Introduction

The Sources and Structures of the Bond of Authority

Islamist literature looks at the issue of reestablishing the original, just State, which rests on the fraternity of believers and on egalitarian principles established by the religion. The issue, which consists of questioning the foundations of such a State at its very birth and throughout the centuries that followed it, is crucial. The present work approaches this point by examining the nature and the foundations of the bond of authority in the Arab world. How can the strength of such a bond and the almost absolute power still held by heads of state today be explained?

To what degree does the genesis of the state account for such a reality? Can we detach the almost mythical state of the orthodox caliphs[1] from the states that came after it and refuse to inscribe it in a historical continuum that the advent of Islam was unable to break?

The present work arose out of a desire to understand an authority that is sometimes fascinating in the mystery that surrounds it but nonetheless terrifying in the abuses it can engender and that, in any case, essentially originates in the reasoning of another age. Social changes in the Arab world call for a knowledge of it without which a solid, coherent social project cannot come to fruition.

This work looks at the question from this perspective. Though in the chapters that follow the opening narrative the book deals with the period surrounding the birth of Islam and the great Omayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (749–1258) dynasties, it is in fact the present that is at issue, out of a desire to better understand the modalities of the exercise of power.

[1] The caliph was the lieutenant of the prophet Muhammad; here we refer to his successors: Abû Bakr, ʿOmar, ʿOthmân, and ʿAli, whose reigns extended from 632 to 661.

This period was not an arbitrary choice; it is quite simply unavoidable. We cannot avoid a detour through the founding moment. We must look to it in order to understand the present, in which the dead still maintain a grip on the living.

It is clear that the foundations of power in the Arab world have their roots precisely in those times. Therefore we will examine that period closely, not only because that power derives its legitimacy from it, but also and above all because we can most clearly see its genesis there. In Arab societies today, the mechanisms in existence at the birth of that power are practically invisible because they are hidden by the illusion of modernity promoted by institutions that originated elsewhere. Going back to the origins removes such screens. Furthermore, the Arab world is still far from having experienced true political and cultural changes that open the way to democracy and freedom. The strong influence of religion remains one of the major obstacles to this.

The question of the nature of the bond of authority leads to another one, essential in our times: that of the bonds between the religious and political realms. Here I attempt to approach this question in a non-traditional way. Servitude has been a very useful key in unlocking the space of the sacred and in desacralizing the approach to this question, or, to be more specific, by approaching it from the bond of authority. Three types of bonds are thus examined: master-slaves, king-subjects, and divinity-faithful. Passing from one to the other enables us to see the interrelationships and to better reveal the interplay of social and political change by emphasizing how naïve it would be, today, to raise this issue outside of any serious discussion of the place of religion in society, that is, without envisioning any fundamental ruptures.

Examining the relationships between the different levels of authority proves easier within the context of the advent of Islam and through the following period because of the crossovers existing during those times. Indeed, the boundaries between the sacred and the profane during that period were not entirely impermeable. The space of the divine was in the process of being circumscribed; the veil and the prohibitions were not yet mandatory. As for the king, he had not distanced himself from the slave master; he had not yet donned the opaque robe of the caliph and still allowed the true social content of his authority to be seen. In other words, there was still circulation and competition among the civil society, the political society, and the celestial society. This is why we must go back so far to investigate the reality of present-day power, which

fundamentally feeds from the same sources while flying the flags of the sacred and democracy. Approaching the question by way of servitude ultimately proves very useful.

Rarely has the question of authority in the Arab world been raised in terms of slavery. On the one hand, this social relationship has elicited little interest in the Muslim world, as Islam has exerted such a fascination that many authors have seen it, if not as an abolitionist religion, at least as being profoundly egalitarian. This perception has closed off any questioning of the nature of power in Muslim societies that would place slavery at its foundation, judging the institution to be unworthy of interest since it was assumed to be of little importance in those societies. Furthermore, a sort of discretion has worked against an unmasked examination of the mechanisms of authority, one that would break down the walls between the different levels of authority – from the celestial society to the earthly political society and on to the civil society – notably through the master-slave relationship. Such breaking of barriers, however, appears essential and fruitful.

Contrary to the widely held opinion, I believe that slavery was a determining aspect of social relationships in the Arab-Muslim world. Provided that it is not approached from the same perspective as for western society, ancient or modern – notably through its essential productive role in that society – slavery proves to be of surprising importance in an approach to social relationships and especially in an analysis of power.

This is why I have chosen this approach. On the one hand, the relationship between Islam and slavery remains largely subject to caution and is often the object of unconvincing shortcuts. Thus, to mention only one essential aspect in the analysis of authority, the question of the freedom and the perspectives of the servile classes in Muslim societies is largely unexamined. On the other hand, numerous indicators lead us to assume that the number of slaves was higher in Arab society than has generally been admitted. But without having to rely on numbers, it seems that slavery acted as a catalyst by setting the tone for the bond of authority in local communities, in which kinship was a powerful link. It formed the major referent in them by imposing servitude in its various facets as a mode of expression in relationships of power. Only through servitude could one measure the degree of proximity to the king. Political language borrows abundantly from the register of servitude, as does that of theology. No lexicon has been better adapted than that of servitude to guide the faithful in the quest to approach the divine.

With the goal of shedding light on the questions raised and being able to fully assess the bond of authority, this work attempts to dismantle the various modalities of domination, constraint, dependency, proximity, connection, and solicitation linking the chief – who despite his title of caliph remained a king in disguise – to his servants. The sources that are consulted prove eloquent. This work goes beyond classical historiography, which says little about the aspects it judges to be of scant interest. Linguistic, literary, and theological collections, by contrast, prove very useful. Examining the language through great Arabic dictionaries enables us to shed light on little-known aspects of the social relationships of power. Words have, in fact, preserved the memory of changed or hidden practices; we need merely to call them into question for these practices to be revealed.

This book is thus focused on the person of the king in his relationship with his servants. The complexity of this figure is presented here in its various aspects, both ordinary and extraordinary. But it is particularly the essential bond of authority, elevating the absolute master, that receives the greatest attention. A strange tale opens the work: it tells of the stormy relationships of a nineteenth-century Moroccan sultan with one of his agents of authority. This first tale, at least in part, orients our approach to the question.

1

The Deadly Lie, or the Death Announcement

Just as the caid's household was settling down for the evening, a man on horseback came galloping up out of nowhere. Foam dripped from the mouth of his mount, exhausted after racing all the way at full speed.

This abrupt arrival stupefied the gatekeepers. The rider burst into the courtyard without hesitation. No one approached him to ask why he had come. There seemed to be no force capable of stopping him. He went straight toward the caid, al-Hâj ʿAbdallah Ubihi. The intrepid messenger had come on behalf of the sultan.

The fortress sank into silence. A sort of paralysis took over the entire residence. Still as statues, the guards and servants from time to time glanced anxiously toward the house. Their vigil took on a tragic tone that was fueled by the last rays of the sun.

The call to evening prayers did not come. The call from the mosque outside the residence usually followed that of the inner mosque. That evening, the call was not heard, as if one had tried to delay nightfall. The *maghrib* (evening prayer) was like a threshold no one wanted to cross. Yet the final rays of daylight were slipping away. One by one, the veil of darkness covered them. Mournful shadows seemed to hover over the grounds. Finally, like an ax, night fell.

Al-ghurûb, or sunset, is a moment of finality. Like other words with the same root, it refers to an end, a limit, a mourning. *Al-gharb* means the extreme of everything, the end of the sun's trajectory, the final stage before night. It is the departure, the distancing, the exile that is also designated by the term *at-taghrib*. In reference to a sword, it means the tip. And in a funereal context, *al-ghurûb* describes tears flowing from the eyes.

As night fell, the chronicler notes, women's cries, tears of mourning and submission, could be heard from inside. The caid had confided in his most intimate circle, who then relayed the message to the rest of the household: "The caid bids you farewell and wants you to know: 'For now, he is going to see the sultan. If he returns, so much the better, and if not, farewell.'"

Al-Hâj ʿAbdallah left. A few days later his death was announced.[1] The news spread like wildfire through all of southwestern Morocco. The caid was practically a viceroy there.

His considerable fortune, including hundreds of slaves,[2] his dense network of connections in northern and southern Morocco, and his renown among all the tribes of the region have kept his memory alive to the present day. He was poisoned by the sultan himself, who offered the deadly cup with his own hands.

But more so than the death of the potentate, it is the sultan's announcement of the demise and the publicity surrounding the death that interest us in this tale. It is rare, in fact, that the death of a provincial chief, let alone its precise date, should be the object of such great attention to the point of being included in official history texts. Numerous provincial chiefs, disgraced for various reasons, were imprisoned and dispossessed without the "media" of the time taking note of them as they did in this case. How can we explain this unusual mode of communication?

THE ALLEGED CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DEATH

Contemporary history, on the whole, keeps the details of this figure's demise tightly under wraps. It shares the death of the caid and remains silent regarding the circumstances. The tales of this episode have reached us not through any written record but thanks to a rich oral history. It has given rise to more than one version.

The simplest account is that of the local chroniclers. Summoned by the sultan, the caid was thrown into prison in Marrakech. He died there shortly afterward. Mukhtâr Sûsi, the most significant of these chroniclers, reputed to be a fine observer, a native of the region having great knowledge of it, and a former minister of the throne, recounts this version. Succinct, it rejects the assassination hypothesis. After all, at that time dying in prison was common and did not arouse curiosity. Prison,

[1] Al-Mukhtâr as-Sûsî, *Min khilâli Jazûla*, IV, 86.
[2] M. Ennaji, *Soldats, domestiques et concubines*, Balland, 22.

as we shall see, was well known to be death's antechamber. Thus the author's attention was focused above all on the reasons for the caid's departure, less so on him personally than on the regional circumstances he left behind.

A second version tells us more. It comes from a European, Robert Montagne, an expert on the region, in his book on the Berbers and the Makhzen.[3] Sûsi, who had traveled the area by donkey gathering a wide range of accounts for his encyclopedia on the Souss,[4] heard this version but said not a word about it. He no doubt consciously chose to ignore it. Recording oral testimony, even long afterward, after tensions have abated, never fails to entail collateral damage.

Montagne's tale is filled with ruse and treachery. The caid was not summoned to appear before the sultan. No horseman had rushed in to pull him from his fortress at nightfall. His departure for Marrakech would not have caused the alleged mourning; no macabre outcome would have been foreseen at that moment. As was customary, the caid simply went to the kingdom's capital to pay his respects to the sultan and give him gifts, as he was expected to do.

The sultan awaited him in person, not with the intention of thanking him, but to accuse him of high treason. The factual history does not skimp on details. The sultan astounded the caid with supporting evidence before offering him the cup: "Do you prefer to drink this tea in silence, or shall I shackle the great caid Al-Hâj ʿAbdallah and drag him in front of the tribe before I cut off his head?"[5] The accused held out his hand, took the cup of poison without flinching, and went to die in his city residence, where his *qâdi* (judge, serving here as notary), who had accompanied him on his trip to Marrakech, was waiting for him.

Disgrace had befallen the caid without his having caught wind of it. His abrupt fall occurred at a time of intense conflict. Yet he was unanimously respected in the region. An unparalleled mediator, he put all his expertise and contacts to work in order to establish the sultan's authority in southern Morocco, in the Sahara. Thus, in that regard, the sultan should have congratulated himself on his agent's effectiveness. Nonetheless, the caid's fate was sealed. To uncover the reasons for his abrupt and fatal disgrace, we will have to look elsewhere, at the very nature of his relationship with his master, that is, at the bond of authority.

[3] Robert Montagne, *Les Berbères et le Makhzen*, 383.
[4] Al-Mukhtâr as-Sûsî, *al-Maʾsûl*, Royal Printing House, Rabat.
[5] Robert Montagne, *Les Berbères et le Makhzen*, 383.

THE ORIGINS OF THE DISGRACE

The story told by Robert Montagne emphasizes the relationships the caid maintained with a large Moroccan dynasty located farther south of his command, some forty kilometers from the city of Tiznit. The house of Iligh in the seventeenth century counted princes among its ranks. It lost its power with the rise and establishment of the Alaouite dynasty. Its chiefs took flight. History lost sight of their descendants after the destruction of their fortress by the central power. In the nineteenth century, the house came back into view. It regained its glory by playing a considerable role in commerce with black Africa through the Sahara. Its chiefs regained their prestige. They once again amassed considerable wealth. They became so famous that they were believed to have secessionist leanings.

In fact, the house was not as independent of the central power as history would lead us to believe, but that power was far away and was no match for the regional leaders. They found themselves with room to maneuver. Thus the chiefs of the house of Iligh played with their quasi-independence and cultivated their image as all-powerful chiefs, uncontested masters, at least among the local populations.

It was that image, Robert Montagne claims, that caused the death of the caid. He supposedly maintained close ties with the chief of the rebel house and upon his visit was received with such pomp that the event has endured in the popular memory. But no trace of this encounter is found either in published sources or in unpublished archives. However, despite the lack of written documents, nothing seems to repudiate this anecdote that is deeply anchored in the popular memory. Its date coincides with a hypothetical armed confrontation between the forces of the house of Iligh and the army of the crown prince at that time.[6]

That would have been enough, as the seeds of suspicion had been sown. Fate took care of the rest: a messenger from the caid misdirected a letter that was intended for the lord of Iligh. Curiously, the missive fell into the hands of the sultan; it convinced him completely of his servant's crime. According to another version, far from having misdirected the letter, the messenger took care to send it directly to the sultan. In fact, the path of the letter is unimportant. In either case, the sultan was omniscient and all-powerful, and luck was always on his side.

[6] M. Ennaji, "Discours politique et gestion des conflits," in *L'amitié du prince*, 86.

A QUESTIONABLE DEATH

Regardless of the circumstances of this episode, history is untruthful in the details. For the caid did not die! He lived for several more years in Marrakech after the supposed date of his death. This is a proven fact. Official documents after 1868 testify to this.[7] Later documents confirm the information.[8]

The historiography deliberately lied: how could the caid's fate have escaped court historians? Such a thing is highly improbable. The caid ʿAbdallah was such a well-known figure at the time that no high-level person could have been unaware of his activities; he had been one of the sultan's inseparable companions, a prodigious lord, constantly giving to the royal entourage and especially to the scribes.

So it is hard to understand how the chroniclers could have been so mistaken about his death. The declaration of his death in 1868 by the voices of authority had the appearance of a public announcement. It solemnly notified the servant people of the death of one of their own, while leaving the motives and means to be filled in by rumor.

But what kind of death was it? In the Arabic language, death is the opposite of life. It is the opposite of the principle of life. A dead land is one whose vital resources have been exhausted. Every thing dies when it stops moving. Thus the wind dies when it is calm, and a man dies when he lets sleep overtake him. Man also dies in a situation of decline or degeneration. The word by extension designates "difficult situations such as poverty, humiliation, begging, old age, and disobedience."[9] The prophetic tradition teaches that Satan was the first to die because he was the first to disobey. "To die" thus can also signify leaving the circle of servants to join the rank of infidels.

Satan would have died from that curse. Recall that the word "death" also means "deadly." Did the fallen Adam die? Of course! He died chased from paradise and from the world of immortals, forced at Satan's instigation to enter the world of mortals. In one tale of this episode, he leaves paradise at dusk. It is said that he died for having succumbed to temptation, for having broken the pact that connected him to God, and for having lacked resolve when facing the demon.[10]

[7] *Kunnach 47*, Royal Library, Rabat.
[8] Including a local work by al-Saddiqi, *Tarikh al-Sawira*.
[9] Ibn Mandhûr, *Lissân al-ʿArab*, II, 92. Henceforth *Lissân*.
[10] The Koran, 20:115–127.

Wasn't the caid guilty of the same crime? He allowed himself to become friends with a renegade, an outlaw.[11] The renegade in question, Ḥusayn Ben Hâchem, the chief of the house of Iligh mentioned above, refused, like Satan, to follow the royal order and to bend, following established rules, to the local agents of authority, that is, to the king's representatives. Arguing his sharifian ancestry and symbolically bearing the name of one of the grandsons of the Prophet, he refused to bow down to an agent of authority having more modest origins.

The caid ʿAbdallah would have been incapable of resisting the temptation. He was on the borders of the zone fully under the prince's control. He officiated over the border lands, in contact with unsettled tribes and practically autonomous chiefdoms, over an uncertain territory where authority wavered. He was at the crossroads of irrigated farmlands, the privileged domain of royal authority, and the edge of the desert, where recalcitrant communities could strike and then disappear without leaving a trace. He was on the border between the realm of servitude and the chasm of disobedience. In other words, he was between life and death. A delegate in negotiations with Ḥusayn, due to his diplomacy and his status, he moved in places the master avoided. His supposed leanings toward the chief of the house of Iligh managed to convince his superiors of his crime. The caid thus had listened to Satan. He had given into temptation and failed to obey orders. His disobedience led to his fall. As a result, he had to die.

METAMORPHOSIS

To die politically, of course. History confirms this indirectly through a tale by a court historian, ʿAbdarrahmân Ibn Zaydân. He provides precious information about the matter, though the facts might go unnoticed in the course of the story.

The historiographer does not formally challenge his predecessors. He does not bother to explicitly correct the supposed date of the caid ʿAbdallah's death, but he gives precious details about the circumstances of the event. According to him, the caid was in open conflict with the prince Mawlay Ḥassan, who was irritated by the great solicitude his father, the sultan Mohammed ben ʿAbdarrahmân, showed toward the great caid,

[11] M. Ennaji and P. Pascon, *Le Makhzen et le sous al-Aqsa, la correspondance de la maison d'Iligh*, CNRS, 1988, 14–15.