Slavery and emancipation in the haalpulaar society (Mauritania).

The influence of emigrants of servile origin on social renogotiation.

Olivier Leservoisier

N.B : This is my oral presentation and not my written version.

Slavery is a topical issue in Mauritania. For instance, the latest official abolition of slavery only dates back to 1981 and more recently the Mauritanian National Assembly adopted, on August the 8th, 2007, a law making slavery a crime. Another example would be, that more and more movements of emancipation among the descendants of slaves, in Moorish as well as in Haalpularen societies, have developed these last years. Well, of course slavery can not be seen today as it was in the late XIXth century when masters exercised their property right on slaves. It is nonetheless true that groups of servile origin are facing various forms of discrimination which, in new contexts, are the object of more and more frequent social conflicts. These conflicts indicate the persistence of inequalities. At the same time, they also show the social changes that are occurring. That is to say that most situations of conflict are less the result of the nobles' power to force slaves to accomplish tasks, as it was the case in the past, than the consequence of the claims of the descendants of the slaves to access rights and responsibilities which had been denied them until now.

In other words, the crossing of social boundaries is the main stake today. This is what I would like to show through my presentation of political discriminations and forms of resistance. This will allow us to identify social stakes better and to show how the political action of subordinated groups reveals the influence of international actors in local political arenas.

My presentation is based on my latest studies on the situation of the descendants of slaves in the Gorgol area. This area is located in the middle valley of the Senegal river. To illustrate my purpose, I will present you one of the hardest conflicts that we have observed these last years in the Senegal river valley. Through this we see how emigrants of servile origin can support political goals in order to back a social movement. It will also show, how in spite of the persistence of the formal hierarchies, social categories are the object of renogotiation. I have to point out that the formal traditional Haalpular hierarchies are divided into three different orders: the free nobles, the professional groups and the slaves, called maccube.

Before presenting this conflict, let me say a few words about the discriminations that the descendants of slaves are facing today.

These involve essentially stereotypes, matrimony, religion, land tenure and last but more importantly the political arena.

Discriminations
Stereotypes
  This is the first type of discrimination the descendants of the slaves suffer from today. For instance, in the Haalpulaar society slaves are commonly described as having no sense of virtue, no sense of shame. These stereotypes contrast with the values of the nobles which are based on the sense of honour and the control of their emotions (pulaaku). These stereotypes tend to present the social and cultural differences as natural. This phenomenon creates a biological prejudice, which is a major obstacle to the emancipation of the descendants of slaves.

The matrimonial stake
  Matrimonial discrimination is another type of discrimination that strengthens the biological prejudice: this discrimination is expressed by the fact that marriages between nobles and maccube are not reciprocal. Let me put it simply, the nobles can find wives among the maccube but the reverse is forbidden. Noble women are not allowed to marry a man who belongs to an inferior status.

Religious discriminations
  Religious discrimination is the third kind of discrimination which the nobles use to justify their refusal to give their daughters or sisters in marriage. The maccube are often perceived as having little religious education.
  Today, in spite of ancient religious knowledge, the maccube still find it difficult to have their religious knowledge recognised by the rest of the society. The tensions operate around three different stakes.
  The first challenge concerns the function of the imam. The nobles do not generally allow the maccube to lead prayer. In certain cases the conflicts are so violent that the maccube had to build their own mosque.
  The second challenge concerns memory. The maccube who have become marabouts find it difficult to obtain the same official recognition as the noble marabouts. Today, the younger generations want more and more to honour the memory of these religious figures who belong to their group. They organise pilgrimages (*ziara*) to honour these figures.
  Finally, the third stake deals with the fact many maccube question the masters' discourse that uses religion to maintain power relations. They question the masters' rhetoric which claims that salvation depends on their submission. A counter discourse is more and more heard to assert the equality of Muslims before God.

Land tenure discrimination
  The descendants of slaves also challenge the land tenure control, particularly since the land tenure reform of 1983. This reform, as the other land tenure laws in Africa, states that "the land belongs to the one who works on it". If this reform has not benefited the most destitute parts of the population, it's neverless true that this new legal frame has strengthened the determination of descendants of slaves to fight for their rights. It explains why, in most cases, the former masters no longer try to recover their land – which was cleared by their former slaves. The former masters now allow

the former slaves to pass on the land to their descendants providing the land remains within the linage which controls the territory.

In fact tensions occur especially when the question of land appropriation outside the community frame is at stake. This is the case when plots of land are attributed within the irrigable areas. This is also the case when plots of land are sold without the preliminary consent of the head of the lineage. In both cases, conflicts can even lead to the eviction of farmers.

Now, we come to the most important source of conflict, today.

Political discrimination
Political discrimination has been occuring in the democratisation process which started in the early 90s in Mauritania. This process has clearly raised the question of the political participation of subordinated groups.

In fact, this process has had contrasting effects among subordinated groups. On the one hand, this process meant their integration as citizens on a national scale, but on the other hand, their frequent eviction from the lists of eligible people strengthened their feeling of being marginalised.

This situation of inequality has acted as a catalyst for all the forms of disagreement which has triggered different social movements. I won't go into detail but I would like to make a few comments on the political action of these movements.

First, the development of social movements has shown that, whatever the democratic reality of a country, the institution of the right to vote and the principle of "one man one vote" played a determining role in the process of the emancipation of subordinated groups. The latter have indeed rapidly realised the importance of their demographic weight, which they use as a means of pressure during elections.

In the case of conflict with nobles on the choice of names on the lists, they can choose to transfer their votes to another list. They can even sometimes decide to leave the communities, which are called *leyyi* in Haalpulaar, to which they were attached, to create their own groups.

What are these *leyyi* ? The *leyyi* are political groups of varying sizes, each having a noble family at its head. During the history of settlement, these noble families integrated many other families and different social groups, and notably, servile populations.

Secondly, the analysis of the political action of these subordinated groups reveals the influence on the local political game of an external power. This is shown through the action of international emigrants whose financial help not only serves economic interests but can also be used to serve political goals with the aim of backing a social movement. This external influence can also be observed in the effects of the democratic process on political imaginaries : for example, more and more subordinated groups tend to claim a share of the power in the name of the principles of equality, dignity and individual skills. This claim not only concerns a participation in the new powers of the municipality but can also aim at a participation in the traditional authorities of the village. In other words, the subordinated groups adapt the right of citizenship to the power structures of a village, which was unimaginable a few years ago.

This is what happened in 2000, in the village of Jowol where some subordinated families, which called Safaalbe Hormankoobe, decided to leave the five *leyyi* to which they were attached, to create their own separate *leynol* with the aim of asserting their rights.

I would just like to point out simply without going into further details that the term of Safaalbe Hormankoobe, which literally means the Horman Moors, refers to one of the components of the servile category.

Well, the decision of these Safaalbe Hormankoobe to create their own leynol is a considerable stake because, it is on the basis of these *leyyi*, that the life of the village is built. For instance, when it comes to sharing food aid, each *leynol* must have its share. When it comes to drawing up a list of eligible people for election, each *leynol* must have a representative among the first five representatives on the list. The fact that these subordinated families wanted to found a new *leynol* caused violent reactions on the part of governing lineages who then took actions against these families.

For exemple, at the general assembly meeting, on the 15th of November 1999, heads of lineage decided to suspend « all their rights and duties in the village ». The Safaalbe Hormankoobe were thus excluded from farming cooperative, parent teacher associations, and they were deprived of food, from the world food aid programm. Some lands which had been lent to them were also confiscated. It was also decided to forbid any person of the village to attend wedding, naming or burial ceremonies.

These repressive measures were even taken in Europe against the emigrants who had supported the cause of these families. In France, relatives of these families were also excluded from emigrant associations.

You have to be aware that these emigrants played a determining role in the rise of the social movement in Jowol. In fact, the families which stayed in Jowol were able to count on the support of emigrants who have settled in France since the sixties. Following the sanctions in 1999, some of these emigrants opened several shops in Jowol to fight against the embargo. In addition, in 2002 they arranged the return of an uncle who had migrated to Gambia where he had worked as prawn fisher for 40 years, and who was asked to assist his elder brother in guarding family property in this period of insecurity.

These emigrants also helped their families to set up their own *leynol* in 2000 during an official ceremony. It's interesting to note how these families organised the nomination of their chief. It was exactly the same rules as we observe with the nobles. For exemple their chief received the insignia of power such as *lefol* (a turban) and the *nguru* (a sheep skin which he sits on). These insignia and also the dress of the chief were all white, symbol of peace. In addition to this, the *lefol* had a design which represented their belonging to the village and their identity.

In fact it shows six hearts in a line representing six lineages. The top one is that of the Safaalbe Hormankoobe where we can see the initials LSHD (*leynol* Safaalbe Hormankoobe of Djeol). The six hearts are linked to each other leading down to the main heart which is red and represents the village itself.

Here again, color is symbolic because red for the Haalpulaar is a color of bravoury and love.

This ceremony shows that the Safaalbe Hormankoobe, even though they were

aware of defying the local authorities, were nevertheless looking for a certain acknowledgment from the nobles as is suggested by the use of the symbol of peace. Here we have all the difficulty of their social movment which aims at a share in a power which can only be obtained if those who exersice the power agree to it.

The example of Jowol is a good illustration of the external influences on local issues. It also shows that power struggles between social groups occur not only at the level of the village but they also concern a wide network of agents – the youth, emigrants, administration employees -, different regional spaces – Europe, Africa – as well as several periods in time and a variety of political imaginaries.

This situation shows that social stakes have become more and more complex, because of the variety of modes of action as well as the overlapping of the different contexts which makes the possibilities of resolution of conflicts more and more difficult. The conflict has not been solved in Jowol and the attempts at mediation have all failed so far. So, one of the stakes that the haalpular society faces is to find a new form of mediation in order to settle situations of conflict and also to answer the subordinated groups' growing need for political participation.

But I would like to add that this overlapping of the different contexts also contributes to the ambivalence of political practices. In the case of Jowol, this ambivalence can be observed in the fact that the rebellious families demand a sharing of powers in the name of democratic principles but, in fact, what these families intend to do is less to topple down the current power than to participate in it, in order to obtain their share. Thus, these families have never stopped asserting that they do not want to question the internal organisation of the *leyyi*.

Finally, let me make another remark. It's about the current restructuring of chieftainships in the democratic process. Many studies have shown that these chieftainships have reproduced their power in the democratic game. But only a few studies have pointed out how, in their turn, these chieftainships have undergone attempts at restructuring based on new democratic ideas. For instance, R. Banégas has shown, in the case of Benin, how chieftainships readapted in the democratic game, with the growing number of applicants for chieftainship. We can also see this in Mauritania. In some cases, we can observe the emergence of new criteria for eligibility wich are no longer based on seniority but on competence and links with political and administratives authorities.

However what is interesting is that until now this political restructuring has no chance of being accepted unless it is initiated by the nobles, who usually do so in their own interest. But the subordinated groups are ignored, as we saw in the case of Jowol. Howewer the subordinated groups do have more opportunities to be acknowledged in the new power of the municipality, even if this remains under control. In reality, even if a certain overlapping of power does exist between chieftainships and the new municipality, there is a distinct difference between them. Applying for a post in the municipality doesn't have the same symbolic value as founding a new *leynol*. This explains why the majority of nobles cannot accept the claims made by the subordinated groups in Jowol.

In conclusion, we have seen that even if different types of discrimination still remain in play, these are being contested more and more by the claims of subordinated

groups to cross social boundaries. These claims are all the more significant because they are backed by the emigrants'actions.

But apart from this role of the emigrants there is the further question about the members of groups of servile origin who manage to obtain responsibilities in the new powers of municipalities. In fact will they change the way of using power or will they reproduce the patterns of politics ?