretically, the description of a religious status tribe from south-western Mauritania should illustrate a group dedicated to teaching, writing, missionary (da'wa) work or trade (which is not, in any way, excluded from the list of 'licit' activities). In fact, it is another particular aspect that defines the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad as a highly original case: their peculiar expertise in camel husbandry (see Monod 1967; Brauer 1993). This feature, always used in the description of the tribe, distances itself from the paradigm according to which south-western Saharan religious status groups are excluded from raising camels and therefore should dedicate themselves 'exclusively' to cattle husbandry.[16]

    This important aspect has its origins in the mid-17th century consolidation of the region's social status roles, following the founding of the Trarza Emirate (Searing 2003: 90). After the Battle of In Titam (1630 or 1631) a Bani Hassān (Arab) leadership was established in this region, and the then defeated groups (from which the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad descend) were 'condemned' to remain solely in charge of

cattle production. The – mainly ideological – association with camel culture was a right reserved to the groups of Arab genealogy that had gained political control, henceforth consolidating a separation between *ḥassān* (or 'warriors') and *zwāya* ('religious') status. The irrefutable connection between the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad and camel-raising demonstrates their proximity to the Trarza Emirate's leadership, which saw the camel as the privileged emblem of a noble 'ethic'. Following this contextualisation, the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad are thus confronted with a serious social paradox.

In fact, other inconsistencies with the 'traditional order' are to be found when we examine the current livestock production of the tribe. The interest in cattle presently shown by the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad is justified by the geographical shrinkage of pastoral routes (which severely limits the success of camel-raising) following profound ecological (and residential) transformations.[17] This contemporary shift in animal production could finally consolidate a rapprochement to the 'true' values of the *zwāya* order. But, in reality, this point was never made by my interlocutors, who simply referred to the adoption of more suitable and more profitable husbandry practices. In all Ūlād Bāba Ahmad's pasture grounds we today find both camels and cows, along with small ruminants (goats and sheep), contradicting their historically recognised specialisation in camels. Various interlocutors told me that they were already adults when they saw cows for the first time, during the 1980s; they also mentioned the rapid efforts they had to make in order to learn how to raise these animals.

Let us now consider the trait that effectively establishes the identity of the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad: their religious dimension. Some of the most notable 'talents' of 'Bāba Ahmad al-Daymānī', the tribe's eponym, are described in H.T. Norris's 'Znaga Islam':[18]

Saints such as Abā Zayd of the Īdaygub and his cousin Bāba Ahmad al-Daymānī provided food or rain when either was scarce, punished offenders by long-distance guidance of meteors and magic spells, and undertook swift journeys on holy donkeys and on flying sticks. (1969: 499)

The above quote illustrates some of the mystical dimensions that have often been recognised in the *zwāya* groups from south-western Mauritania. Based on such sources I questioned the leader of the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad, Daddah ould Mohamed Lemin, about the contemporary value of the well-known miracles of its 'father':

It is true that that dimension exists, but today people do not pay much attention to it. It might be important for other groups, but we do not attach

importance to those aspects, and never provide those kinds of service! Even in the relationship we have with our *znāga*, we never use those arguments. As we are strong, we do not need to do it! Ahmed ould Mohamed Mahmud [a previous leader of the *qabīla*], for example, did not even pray next to his *znāga*. He always tried to look strong next to them. As a matter of fact, if we show ourselves to be too religious ['maraboutique'], the *znāga* won't respect us anymore. (Ould Mohamed Lemin 2011 int.)[19]

This statement is significant as it conjugates the tribe's present-day 'official' narrative concerning its exoteric dimensions and the tributary role ascribed to communities such as the *znāga*.[20] The relation between religious practice and power is also made evident, clearly widening the region's Islamic readings to include a large spectrum of socio-cultural dimensions. To a considerable extent it is the actual religious status of the *qabīla* – as historically described – that seems to be called into question today. In reality, we are seeing a new religious framing, which some consider to be 'deculturalised' (Roy 2008: 196–7), apparently gaining ground. This new framing has located the qabīla's religious identity at completely different levels from those that 'traditionally' described the group's eponym and many of its more distinguished descendants (Cleaveland 1998). The mystical dimensions attached to the religious role of the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad today seem to be officially non-existent.

This debate should be carried out in conjunction with a wider regional adoption of versions of Islam that question the more mystical dimensions which have, until recently, largely defined religious practice in the western Sahara (Ould el-Bara 2007; Hamès 2008).[21] The Ūlād Bāba Ahmad's adherence to a 'saner' Islam (that in its political version is usually classified as 'Islamist'; see Hunwick 1997; Otayek 2011; Hill 2012; Ould Ahmed Salem 2013), still correlates, however, 'traditional' practices and 'reformist' charters of contemporary Islamic theology. Even though the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad continue to be historically associated with their extraordinary mystical powers and their success in husbandry, these representations are currently being questioned and redefined, again confirming the 'liquid' use of the Saharan status model (in this case related to a 'religious' group) and the likely dilution of any definitive features associated with pre-established orders.

BACK TO THE SAHARA, AND TO THE *QABĪLA*: SIGNIFICANT CONTINUITIES

If the discussion above suggests the need for new analytical tools or concepts, as well as the vitality of Mauritanian tribal structures, when one

focuses on the status identity of the *znāga* families recently returned from the Gulf one is often faced with seemingly unchangeable formulas. The alterations that are noticeable, for example in the models of animal husbandry, religious practice or spatial identity, have not yet been felt at the more 'intimate' levels of tribal structure, particularly if we consider intra-tribal status mobility. If the extraordinary income earned abroad was enough for many families to buy property, cars or animals (Haas 2006; Radeny *et al.* 2007), this was not sufficient to celebrate, for example, the marriage between a *znāga* man and a woman of noble/free status, even if she had considerably fewer financial resources. Notwithstanding various such attempts, such an alliance is still considered illicit (by non-*znāga*). In fact, I was repeatedly informed that the impossibility of *znāga* men marrying women of higher status was one of the most complex – and currently intractable – problems facing the group.[22]

If, on the one hand, the status of a tribe is open to change (as we have seen), its internal hierarchised programme seems, on the other hand, determined to keep its historically recognised form. According to my research, there would appear to be only two ways to accomplish an effective change of status: either through the creation of a new genealogical project (thus silencing another), consolidated possibly over the course of a century until the traces of a servile origin are lost; or through a radical change in residential location, by migrating from one's place of origin. Both options, for which we can identify various Saharan examples, imply a clean break from any tribal bonds. In fact, the Saharan tribal model still seems to lack the malleability to generate an endogenous mechanism capable of solving this most sensitive question.

But let us return to the issue of the professional requalification of the Mauritanian shepherds who migrated to the UAE. In reality, their remarkable expertise remains a fundamental asset if we consider the choices they made after their return to the Sahara: most of them remain dedicated to raising livestock. Nevertheless, a decisive transformation has taken place, given that now, unlike in the past, they own their own herds:

Today, most of them do not have the life they once had. We can find chauffeurs, guards, businessmen ... Many possess some livestock, but instead of tending the herds themselves, they leave them with relatives. All their children are now schooled, and they all know the Quran. Many of them have started to attend school in the Emirates. Their life has in fact improved a lot. It was, nevertheless, due to their capacity as
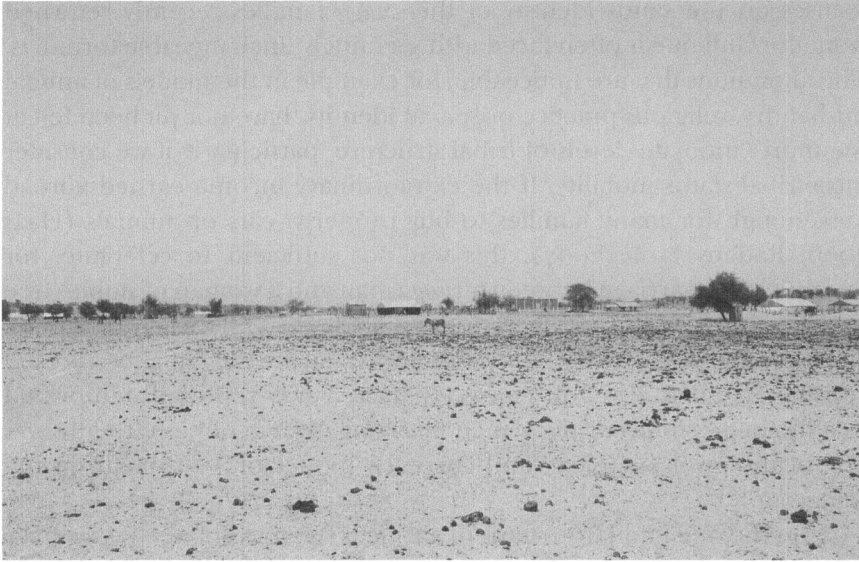
FIGURE 2

The village of Bir Jud (southwestern Mauritania), founded in the early 2000s by migrants returned from the United Arab Emirates. © Francisco Freire.

shepherds that they achieved all this. (Ould Mahand Baba ould Mazruf 2012 int.)

Today I am *guardien* in a firm in Nouakchott. I have some animals, which I leave with relatives in the village [of Bir Jud, to the north of Mederdra]. Most of us have not gone back to the countryside. I even bought a plot of land, and built a house here in Nouakchott. If I had not gone to the Emirates, perhaps I would still be in the countryside. Today I have my own animals, and I no longer have to care for the livestock of others. My family, all of my brothers, who have not been in the Emirates, they all still live in the countryside. (Ould Umar 2012 int.)

The pervasive association of the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad with an eminently rural environment should be reconciled with a connection to urban contexts, from which they extract revenue that adds to what they earn through husbandry (see Figure 2). What one now sees is a diversified residential and professional structure that conjugates urban and rural life (Bonte 2000; Ould Ahmed Salem 2001). Nevertheless, this structure does not hinder the pervasive influence of genealogically based narratives, and the possible reconversion of the social status of *znāga* populations. The 'official' statement that the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad's 'traditional leader' (*shaykh taqlīdī*) insisted on making regarding the

role of the man who once led the *znāga* community in the Emirates – and who is presently a thriving cattle owner – gives us a clear indication of the complexity of the processes at work here: 'Let me tell you this very clearly: he can represent us anywhere! He's a great, great man, and can represent us at all levels, and in any place!' (Nouakchott, 9.4.2012).

This statement might prove that a *znāga* origin does not constitute an impediment to the recognition of a 'shepherd' as the leading figure, today authorised to politically participate fully in all spheres. The importance that the 'traditional leader' now assigns to this agent can also be associated with his comfortable economic position, which might, for example, lead to severe questioning of the traditional leadership of the tribe (Barth 1986: 127). It should also be noted that it was precisely within the family circle of this 'distinct' *znāga* – a tribe's representative 'at all levels and in any place' – that a serious conflict broke out some years ago. By then, following another unsuccessful marriage attempt, it was even suggested that all tribal bonds be definitively cut due to the refusal of the bride's family to accept a *znāga* as the husband to their daughter.[23]

CONCLUSION

Despite the recent academic interest in studies of globalisation and transnational flows, much of the material presented in this article – if based on a transnational migration experience – resists an analysis exclusively focused on this perspective. The issues I have tried to address question the interpretation that consecrates the use of the pair 'cosmopolitism and globalisation' when, in fact, plenty of other concepts (such as history, nation, ethnicity and, in the particular context dealt with here, social status) also play a significant role. The processes discussed in this article do indeed support the opening of new research areas in the Saharan context, but they also reiterate questions long explored in the region. The *znāga* example confirms that their passage through the Emirates has allowed only a limited degree of emancipation from the status bonds that, in many cases, still define these families as simple 'tributaries'. Even though their recent earnings allow for decisive material improvements, as well as the guarantee of a qualified position in the political life of the tribe or the state, they still cannot accommodate the possibility of a marriage between a man of *znāga* status and a noble/free woman.

In Mauritania one can currently see ministers and even prime ministers who are known to be of tributary origin, but whose genealogy

does not disqualify them as eminent statesmen. In these specific cases, in public service, or globally, in the labyrinths defining urban life, the traditionally hierarchised social order seems to have assumed a degree of flexibility. However, as one attempts a detailed examination centred on tribal-based contexts and reflects, for example, on the adopted kinship strategies, one finds that the weight of genealogical narratives is still highly present. My experience confirms an interest in continuing to discuss status roles in contemporary western Saharan contexts, and reaffirms my reluctance to simply dismiss them as historically located regional curiosities.

The examples studied here also prove that the present academic focus on the telling issues of slavery and slave descent does not present a complete account of the many forms of adherence to the western Saharan hierarchical social model. Different forms of social mobility coincide in the efforts to question the limits established by the traditional status code or by kinship. Nevertheless, in the case of the *znāga* population it is precisely these two interconnected elements (social status and genealogy) that seem to halt the much-desired possibility of intra-tribal social mobility. This issue is, as we have seen, widely noticed, and furthermore identified by the tribal leaderships as the generator of profound tensions. Therefore, it is argued here that despite the recognised inefficiencies of studies focusing, for example, on the segmentary model, or on a totalising qualification of kinship – which was once identified as 'the most fundamental organising principle of Arab society' (Rosenthal 1993: 967; see also Conte & Walentowitz 2009) – such difficulties should not prevent the conduct of research in these particular fields, which continue to present themselves as decisive elements in the contemporary exploration of western Saharan social contexts.

NOTES

1. Speakers of *Hassāniyya*, the lingua franca in western Sahara. This group is formed by *bīḍān* communities (etymologically the plural of 'white', and the name attributed to the populations of 'noble'/'free' status) and various groups of tributary status, with a clear emphasis on the *hrāṭīn* population (of slave descent), which presently forms a demographic majority. I avoid using the term 'Moorish' (*maure*, in French) that usually describes the whole of these populations in European languages, as it does not in fact exist in *Hassāniyya* and is of very recent (colonial) use in Mauritania.

2. The exact number of pastoral agents involved in this itinerary is difficult to establish, but it was probably around 600–800 people, mostly associated with three major tribes (*qabā'il*): Ūlād Bāba Ahmad, Tagunānt and Machduf.

3. A social and political force reclaiming sovereignty over all of the western Sahara, in a process today directly contested by Morocco (cf. Hodges 1983; Mundy & Zunes 2010).

4. This possibility is confirmed by the data presented by Lydon (2009) on the totality of the western Saharan region, despite the title that the author (an historian) gave to her work: *On*

Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa.

5. The Mauritanian community in the Emirates comprised, at this stage, besides the group of shepherds, a large contingent of military and police personnel, and a group of approximately 100 'religious professionals': teachers, judges, imams and theologians (Ould Ahmed Salem 2007).

6. The Islamic credentials of the Saharan camel shepherds (invariably complemented with a pilgrimage to Mecca during their stay in the Gulf) constituted, most probably, another important aspect for their inclusion in the UAE: they follow the Maliki dogma revered in the Emirates. For an understanding of theological production in the south-western Sahara, see Krätli & Lydon (2011), Lovejoy (2012); and, in Arabic, Ould el-Bara (2009).

7. See '*badw*' ('Bedouin'), in Coon *et al.* (1986).

8. It is worth mentioning the presence of Mauritanian children (but also Pakistani, Sudanese and Bangladeshi) in the camel-racing activities developed in the UAE. The numbers are, again, difficult to confirm, but the existing references suggest that over 1,000 children (aged between five and six) were involved in this practice. This sensitive issue was finally settled in 2006, with the direct involvement of UNICEF, resulting in the payment of indemnities to the families of most of these children by the UAE authorities (UNICEF 2007, accessed 7.3.2013). In the Gulf, human camel riders were meanwhile replaced by robot jockeys (Nawata 2005).

9. These activities were developed together with migrants of other nationalities, notably Pakistanis (Bourgey 1991; Khalaf 2010). Nonetheless, the latter supposedly did not go out with the animals, and were 'exclusively in charge of their feeding. In fact, the Mauritanians were the ones who took the camels to the pastures and who prepared them for racing' (Ould Abdrahman 2012 int.).

10. The purpose of this Arabian diversion is simply to underline the bilateral complexities of a migratory process that cannot be associated solely with the search for work by some destitute Saharans, but that also included the particular interest of some eminent UAE officials. Important work remains to be done concerning official efforts behind the recruitment of Saharan migrants in the Emirates.

11. *Zwāya* and *ḥassān* groups epitomise *bīḍān* 'social order' (Stewart 1973); the first associated with religious practice and teaching, the second with an 'Arab' 'aristocracy' that retained political supremacy over the south-western Saharan region (Sanneh 1976).

12. The depth of these bonds has long been highlighted, by, among others, Ibn Khaldûn: 'Clients and allies belong to the same category. ... [A] client(-master) relationship leads to close contact exactly, or approximately in the same way, as does common descent' (Khaldûn 1989: 98).

13. As studied in other, different contexts (Azarya 1996; Bollig & Schulte 1999; Salzman 2004; Chatty 2005; Adriansen 2008).

14. Even with the massive sedentarisation of the region's populations, livestock remains a fundamental feature of Mauritania's economy (see Wabnitz 2007; Turner & Hiernaux 2008).

15. As recognised in many other African contexts (Fratkin et al. 1994; Geschiere & Gugler 1998; Choplin 2009; Fourchard et al. 2009; Kaufmann 2009).

16. 'Comme tous les Arabes, les Maures font une distinction entre les '*beggâra*' [see Holt 1986: 962], gents des bœufs, et les '*ebbâla*', éleveurs de chameaux; et ils disent (...) 'les chameaux ne sont pas le bien du marabout; ce qui est le bien du marabout, c'est les bovidés" (Lériche & Ould Hamidoun 1948: 526).

17. One type of process extensively studied in East African contexts (Lewis 1975; Österle 2008; Casciarri 2009; Galvin 2009; Degen 2011).

18. This title does not relate to the *znāga* status studied in this article, but to the south-western Saharan groups of Berber ancestry, termed, like the language they spoke (Al-Chennafi 1981), by this same noun (see Hart 1997).

19. One should also note that Daddah attended Boutilimit's colonial 'Madrassa of the sons of the tribal leaders' ('*madrassa al-ūlād al-shiukh al-qabā'il*') during the late 1950s, confirming the interest the French authorities had in controlling the region's traditional leaderships (Taylor 2007; Ben Hounet 2008; Lesourd 2009).

20. Religious status groups were also characterised by their cruel treatment of tributary populations, as noted by the French adventurer René Caillié at the beginning of the nineteenth

century: 'De toutes les classes des Maures, les marabouts sont ceux qui donnent le moins et demandent le plus (...) Ils traitent leurs esclaves avec barbarie, ils ne leur donnent que des noms insultants, les frappent, exigent d'eux beaucoup de travail, ne leur fournissent que très peut de nourriture, et, pour tout vêtement, une peau de mouton' (Caillié 1996: 142–4; see also Ensel 1999).

21. If, in the neighbouring Algerian context, state-sponsored support of 'traditional' Islam was attempted in the 1990s (hoping to domesticate the militant Islamic trends) – thus 'recycling' the 'popular' baraka (Scheele 2007: 313–14; see also Rosander 1997; Brenner 2001; Soares 2004) – in the case of the Ūlād Bāba Ahmad (which can easily be extended to other Mauritanian contexts) one might think it was something more likely to have caused the 'death of the baraka'.

22. Conversely, several cases are known of znāga women who married men of free/noble status.

23. The depth of the genealogical stigma is even clearer in the case of the ḥrātīn population. The fundamental debate on this (majority) population continues to the present, with the renewed intervention of militant abolitionist groups that attempt to decisively question Saharan 'social order' (on this subject and its more recent developments, see Ould Ahmed Salem 2013).

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