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A century of hands : work, communities, and identities among the Ayt Khebbash fossil artisans in a Moroccan Oasis

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Chapter 6 – Conclusions

The modern world is seemingly bound by the web of an administrative apparatus, in Foucault's terms, which controls and disciplines human beings through education, media and market forces (1975). The aim of the preceding chapters was to look at the material and ideological life of the Ayt Khebbash artisans so as to draw the contours of the tensions between identities formulated through work practice and articulated through power relations. These identification processes are also organised around places in which they dwell, and from which they reap the meagre fruit of their labour. Drought and economic necessities has once driven the Imazighen out of the desert, and will continue to perpetuate their ever-circulating migratory routes to and from towns and cities, and then back to the desert again. As discussed in chapter five, this life cycle was often described by the locals as: *sbʕa snayʕa w l-rzaq dayʕa* (seven jobs, and the money lost) - after a century of hands in different domains of work, they realise that they did not even have their hands, and will not have them in the future to come.

'My life has not changed much. Except that I settled down in Rissani fifteen years ago', an Ayt Khebbash artisan in his fifties who once worked in the French-run lead mines said, while recounting how his present life as an independent barite miner was filled with unpredictable dangers and loads of payments for the workers. When asked why he chose the profession if it is so difficult, he replied in bewilderment, 'There is no other work (than mining). Isn't it better to be a herdsman?' It is not entirely sure if he really thinks living in a tent without modern facilities and herding animals is a better way of life, but this nostalgic discourse on the past is often heard among the Ayt Khebbash artisans, which can be understood as an effort to vindicate their tribal roots in order to counteract the contradictions they face in everyday situations.

During my more than two years residence in Rissani from the end of 2011 to January 2014, I saw many of the fossil artisans who worked in the garages of Moqaouama quarter move on to the domain of barite mining. The previously lively artisan street became less and less animated, as an increasing number of garages closed down and the artisans sold their machines that used to emanate the familiar noise and dust. Some of them got associated with friends and set up their own business to exploit the mines, whereas those who did not have the means randomly went on to the mining sites such as Tijaght and Rask Mouna to dig the veins with rudimentary tools, without

authorisation for exploitation. Those who remained in the fossil business were often caught in debt crisis, since the buyers refused to pay the full amount and the retailers also delayed the payment to the suppliers. I witnessed on several occasions serious arguments over money and even quarrels turning into fist fights. The loose-knit credit relations based upon Islamic morals started to crumble due to the absolute lack of income and the decline of the economy within the whole of Morocco. Although payment delay is less common in the mining sector, the barite miners are also entirely dependent on the volatile international market and the whimsical complications imposed on them by the Moroccan administration and commercial enterprises.

The identification processes of the Ayt Khebbash people are complicated by their participation in the communities of practice that is premised on the marginalisation of their income, health and language. In Tafraoute, a man from the Irjdaln clan will not be allowed, by social pressure, to work for a profitable venture initiated by one from the Ayt Taghla clan, for fear of revenge and boycott from his own group. The wealthy Ayt Taghla businessman, on the other hand, is associated with influential Arab politicians and lives in Erfoud, while pursuing his own economic goals. Marginalised and impoverished village people are often made responsible for illegal smuggling, ending up in prison without viable evidence. In Rissani, the dominance of the Arabic language and some privileged Arabic-speaking families organise the ways in which the Amazigh population participates in the communities. As discussed in chapter two, the domains of work in Rissani are hierarchically divided by ethnic or linguistic groups and there is very little space for social mobility. Local politics and commerce are dominated by Arabic-speaking officials and merchants, and those *qayd*-s or *pasha*-s appointed by the central government with little knowledge of Amazigh culture or language. The Ayt Khebbash people usually find subsistence in informal sectors, and the marginalised status of fossil sculpting demonstrates the conflictual identification processes within this distinctively modern domain of work.

In the context of this town environment, the artisans participate in apprenticeship in a paradoxical way, since the individual's historical and cultural backgrounds are evoked and shifting, displaced and also continuous in participation. They constantly evoke and reinforce their memories of the nomadic past in their utterances and through their participation as an 'Ayt Khebbash' artisan in the communities. They participate in various ways, by recalling their days as herdsmen, and by conforming to, but also contradicting the Western norms and values of commodity production. In

every circumstance we see that Moroccans are not autonomous individuals but contextualised in the web of social relationships. The Ayt Khebbash artisans will migrate to Rissani or look for seasonal income in Nador by the force of circumstances, but their decisions depend on the consent of their fathers and brothers, and the money earned goes to the mouths of their patriarchal family members. In Rissani fossil *ateliers*, the Ayt Khebbash men are not entirely alienated from themselves in a sense that they often work with their own brothers and kin-groups in a Tamazight-speaking environment within the town. As Rosen discusses, the actors are placed in a context of origins, family, knowledge and relationships, and on this grounding the 'negotiation' with one another becomes possible (1984: 182-3). Within this 'bargaining' process, as Rosen calls it, it is only the 'situated person' who can engage in the course of 'negotiation' since the person's 'freedom of action' is shaped by the contexts (1984: 165-192).

When it comes to the work in mining and construction domains, the Ayt Khebbash artisans find themselves in the acute condition of a capitalist market economy on the basis of their everyday work. Exploitation of mines involves unreasonable imposition and fluctuation of prices, a series of bureaucratic complications, and inevitable corruption. In the disorganised domain, cheating, robbing and falsification of documents are rampant because of the artisans' peripheral position within the economic and political hierarchies. The social consciousness of the Ayt Khebbash artisans based on their tribal roots is even more heightened by their seasonal migration to Nador and the large cities outside Ar-Rachidia. As discussed in chapter five, the work conditions of construction labourers speak of the paradox of the Moroccan nation in the course of being integrated into the world market. The export of mineral resources increases the vulnerability of a nation entirely dependent on external trade for survival, and the process of the Ayt Khebbash artisans becoming an urban proletariat is deeply connected to the demographic change and cultural transformation of post-independence Morocco. These workplaces, which represent the dominant parties in the capitalist economy, invented their own norms – unwritten rules and employment conditions – in order to serve their interest and maximise profits. The artisans simply cannot affiliate with such communities, nor participate as 'members'. As discussed by Hodges (1998), identifying through participation in the norms of the communities of practice can involve conflictual relations between one's socially marginalised differences and one's peripheral relations within the community of practice. Most importantly, this marginalisation is *not* negotiable and will never lead to more inclusive practices; rather, the marginalised persons continue to remain outside the dominant social struc-

ture. In other words, the Ayt Khebbash artisans are in the process of reconstructing themselves historically, on the basis of the social exclusion they experience in the new work environment.

In the course of the historical reconstruction of the self, the artisans experience the non-negotiable conflicts embedded in the multiply situated power relations. The Amazigh population of Rissani appreciates the improved status of the Tamazight language and its incorporation into the educational programme, but do not speak in Tamazight to their children. Also, they are aware of the power of the Berber-speaking elites in Rabat who influence the state policies and decide which region and what aspect of 'Amazigh culture' should be broadcast and promoted. The Rissani artisans may refuse to identify with the state ideology of 'Amazigh-ness' or resent the Arab-dominated social order, yet selectively adopt the overarching 'Amazigh identity', 'individualism' and encourage their children to learn Arabic and French. This reveals the processes of power relations as multiplicious, and that their complexity is incorporated into the situational identifications of the historicised self.

At some point in 2011, before I started my fieldwork in Rissani, the lead singer of the Saghru Band, M'barek Ou Larbi from Mellaab, passed away at the age of 29. With a bachelor's degree in French public law and literature, he was known as a militant Amazigh activist and an open critic of the Moroccan government and IRCAM policies. The much speculated reason of his sudden death was reportedly a heart attack or drug abuse, which remains to be an unresolved mystery for many of the Imazighen in Ar-Rachidia. His inimitable voice however continues to sing in the taxis, lorries and *fourgonnettes*, up and down the mountains and on the bouncing, unpaved routes to and from Tafraoute. 'Moha' is one of the favourite songs of the young local Imazighen, which depicts both real and imagined state of inequality experienced by an Amazigh persona 'Moha':

> Poor Moha, poor Moha
> (*igellin Muḥa, igellin Muḥa*)
> Moha the unemployed has studied abroad
> (*Muḥa d ashumar ighra aghd bṛṛa*)
> In the country of his ancestors he became a stranger
> (*g tamazirt n daddas yaghul ig u bṛṛa*)
> My suffering I share with Moha

(*arzag inu sharegh t d Muḥa, arzag inu*)
His leg is suffering and the *makhzen* has killed it
(*ineqqa t wafud, ineqqat lmakhzen*)
Poor Moha, poor Moha
(*igellin Muḥa, igellin Muḥa*)
Since his existence Moha walked with bare feet
(*seg mayd illa Muḥa iteddu s uẓir*)
Moha has never dreamed of becoming a minister…
(*Muḥa ur jjin iwarg ad ig lwazir*)
Oh the Moha-s, go there Moha-s!
(*ah, a id Muḥa, anekragh a id Muḥa*)
The Moroccan race have reunited
(*ijemʕa uzur n umureski*)
A cunning Arab
(*a yiwn waʕrab aḥḥraymi*)
They say Moha is ignorant
(*nann Muḥa d abujadi*)
Or is it to fight against the colonisers
(*hat lahkt ad iwt aṛumiy*)
Moha climbed the mountains
(*Muḥa ittel lʕawari*)
The sons of Allal (El-Fassi) went to Paris
(*memmis n ʕAllal iʕayn baris*)
To obtain another degree
(*ad iberred diblum yaḍnin*)
And returned to sit on the chair (became a minister)
(*yughul d amzn akersi*)
Ayay ayay ayay ayay…..
They told me I am not even worth a shit
(*nann iyyi ur tswit amezzur*)
The culture of folklore….
(*idelsen n lfulklur*)
For the Amazigh, there is only the ruins remaining
(*amazigh, iqquma lharhur*)
This land is [belongs to] the Imazighen!
(*tamurt a i imazighen!*)

Throughout the song, the post-independence state policy to integrate the Imazighen into the national unification process to become *mureski* ('a Moroccan citizen') is described as a conspiracy of 'a cunning Arab', which marginalised and devalued the identity of 'Moha'. M'barek goes on even further to say 'They told me I am not even worth a shit', referring to the proliferation of Amazigh cultural movements since the 1990s which in turn was used by the Moroccan government to 'folklorise' the Amazigh arts and tribal culture, without much consideration for the actual life of the economically and socially disadvantaged.

As discussed in chapter five, this is not to say the ordinary Imazighen in the Tafilalet necessarily share the same viewpoint of M'barek and the militant activists of Goulmima, Tinejdad or Mellaab. The artisans of Rissani do identify themselves as Moroccan citizens and Muslims, especially against foreign entities, and are at least linguistically integrated into the town environment, in the sense that the first generation immigrants are all bi-lingual in Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight, or that they speak Arabic even better. The 'Amazigh' ethnic category is highly contested, since the ideological penetration of international and national Amazigh movement created an imagined unity of Berber language speakers all across the globe through media and internet. As a matter of course, the local youth, especially those with frequent contacts with foreigners, are more susceptible to this international trend and are influenced by it, but illiterate people of over forty years old – which includes most of the Ayt Khebbash artisans - are less interested and more selective by adopting only beneficial aspects of 'Amazigh-ness' that are directly relevant to their daily concerns in the context of the Arabised town environment.

I have argued throughout the preceding chapters that what matters for the Ayt Khebbash artisans on the level of personal identities are their tribal affiliations based on agnatic ties. They still strictly observe the *tafargant* ('rule of respect') which prohibits certain inter-clan marriages within the Ayt Aṭṭa group and seldom out-marry their daughters to the Arabic-speaking 'strangers'. This marriage practice is irrelevant to what Cynthia Becker claimed to be their wish to 'keep the bloodlines pure' (2006), but rather is a matter of filial piety. The process of modern state formation and migration to towns and large cities necessitated the Ayt Khebbash people to strengthen their family networks in order to consolidate their sense of geographical and historical belonging, which will be beneficial to the parents and grandparents who are dependent on the sons' income, and for the sons who are in need of imagined homes. In a state

without a tangible welfare system to rely on, traditionalised practices become part of the reconstruction process of the global reality the Ayt Khebbash artisans have to face, and also the spiritual shelter they seek for. In becoming a 'Moroccan citizen', and in becoming a universally defined 'Amazigh' person, they identify and dis-identify within the ideological constructs to transform it into something more creative and discursive. At least, the Ayt Khebbash artisans I encountered had the ability to actively manipulate the power relations in practical and imaginative ways which allowed them to flexibly adapt to institutional and cultural changes in the real world. I have analysed in chapter three how the 'Ayt Khebbash' tribal category was constructed through repetition of myth and through intermixing with different patrilineal descent groups. Tafraoute itself is a modernly constructed village where the nomadic population sought for refuge after the two wars with France and Algeria. This historical fact does not sit well with the Rissani artisans' strong affinities with their *tamazirt* ('homeland'), since *tamazirt* itself is neither unchanging, nor pure, nor sacred. However, the tactical ways in which people attach meaning to *tamazirt* and Ayt Khebbash tribal belonging help them to historically reconstruct the self in order to cope with their everyday work environment in towns and cities. Their renewed interpretations of 'Amazigh' and 'Ayt Khebbash' categories are nurtured by individualised interest in the modern context but are strongly anchored to the perpetual kinship and tribal sense of belongings. Apparently, the Ayt Khebbash artisans are not at all a 'revolutionary' segment of the working class, although they are aware of the penetrating force of global capitalism and social inequalities, as depicted in the songs *Tagrawla* or 'Moha'. Their opposition, dis-engagement and non-participation are rather embedded in micro-level social interactions and work practices that will remain marginal in *reḥla* as long as they continue to earn the bread of the day. They will eat, invite guests to the table, and they will joke: *mstnyn iyzm ikhmjak imi*? (Who will tell the lion 'your mouth is dirty'?).

The point of departure of this dissertation was my unfinished series of encounters with the hospitality of the land, which does not belong to the realm of a rational legal principle. The simple offering of sweet tea and bread on the road relates to 'living' or 'dwelling', and this relationship belongs to the unreasonable poetic realm rather than to the relativity of rational discourse. The Ayt Khebbash artisans of Rissani have no reason whatsoever to vindicate themselves in the framework of Western civilisation, although their lives are constantly encroached and engendered by the administrative apparatus of power. However, they do refuse to be commodified into an expendable object in the market – at least on the deepest emotional level. Therefore, if the 'de-ter-

ritorised' land of the nomads is worth theorising and philosophising, it is due to the local hospitality which allows life, movement, and the regenerating forces to flow out against the all-encompassing will of civilisation.