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Making a fortune in the Sahara (Mauritania, 1940-1970)

Céline LESOURD

The last years of the colonial era represent a turning point in West African business history. In this new history, women were no longer “mere agents” working for their lineage (extended family),¹ but brought their own “agency” to bear on becoming mobile actors in their own right. The emblematic Togolese example of the “Nana-Benzenes”² – a label commonly given to West African businesswomen – offers an example of how female traders took over the Dutch wax cloth trade [wax printed fabrics, similar to batik, popular throughout West Africa] and transformed themselves into socially recognized true businesswomen in a new professional and social urban context, making fortunes and being protected by the new postcolonial regime.³

In the towns located between Mauritania and Senegal where French military camps had been established, from the 1930s and 1940s a few *baydhāniyyat* [Moorish women] also started using the important trading routes. From Ivory Coast to France, from Saudi Arabia to Morocco, they were the pathfinders for today’s transnational businesswomen.⁴

Building on accounts⁵ of the professional trajectories and personal itineraries of four such Mauritanian pioneers, this article takes the

¹ Meillassoux 1963; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1994.

² “Benz” refers to Mercedes-Benz cars and “Nana” to “mother” in the Ewe language

³ Cordonnier 1982; Sylvanus 2006.

⁴ Bredeloup 2012.

⁵ This article reprises the title of an article by Pierre Bonte (2000). All names have been changed. Because all of these women are dead, the interviews were undertaken with members of their families and others who were there at the

reader from the *qsûr* [towns] under French colonial rule to Nouakchott, the capital created *ex nihilo* in 1960. It analyses how these women created their financial capital and developed their businesses and also seeks to understand how these *baydhâniyyat* pulled themselves out of the female social sphere, thereby sowing a little disorder in the socially codified relations between men and women. Despite their challenges to the social order, it is important to note that these success stories are also stirring narratives, almost legendary, which have been polished in the telling so as to play down any untoward episodes (notably amorous ones) in their protagonists' lives.

Rebellious heiresses and wandering lovers

The Moorish female business pioneers principally came from groups⁶ specialized in the Trans-Saharan trade: the Awlâd Bûsba', Tekna, and Smâsîd tribes.⁷ Most of them were girls from "good tents." In other words, they came from families who had a privileged position in traditional hierarchies, as the examples of Mokeltoum and Aminatou demonstrate below. On the other hand, some of these adventurous women came from groups who were considered socially subaltern, such as Lala and Meïmouna. But, whatever their origins, it is

time, during PhD fieldwork in Social Anthropology from 2002 to 2005. Only four businesswomen are presented here, because their life-stories, while similar to other women at the time, seem the most rich; references to other businesswomen who are not presented here, would only encumber the article. This article also makes use of interviews relating to powerful women, undertaken for the purposes of research on Mauritanian political and economic elites.

⁶ Moorish Mauritanian society is strongly hierarchical with, at the top of the pyramid, the Arab or warrior tribes [*hassân*] and the religious marabout tribes. A third group, dominated by the former, is formed of tributary or client groups. Each tribe can be broken down into sub-groups between whom different hierarchies can be very important. In parallel, a number of groups exist which do not form part of tribes but for whom identity is defined by their labour role: blacksmiths, griots, slaves and freedmen (*barâtins* i.e. enfranchised slaves, *bartâni* (masculine singular) or *bartaniyyâ* (female singular) (Bonte 1998; Ould Cheikh 1985).

⁷ Bonte 1998.

important to note that they all began with financial capital linked to one or more men.

Mokeltoum, an opportunistic marriage

Mokeltoum came from the town of Chinguetti, in Adrar Province. Her father, from the Tekna tribe, had traded salt from the salt pans of Idjil to Mali, a country from which he brought back other goods including textiles. His father before him had also traded on the same roads that went from Chinguetti to Timbuktu. Mokeltoum's mother came from the warrior tribe of Awlâd Qaylân and had brought up six children, two of whom were boys; Mokeltoum, the eldest child, was born in the beginning of the 1920s.

At the age of fifteen, in a context of “shortages”, as a niece remembered, the young woman left for Atar and, in somewhat opaque circumstances, met and married a French man who was 30 years older than her. To give a daughter in marriage⁸ to an infidel [*nassrani* i.e. a Christian] created such a scandal that even now people enjoy talking about it, thereby obscuring a number of liaisons also linked to the young single woman, as some of Mokeltoum's descendants admitted in this, more conventional, version. “She was so beautiful, she had a number of pretenders. It was normal that Monsieur Jean married her”. At Atar, where there was a French military camp, people who had known her at the time, whether closely or not, all agreed about the great beauty of Mokeltoum. Each person also suggested that her suitors did not stint in their generosity to conquer her. Monsieur Jean, the lucky chosen one, had trained as an engineer and was a Savoyard businessman and a politician. He was handling the affairs of a French company, the Société Industrielle de la Grande Pêche, based in Port-Etienne⁹ (Nouadhibou). A rich man, he generously looked after the family's needs during the 1940s when the Adrar region was faced with famine.¹⁰

⁸ According to contemporary witnesses, a family advisor is supposed to have authorized the marriage.

⁹ The SIGP was created in 1919 and specialized in the production of fish (Bonte 2001).

¹⁰ Bonte 1998.

In Mokektoum's extended family, everyone agreed that she began trading to meet her family's needs herself. Perhaps she also wanted to bury, or at least soften, the mistrust created by her marriage. Monsieur Jean gave her the opportunity to act on behalf of his company at Atar. At the beginning of the 1940s, the young woman took on this role and provided the town with daily groceries such as rice, sugar and tea which had all been brought from the Tanoudert warehouse to Atar by camel caravan.

Thanks to her profits, the money she earned, and the welcome help of her husband, from the 1950s Mokektoum also began to import her own trade goods using the networks made available by her official role. Because her goods followed the same route as those taken by her husband's business, she was able to take advantage of easier customs transit and transport, even though the franchise which she operated was collapsing because of competition with Lacombe, the French trading house, and the increase in Moorish commercial businesses. It was during this time that Mokektoum began to develop her own business with great success.

[His successor] Monsieur Jean (...) had married a Moorish woman called Mokektoum, a canny businesswoman who owned numerous caravans and managed important businesses at Atar; when Mokektoum went to Paris, she ordered her dresses at Dior, but at Port-Etienne she wore the blue veils of the desert.¹¹

Taking advantage of her many voyages between her two countries of residence (France – where she divided her time between Savoie and the sixteenth arrondissement in Paris – and Mauritania) Mokektoum brought back goods from Europe, placed orders from her networks created under the aegis of the SIGP and organized caravans from Port-Etienne to Atar of foodstuffs, pearls, bazin [polished cotton] and textiles. Very quickly afterwards, she focused her commercial activity at Port-Etienne and Nouakchott, which was now designated the capital of the new Mauritanian state. In this back and forth trade,¹² Mokektoum slowly began to specialize in the trade of beauty products. At the time these were very much seen as luxury objects (pearls, textiles, wax cloth,

¹¹ Garnier 1960: 197.

¹² Bredeloup 2012.

gold, perfume and cosmetics), which she brought from France or Germany via Port Etienne, with merchandise then transported to Nouakchott by lorry. She owned shops in Nouadhibou, and her sales outlets stretched as far as Dakar, where she sent veils, jewels, bazin, and brought back gold and textiles. Mokeltoum's business exploits were brought to a sudden end in 1965, when the young woman died in an air crash between Paris and Nouadhibou.

Meïmouna, an unexpected inheritance

Born in Atar between 1910 and 1915, Meïmouna was born out of wedlock and, worse still, her mother was of subaltern status, a *hartâniyya* from the Smâsîd tribe. As a young child, Meïmouna was exiled with her mother to the Tagant region. When her father died (he had been a man of the Shurva tribe "from a good tent",¹³ a rich businessman and caravan sponsor) his widow brought the illegitimate girl back to Atar. Meïmouna, then aged eleven, received her share of the inheritance and returned to "her" family. "[The widow] must have been touched by the poverty of my mother, who had never seen a house! (...) She fattened [my mother],¹⁴ and gave her jewellery" (Omar, Meïmouna's son). At the age of thirteen, Meïmouna was given in marriage to a Shurva man from the Oualata region. Together, they went to live in St Louis in Senegal. Her husband, a small shopkeeper, did business between St Louis and Atar. His business was going nowhere, so the family quickly left to set up home in the Adrar region. "In those years, my mother only had one veil and, so as not to wear it out when she sat down, she lifted it up (...) We went back to Atar very quickly".

Despite malicious gossip – it was not becoming for a young woman from a good family to engage in any kind of business – at the beginning of the 1940s Meïmouna began to rent out the jewellery left by her father. Very soon Meïmouna opened a shop and began to

¹³ Social group which considers itself to be descendants of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter.

¹⁴ The social practice of fattening girls aspires to a corpulent female aesthetic, thus proving the social status and financial means of her family (Bonte 1998; Fortier 2000; Tauzin 2001).

trade with Hausa businessmen:¹⁵ “they brought 50 to 60 kg bags of precious stones (...) She also purchased jewellery from them”. Afterwards, surrounded by a group of women, Meïmouna washed, sorted and worked the stones and “then made jewellery that she rented or sold”, a niece remembered.

In the 1950s, Meïmouna’s reputation grew and her business flourished. To meet customer demand and increase her commercial clout she began to travel. She attended trade fairs in Algiers, Tindouf or Zak (Morocco), travelling to them in a Berliet lorry or in a Citroen T45 – from the first and only transport company of Atar – accompanied by Omar, her youngest son. She brought back carpets or incense, which she sold to the shopkeepers in Atar. Very quickly, Omar became, according to his own words, “her assistant, if not her workforce!” It was he who went to the market, on his bicycle, to play the intermediary: “my mother, because she was a Shurva, could not go to the market, people would have disapproved. Other women like Foïti and Lala were able to go. So I did the transactions there, but I did exactly what mother had intended (...) she was a dictator”. Meïmouna also bought stock from the “Paris wholesaler”¹⁶ with whom she placed two or three orders per year. In Atar, evidence of Meïmouna’s success is easy to come by: “we slaughtered [a sheep] every day”, “(...) All the family went to eat at her place or she sent food over”. Many people also remember the little red Peugeot bicycle.

In the 1970s, Meïmouna left Atar and set herself up at Nouakchott, where she continued the same type of trade in a house that she bought in the Ksar neighbourhood. In 1972, she attended her last trade fair in Hoggar - the difficult relationships with Algeria and her advanced age did not allow her to travel with the same ease as before. Then, little by little, the fashion for costume jewellery imported from Dubai and France overtook the traditional pearls, so Meïmouna resolved to end her business.

¹⁵ It seems unlikely the Hausa speakers were from Hausaland.

¹⁶ There is no further information on this wholesaler.

Lala, the business of love

With an Aqz zir¹⁷ mother and a *bart ni* father from the Sm s d tribe, Lala was born in Atar at the beginning of the 1930s. Just like the other pioneering businesswomen, she did not attend school; she was married at the age of fifteen to her cousin. Less than a decade later, in Thi s (Senegal), she made a second marriage to a Moor from a good tent, an Idaw li¹⁸ from the Tijikdja region. He was a thus young man from a good family, but not rich. It was at this time that Lala opened her “bazaar” and took her first steps in business. Between these two marriages, hidden in a French military town, the life of the young woman was restless and ambiguous. People who knew her at the time at first avoided our questions on this period of building up her financial and social capital. Later, however, they began to allude to her great powers of seduction: “you know that once you have married once, you can then make secret marriages [laughs]. Perhaps she married 20 times, we wouldn’t know about it” (her adopted daughter).

After Mauritania’s independence, Lala and her second husband left Senegal and set up in Nouakchott. With the profits made during their exile and the social skills of the young woman, they bought a house and opened two luxury shops. In the first one, they sold a number of products (food, cosmetics, jewellery, clothes...) destined for a clientele of rich Mauritaniens and expats.

At the end of the 1960s, Lala travelled to Saudi Arabia and brought back jewellery, textiles and living-room sofas.¹⁹ In the 1970s, she regularly flew to France and Spain and came back laden with luxury goods (clothing, jewellery, shoes). In order to stock up in gold and pearls, Leila’s network extended as far as Cotonou and Niamey; she also traded with other businessmen and women, particularly Mokeltoum. Her adopted daughter enjoyed recounting anecdotes about her eccentricities and her expeditions.

She didn’t speak a word of French or English, she only spoke Hassaniyya Arabic. One day during an unexpected stopover in

¹⁷ From the socially subordinate Saulnier group.

¹⁸ Marabout tribe (Adrar, Tagant).

¹⁹ Female trading remained specialized in “feminine” objects: jewelry, clothing, cosmetics and products linked to the domestic sphere.

Holland, she wanted to drink milk. The air hostess didn't understand. So, she took out her breast to explain that she wanted milk. She told everyone about it when she came back. (...) She had a great sense of humour, people came to her house to hear her adventures (...) and we also recited poetry. She was talented. Men loved her character (...) Women were jealous of her success.

When Lala died at the beginning of the 1980s, it was whispered at Nouakchott that just before her death, this strong-minded woman had designated for her husband the new wife who would succeed her.

Aminatou, the rebellious heiress

Aminatou came from an important Tekna family. Her father was a rich Moorish businessman specialized in the peanut trade and was, according to people close to the family, a hard and "very conservative" man: "men and women in the house were separated", "(...) Women were not allowed to go out". Aminatou attended the Koranic school in Kaolack, Senegal: without a doubt, in religious matters she was the best educated of all the female business pioneers.

In 1930, when she was ten her father forced her to marry her patrilineal cousin. She was only fifteen when her father died during a pilgrimage to Mecca, leaving her an inheritance that put her in charge of a real fortune. "She was a princess," her niece stated. Thus, the young woman organized the annulment of her marriage and, with her cousin out of the way, she married "for love, this time" a young Moroccan businessman who was living in Kaolack. After two children, Aminatou demanded a divorce, which caused a scandal. Her husband fled back to Morocco with their two children.

At the age of twenty, without respecting the interdiction of feminine hypogamy (Bonte 1998) she married Ahmed, a *bartâni* who was temporarily in Kaolack. Her new husband gave her the taste for business. While Ahmed travelled to Senegal and Gambia, Aminatou managed the shop that she had bought for them both. Thanks to her money, Ahmed began a business importing textiles, foodstuffs and jewellery. In Kaolack, Aminatou sought out merchants in the town to ask them what they needed in terms of textiles and also asked the shopkeepers and grocers what provisions they needed. Equally, because of her social capital, she was able to build a network of

resellers: “she did not do business for money, she didn’t need it (...) her husband had introduced her to it, but very soon her influence became more important” (her niece).

Furthermore, from the end of the 1960s, bored with being confined to her role as a wholesaler while her husband travelled, the rich heiress decided to go travelling herself to buy stock. Thus, she travelled to Las Palmas, Morocco and Saudi Arabia two to three times a year. She brought back beauty products and textiles. Aminatou thus broadened her horizons and her fortune.

She was a princess, she drove a [Citroën] Traction [front-wheel drive] or a [Peugeot] 404, and she drove the car herself, which caused a stir in Kaolack [...] she liked to be a little provocative in her marriages and in her voyages, she was free, she had a car, and no driver, no husband, she travelled alone! (her niece).

At the end of the 1960s, she began to make frequent journeys to Nouakchott. With her car, she brought wax cloth, “guaranteed jewellery” (silver or gold plated) and brought back “khartoum” (a light cotton valued by Senegalese women), blankets and tea. With her car, she also crossed the Gambian border to buy tobacco, which she sold wholesale at Kaolac. Driving a Traction, Peugeot or a Mercedes, Aminatou was known for her frequent comings and goings which slowly pulled her towards Mauritania, her country of origin; in the 1970s, she acquired three houses in Nouakchott and equally invested money in Dakar, where she bought and sold houses in luxury neighbourhoods.

Also at the end of the 1970s, Aminatou went eight times in two years to Benin – where she bought wax print fabric, pottery and shoes – and to Ivory Coast from where she brought back so-called “English” merchandise (sweets, cakes and chocolate). During these last trips, Aminatou also came back with gold ingots, carrying them with the greatest discretion. She had them worked by the goldsmiths at Nouakchott in order to resell them in Dakar. This gold trade eventually brought her bad luck.

It’s true that people say that [...] In addition, at home, her father had always forbidden his daughters to wear gold, he was very strict and conservative [...] She died after a transaction, some people said that it was the evil eye, but I don’t really know [...]

*From the private sphere to the public sphere: the caravans pass ... the dogs bark
[lots of noise, but nothing changes]*

By forcing their way into the history of transnational trade, these women entered the world of commerce and achieved status and fortune by working in a trade which gave them considerable social recognition. The adventures of these women who stood out from the crowd did not, however, attract social criticism: the role of women in Moorish society, as well as the local upheaval caused by the transition from colonization to independence, doubtless made possible this social tolerance and contributed to the elevation of these women into legendary personalities

On the road to fortune and eminence

Mokeltoum, Lala, Meïmouna et Aminatou pulled themselves out of the *khayama* [tent] - the sphere reserved for women - to go on the road - the male sphere. In the community of long distance trade, these women created a name for themselves, prospered and created fortunes. By the time of her sudden death, Moketoum was said to be very rich: she had 60 she-camels, a legacy for her son estimated at over 40 million *ouguiyas*,²⁰ two houses and some shops at Port-Etienne, two shops and a house at Nouakchott, and numerous properties at Chinguetti and Atar. Apparently Mokeltoum's fortune was one of the largest of that period. Similarly, Aminatou, who died in Kaolack in 1981, left a large amount of savings: jewellery ("pearls, white sapphires and rubies" according to her niece), cars, houses and shops in Dakar and Nouakchott. The same went for Meïmouna, as her son remembered:

[...] My mother owned a number of houses in Atar [...] she also had palm plantations [...] At our place, we slaughtered [a sheep] every day[...]. And then she also bought the house in Nouakchott, in the Ksar neighbourhood, next to the graveyard.

These four women invested in buildings, camel rearing and the purchase of palm plantations. They positioned themselves in the areas that underpinned the respectability of the big men. They sought to become important ladies [*Grandes Dames*], businesswomen, heads

²⁰ Mauritanian currency.

of households, but also generous women. People who knew Mokeltoum praised her generosity: the metres of textiles which she handed out, the first watches, the first Chanel perfumes, the makeup products which she showered on her family. People close to Lala reported that, ten years before her death, she was said to have donated a quarter of her fortune (25 million *ouguiyas*) to the poor.

Just like men, these pioneers had a reputation for largesse and were continually preoccupied with social redistribution. They equally made a point of honour to be seen to be respectful to Islam, as Lala's adopted daughter remembered:

[...] She went on pilgrimage 23 times! [...] each time she paid for ten people to go with her to Mecca. Every time. She was a real believer.

Success and the respect of social and religious norms doubtless contributed to the warm welcome given to these pioneers who, very quickly, took on the mantle of respectability, previously a concept reserved only for men. On the subject of Lala's shop, her adopted daughter remembered:

It was the biggest shop in the capital, it was really "high class" as they say! [...] She was a woman with a very strong personality [...] she knew a lot of people because everyone liked her and enjoyed her company.

Similarly, when Elemine Ould Mohamed Baba²¹ described the unmissable areas of the capital in the 1960s and 1970s in *De Mémoire de Nouakchottois* he described Lala's shop:

The biggest shop was *ebel* Mahmoudi's [...] The shop was a few metres long and served as a grocery shop, a hardware shop, and a fabric shop [...] it served as a meeting place for some important town personalities and the much-missed Lala was never far away.

In the same way as other African women, who were active in one way or another in the independence movements,²² Mokeltoum took advantage of her new social status to extend her influence to politics, another sphere far removed from the tent.²³ Her first attempt was in 1946 when she organized her husband's political campaign, as a

²¹ Ould Mohamed Baba 2004: 120.

²² Barthélémy 2010; Goerg 1997.

²³ Lesourd 2007 and 2014.

candidate for a seat of territorial councillor in the French West Africa Local Assembly, as a family member recalled:

When Monsieur Jean put himself up to be territorial counsellor, he was up against Ould Mouknass [a powerful man who shaped Mauritanian politics]! But he was elected! Thanks to her. And with his political role, he also helped his wife a lot! She brought him his voters. She managed his campaign.

Her second attempt was in 1958: she supported the Mauritanian Republican Party which sought the territory's independence:

There were two parties that fought each other for the referendum [about the independence of the territory]: the PRM, which was to some degree the pro-colonial party, against the pro-Moroccan party [who wanted to keep Mauritania linked to Morocco]. These two groups had their roots in tribal loyalties [...] Mokeltoum played a big role. She was the principal collector of donations in the Adrar region, she donated gifts to rally people to her cause. The money came principally from Monsieur Jean.

Moving up and turning the establishment upside-down

Traditionally, Moorish women are not completely excluded from the trading sphere. In the camps, they often undertake an informal type of subsistence trading on a small scale: they sell sugar, tea or perhaps tobacco.²⁴ But they stay in the shelter of the tents [*khayma*]. A day under [camel wool] canvas is organised around meals, craft activities, games and other discussions. In the absence of men, the *baydhanīyyāt*, whatever their age, can talk openly because *sabwa* [modesty] is only obligatory in the presence of men.

By leaving the private sphere of the tent to slip in to the public sphere, these female pioneers overturned society's spatial organisation because they undertook commercial activities previously considered as male. Furthermore, this led them to move around, to travel, and to take over both familiar and faraway spaces, both social and geographical. For example, Mokeltoum made an impression on people both by her numerous trips to Europe and by her political opinions. Aminatou travelled between countries alone, in the driver's

²⁴ Women monopolized this trade because these products are subject to the rules of modesty, which mostly concern men; it is therefore easier for men to buy them from women.

seat, extending her network north into Morocco and south as far as Ivory Coast. Lala moved from the back of her grocery shop to the Emirates, and transformed her fancy goods store to an important meeting-place – for both sexes, moreover. As for Meïmouna, while she did not set foot in the marketplace, out of respect for social convention, she did not hesitate to travel to Morocco or Algeria, accompanied only by her very young son.

Furthermore, by successfully interfering in these masculine spheres, these female pioneers also shook up the social hierarchy. They showed "what was possible" in terms of social mobility. An example is the case of Meïmouna, the "illegitimate" heiress, initially abandoned and "exiled" with her mother, a freed slave. Similarly, Lala came from a social group considered at the bottom of the social hierarchy: a saltworker father, a mother who was a freed slave. Yet, despite these subaltern origins, she made her fortune, married a man from a "good tent" and obtained the social recognition that would not normally have come to someone of her origins.

These important businesswomen also overturned gender norms. The life of Aminatou was distinguished by a refusal to model herself on the *baydhanīyyā* from a "good tent": she distanced herself from the typical inactivity associated with her social class, in order to take charge of her own business. In parallel, in her life as a woman, she went from divorce to divorce, did not bring up her children who stayed with an ex-husband, and she married men that her father, who respected matrimonial interdict and conventions, would have never approved: first, a foreigner! Second a *hartānī*!

Were we to peer again beneath the tent flap where, as every day, a few men have come to pay a courteous visit to the women who remain in the camp, we would observe that in their space, women have tea prepared for them and succeed in making the men present buy mint or sugar. These male concessions are the object of long negotiations, during which time these women demonstrate amazing ingenuity. Audacity and a good sense of repartee enable their visitors' (sometimes fake) hesitation to be overcome. In these relationships of seduction, by placing himself in the tent, the man chooses to be the instrument of a game of which he is not the master. Women lead the discussion, attracting and stirring up their audience. They take the

initiative to speak, they cut their visitor short and they can laugh at him, his embarrassment and his words. The man must submit himself to the desire of women and his own desire is secondary, while the women adopt the behaviour typically associated with men. The pioneering businesswomen deliberately played off these ambiguities. Mokeltoum and Lala used their charms and the power they bestowed on men to build capital and invest in business. By doing so, they did not break the rules, because women are allowed to show themselves to be flirtatious, decision-makers, seductive, audacious and domineering towards men.²⁵ But this consensual subordination of men to women, in the framework of flirtatious relationships, is not something that can normally be shown in public. It is supposed to stay beneath the tent flap. In private. The world, in this flirtatious imitation of it, should be hidden. It should nestle in spaces far away from social inspection because, in public, the subordination of women to men is supposed to be put on show. This is the game that must be played in public, in front of everybody, because the public sphere is the sphere of what should be seen.²⁶ Yet the pioneering businesswomen modified and went beyond these frontiers, overtly displaying their love lives, choosing their own male companions, asking for divorce, revealing their role in the relationship, playing the role of head of the family and distributor of largesse. Thus, Aminatou managed a number of relationships, Mokeltoum directed her husband's electoral campaign; Lala managed to shop and created a network alongside a socially superior man who actually took the back seat; as for Meïmouna, she became a businesswoman when her husband was not able to make a success of his own shop in St Louis and appropriately meet his family's needs.

Women (over)-protected by collective memory

In considering this rebellion against the established order, my fieldwork has shown that such rule breaking did not, however, provoke social condemnation. There were very few people who made open or spontaneous criticisms of the women. If an occasionally

²⁵ Fortier 2000; Tauzin 2001; Schinz 2007.

²⁶ Lesourd 2010, 2014.

bitter comment was recorded, it must be noted that these were very few, and most often, not made openly... a few remarks here and there over many years of fieldwork. Here are a few of the severest ones, expressed by two people from Atar: “Lala was [a woman of the night], the soldiers used to queue outside her house [...]”; “Mokeltoum messed around with men, but she also gave a lot.” These kinds of acerbic remarks tended not to be directed at young women from a “good tent”, of whom these witnesses, also from “good tents” preferred to speak euphemistically, especially if the children of the female pioneers had made good marriages, good business connections and good political contacts. Thus, Mokeltoum “messed around” while Lala, from a subordinate social group, was “a woman of the night”.

Nevertheless, we were more generally confronted with the difficulty of whispered understandings and evocative silences that refused to be drawn into gossip. A few people alluded to the evil eye, to avoid expressing what they really thought. But this reserve or propriety, or even the admiration expressed for these women can be understood through the framework of a suite of broad but complementary arguments.

On one hand, it would appear that this reserve can be directly explained by the women’s success: why would anyone personally undertake to dig out the secrets of rich, prestigious and well-known people, descended, in some cases, from wealthy and well-known families? Why put oneself in danger, or at least, at odds with them?

A concern to protect the reputation of the female pioneers also doubtless derives from the very strategies that they were able to deploy to cover up their complicated personal trajectories: they strove to show respect for some conventions, such as investing in areas which confer social status, behaving generously in redistributing wealth and overtly demonstrating their respect for Islam. Their frequent pilgrimages are difficult to interpret – it is as if, in everyone’s collective perceptions and memories, they served as a behavioural “facelift”. It appears that this overt desire to appear conventional partially allowed each woman to refashion the hidden areas of their personal lives.

Finally, as Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh²⁷ and Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem²⁸ have noted, heroes are important in Moorish society. Furthermore, these heroes have common characteristics, such as being lone riders, anti-conformist, “isolated, but even more highly regarded because they get what they want by way of cunning, opportunism, luck and also a sometimes-temporary rupture with the values of wider society.”²⁹ With a popular imagination that celebrates, in a certain way, the figure of the rebel, why not then, the figure of the female rebel?

Finally, our hypothesis is that if the continual transgression of established norms does not attract criticism today, it is because it did not attract opprobrium in the past. This investigation suggests that the financial crises which have turned the history of colonial and post-independence Mauritania upside down opened up the possibility of “the past is another country, they do things differently there” for women, and for their relationships with men.

Furthermore, the famine from 1904 to 1932, the Great Depression of 1929 and the two world wars profoundly affected the Adrar region, the nerve centre of the caravan trade, which was reduced to surviving on barter and the black market.

During this period, the majority of people from Adrar could not get hold of the traditional cotton textiles, which were their normal clothing, and they carefully held on to rags, or could not even go out for want of enough clothing for everyone.³⁰

The work of Pierre Bonte (1998) and Francis de Chassey (1993) has demonstrated how much these crises overturned social structures. Mokeltoum’s niece expressed this in her own way when talking about Monsieur Jean as a “welcome saviour”:

[...] people were so hungry. She left the family home to meet her needs. She left for Atar. She was at the mercy of all comers. He was about the same age as General de Gaulle. She must have been around 15 years old.

²⁷ Ould Cheikh 1991.

²⁸ Ould Ahmed Salem 2001.

²⁹ Ould Ahmed Salem 2001: 95.

³⁰ Bonte 1998: 2020.

According to this statement, the difficult living conditions of the time pushed some needy families to give their daughters to the “[military] camp men”. The account of Mokeltoum’s niece is deliberately tear-jerking, aiming to rewrite history, in which the businesswoman incarnated the generous and intelligent woman from a noble lineage who sacrificed everything for her family. In the telling of this story, there is a moment when the door is briefly opened on the unmentioned lucrative “adventures” which Mokeltoum underwent, but it is soon closed back up again, so that the only remaining memory is the scandalous but financially lucrative marriage which saved her. Like many others from the continent during the colonial period,³¹ young Mauritanian women swayed their hips in the officers’ mess and offered up far more than “kisses fresher than the purest streams”.³² Marriages were also made. In Atar, these facts are well established and recounted by many people.³³

But, beyond these sexualized economic exchanges, colonial towns had doubtless [already] been crossroads where alterity had taken root. Could it perhaps be said that these “scandalous” matrimonial unions and haphazard relationships impressed another way of being a woman, and of understanding gender relations, on the collective imagination of Atar? Lala, Moukeltoum and the other pioneers knew how to enchant a man from the camps, or amaze a bureaucrat in exchange for financial advantage from which they undoubtedly benefitted. In our opinion they chose to become different women, to become women in a different way – sometimes reproached, sometimes tolerated, admired and/or envied. Lala and Mokeltoum took advantage of this situation and created their opportunities. They created and seized the possibility of transforming their capital of beauty and seduction into social and financial capital.

Thus, at the beginning of the 1960s, Nouakchott, [previously] a “bleak outpost, a small isolated fortress [...] a type of Saharan Knights Templar settlement for a monastic soldiery”³⁴ was a

³¹ Taraud 2004.

³² Psichari 1927.

³³ Caratini 2009.

³⁴ Puigauudeau 1954: 127.

promising background for business development for these ambitious businesswomen, whose affairs were already firmly established. The capital-cum-military camp opened up new possibilities for doing business. When it became the new capital of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, it quickly opened up to businessmen, bureaucrats, French development workers and an endless flow of nomads leaving the *bâdiyya* after suffering successive droughts. A town that originally housed 500 people, and was intended to expand to no more than 15,000, ended up with 40,000 inhabitants by the beginning of the 1960s.³⁵ Nouakchott was a town with “everything to build”.³⁶ It was a town that offered itself up as an incredible marketplace, an Eldorado almost, for Mauritanian businessmen who understood, from the 1940s, how to squeeze out the European commercial houses and take their place on the business stage.³⁷ Arriving in this capital under construction, the four businesswomen had a certain fortune and know-how at their disposal, and their already prosperous activities merely had to be developed.

There was a saying, which said that when a certain product would not even be found at ‘ehel Mahmoudi’s [Lala’s] place’, one was truly in the most severe penury.³⁸

These female entrepreneurs seized every opportunity offered to them. From the colonial period to independence, the life choices – particularly marital choices and flamboyant love affairs – of these pioneering women who had pulled themselves out of the tent to weave their way through the male social spheres of transnational business were not subject to censure. For these new times, it was necessary to adapt to new ways. The opportunities that both the French military camps and Nouakchott itself (where everything was to be built) offered were seized at breakneck speed by these “opportunistic artistes”.³⁹

³⁵ Choplin 2009.

³⁶ Ould Daddah 2003.

³⁷ The European trading houses have always been squeezed out of the cattle trade and caravan transport, elements that form the basis of “national” market accumulation. This is how *baydhân* merchants gradually took over the trade in manufactured goods (Bonte 1998).

³⁸ Ould Mohamed Baba 2004: 120.

³⁹ Ould Ahmed Salem 2001.

Thanks to these Grandes Dames whose stories have been reinvented as veritable epics, it would appear that the Moorish Pantheon, already full to the brim, now has heroines as well.

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