

African Post-Slavery: A History of the Future*

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Introduction

The term post-slavery refers to historical and social circumstances identifiable in contexts where slavery was a fundamental social institution and its legal abolition was followed by resilient legacies of past hierarchy and abuse. It is commonly used as an adjective, as in the expressions “post-slavery subjects,” “post-slavery population,” “post-slavery society,” “post-slavery plantation,” or “post-slavery literature.”¹ Although commonplace in studies of the Americas, it is less so—at least until recently—in Africanist research.

Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt, and Rebecca Scott distinguish between a “chronological” focus on the period that followed legal status abolition, and a focus on “the history of the category [slavery] itself” in their comparative volume on post-emancipation societies.² They show that outlawing enslavement and the slave trade did not immediately bring about the emancipation of ex-slaves and their descendants. In a chronological sense post-slavery is a process that follows legal abolition and can be periodized according to various criteria, such as the gradual accession of ex-slaves to property rights or full citizenship. Post-slavery also refers to discursive changes in how slavery and freedom are conceptualized and represented. Baz Lecocq, in this issue, emphasizes the discursive nature of post-slavery. He defines post-slavery as “the creation of a present in reference to an active past which, by creating a particular discursive and narrative memory of that past, influences the present.” The notion of “post-slavery,” he adds, indicates that emancipation “ought to have happened,” but has not.

The modal verb “ought to” does not denote a merely temporal reference. Like postcolonial studies, post-slavery studies have a critical purpose: to expose the continuing legacies of a state of affairs that *should have ended*. They denounce the continuing legacies

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¹ See, for example, C. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); G. Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2011); D. Scarr, *Seychelles since 1770: History of a Slave and Postslavery Society* (London: Hurst, 2000); J. Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

² Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt, and Rebecca Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 4.

of slavery and are neo-abolitionist in intent.³ The abolitionist bias of most contemporary research in this field risks building a teleological argument that sees post-slavery as a stage that follows legal status abolition and leads to the inevitable, if sometimes slow, death of slavery. But framing our analysis in these terms may hinder our understanding of societies in which legal pluralism makes possible the simultaneous and tense coexistence of abolitionist ideologies, on the one hand, and worldviews in which slavery is seen as integral to the constitution of society, on the other. In such contexts we should try to explain the co-presence of slavery and post-slavery, and not the transition from the former to the latter.

Discursive regimes about slavery in Africa are not unified. A post-slavery perspective is relevant to discursive fields in which slavery is thought of as an institution that should have ended following its abolition in colonial, national, and international law. Such contexts include the official discourse of the state, and the discourses of individuals and groups who have internalized an abolitionist ethos and agenda. They are less applicable in contexts where colonial abolition and international anti-slavery are regarded suspiciously as unwelcome interventionism in African affairs, or contexts where the echoes of these discourses are so faint that they hardly matter at all to people's everyday life. How can we make sense of the discourses of slavery that pervade these other contexts?

The past has been experienced differently by different African social groups, and so too the present. Interpretations of the past are particularly contested in relation to ideas and institutions that were originally introduced under colonial regimes. Some African groups and individuals enrolled in colonial projects; others surreptitiously tried to turn them to their own ends. In most regions there was upfront resistance to the central tenets of colonial governance, including abolitionism.⁴ Some remote regions eluded the control of an understaffed and underfinanced colonial administration and existed as semi-autonomous social fields where precolonial hierarchies continued to operate. The coexistence of multiple ideologies resulted in normative pluralism in African discourses of slavery and emancipation.

This normative and legal pluralism is particularly visible in Islamic contexts. For example, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and many states in Nigeria have instituted Sharia as the main source of civil and criminal law. Here some normative interpretations

³ The term neo-abolitionism was first used in the 1960s in relation to civil rights movements in the United States, e.g., Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon, 1964). More recently Benjamin Lawrance has applied it to contemporary antislavery humanitarian advocacy in Africa, Benjamin Lawrance, "Documenting Child Slavery with Personal Testimony: The Origins of Antitrafficking NGOs and Contemporary Neo-Abolitionism," in Benjamin Lawrance and Richard Roberts, eds., *Trafficking in Slavery's Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 163–83.

⁴ Resistance on the part of slave owners is broadly documented. It took many forms, from armed opposition and avoidance in the early stages of colonial occupation, to requests that they be allowed to keep their slaves, to secret efforts at keeping slavery and the slave trade alive. See for example Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 164–67.

are incompatible with international treaties and conventions of which these countries are co-signatories.⁵ Ann Mayer has shown that from an Islamic perspective equal rights for women and foreigners are the most controversial aspects of international human rights law.⁶ Annie Bunting has explored the local interpretations of Islamic and international law in relation to early marriage in Northern Nigeria, where international human rights are contested by men and women alike.⁷ Different Muslim constituencies give different interpretations of Islamic Law with regard to the circumstances of slave descendants and their legal position vis-à-vis the descendants of their former owners.⁸ Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh has shown that in Mauritania the legal status of slave descendants, their rights and obligations toward former masters, and their claims to the ownership of land are deeply contested.⁹ Not only are Islamic perspectives sometimes in conflict with international anti-slavery legislation, but there is no unified Islamic position with regard to contemporary slavery.¹⁰

Legal, normative, and religious pluralism belong to the *longue durée* of African history and influence the reception of international anti-slavery law. Alternative normative and legal frameworks provide diverse interpretations of slavery and emancipation. These alternative frameworks often slip under the radar screens of anti-slavery activism and research. When they suddenly appear on these screens, they trigger outrage more readily than analysis. For what could be more heinous than slavery in the present day? Yet our own un-reflexive reactions are precisely those that we should guard against most vigilantly. Their immediacy is a consequence of the fact that “freedom is neither past nor elsewhere; it is the historical terrain we currently inhabit, the system that governs our lives, our livelihoods, and our consciousness.”¹¹

⁵ See case studies in Shamil Jeppie, Ebrahim Moosa, and Richard Roberts, eds., *Muslim Family Law in Sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial Legacies and Post-colonial Challenges* (Amsterdam: ISIM/Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

⁶ Anne Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 97–130.

⁷ Anne Bunting and Sally Engle Merry, “Global Regulation and Local Political Struggles: Early Marriage in Northern Nigeria,” in Alladen Venkatesh and Ronald Kassimir, eds., *Youth, Globalization, and the Law* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 321–53; Anne Bunting, “‘Authentic Sharia’ as a Cause and Cure for Women’s Human Rights Violations in Northern Nigeria,” *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 9 (2011), 152–70.

⁸ William Gervaise Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18–21.

⁹ Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, “Géographie de la liberté: Émancipation légale, émancipation foncière et appartenance tribale en Mauritanie” (unpublished paper presented at the workshop, “C’est qui, c’est quoi le ââtâni? Etude comparative entre le sud Maroc et la Mauritanie bidane,” Collège de France, Paris, 28–30 September 2011).

¹⁰ Amal Ghazal, “Debating Slavery and Abolition in the Arab Middle East,” in Behnaz Mirzai, Ismael Musah Montana, and Paul Lovejoy, eds., *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2009), 139–54.

¹¹ Cooper, Holt, and Scott, *Beyond Slavery*, 3.

We perceive freedom as the norm, and slavery as a moral aberration. For the purpose of this discussion, “we” refers to the majority of anti-slavery activists and researchers publishing in the main academic publications in European languages, whose views are broadly aligned with abolitionist agendas. This perception is a historical legacy of European abolitionism. Its discursive grip is so entrenched that it makes freedom appear as self-evidently desirable, and dependence as irremediably flawed. This article examines the perspectives of people who *do not* inhabit the “historical terrain of freedom,” and whose lives, livelihoods, and consciousness are governed by ideas and norms that have other genealogies.

Those who retain hierarchical ideologies that support extreme forms of dependence, and possibly slavery, are usually the descendants of slave owners and elites. But occasionally persons of slave descent, too, accept forms of subjection that vary from the exchange of customary gifts to the sale of people; from the occasional performance of unpaid services for former masters to the payment of ransom to purchase one’s freedom. What accounts for these positions? What discourses do these groups mobilize to show that the end of slavery is not inevitable? I am not concerned here with traffickers who choose to be involved in illegal activities. Rather, I wish to concentrate on broadly documented African contexts where precolonial slavery and related hierarchies have been dying a slow death—or may not have been dying at all. For research purposes such contexts should be spared the enormous condescension of anti-slavery activism.¹² Indeed, the forms and formalities of *both* contemporary slavery *and* anti-slavery should be subjected to critical scrutiny.

In Euro-America’s African politics one can trace many failed institutional attempts to regulate African labor relations and social hierarchies—first and foremost, slavery. For over two centuries abolitionism has been a source of moral capital for those who spearheaded its doctrines.¹³ It still is.¹⁴ This urges us to think critically not only about the legacies of African slavery but also about the legacies of abolitionism in Africa, and to examine the constellations of power to which both discursive fields give rise. If our aim is to deconstruct discursive formations that “by creating a particular discursive and narrative memory of the past, influence the present” then we should focus not only on post-slavery, but also on post-abolitionism. But if, given the intense activity of anti-slavery organizations today, we find neo-abolitionism (or simply abolitionism) a satisfactory gloss for present circumstances, perhaps “slavery” (or neo-slavery?) is a more appropriate analytical term than “post-slavery.” Perhaps post-slavery is not a present reality, but a future option.

¹² I am paraphrasing E.P. Thompson’s famous expression, “the enormous condescension of posterity,” *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1963), 12.

¹³ Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Joel Quirk, *The Anti-Slavery Project: From the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 82–110.

¹⁴ For example, Kevin Bales of Free the Slaves was awarded several prizes and awards for his anti-slavery work. Biram Dah Abeid, President of the Mauritanian Anti-Slavery Association *Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste* (IRA), won the main UN human rights prize in 2013.

In what follows I discuss these questions in three sections. The first section examines the case of Hadijatou Mani, which reveals the coexistence of normative views that support slavery alongside official anti-slavery legislation in the region of Southern Niger and Northern Nigeria. The second section discusses the notion of “slave descent” that is commonly used in historical studies of African emancipation in the twentieth century: it considers groups known as *hratin* in Morocco and Mauritania, and asks whether “slave descent” implies actual slavery or classificatory slavery, and how truly helpful it is as an analytical category. The last section examines the debate on the role of Gorée Island (Senegal) as a world heritage site, and explores prevalent forms of public commemoration of “African slavery.” It highlights the very partial view of post-slavery enabled by such commemorative practices, which focus narrowly on the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and silence the history of African emancipation.

What if Slavery Was Neither Dead Nor Dying? Normative Pluralism in Niger and Northern Nigeria

International legal integration is, to some extent, a chimera. Institutions are in place, and (usually) the right actors duly sign the right agreements and conventions. But laws are tools: applied *potentially* but not necessarily in practice. More work needs to be done on legal pluralism to determine the existing official legal provisions in different African countries; how they are perceived and implemented, in practice, by those subject to these laws; and which—if any—alternative normative discourses are brought to bear in relation to practices analogous to slavery.

In different regions and at different moments in time African societies have been integrated into various legal frameworks that characterized slavery differently and prescribed different avenues for emancipation. Although today most African states have abolished slavery, neither state law nor international law are perceived by everyone everywhere as the only legitimate sources of rules of social morality and individual behavior. The result has been a variety of practices and interpretations concerning slavery and the meaning of freedom. These practices and interpretations are influenced by religious beliefs and ideologies of gender and status. In each legal and normative tradition, what is considered acceptable for some groups is not, or not always, seen as acceptable for others: men and women, people of free and slave descent, “insiders” and “outsiders” have been seen as having different “needs,” rights, and options for making claims or bringing about change in their lives.

The case of Hadijatou Mani is emblematic.¹⁵ Hadijatou was born to an enslaved mother in Southern Niger in 1984. When she was twelve years old she was sold to El Hadj Souleymane Naroua, a friend of her mother’s master, for the equivalent of £250. She thereby became Souleymane Naroua’s concubine, and as such she was sexually accessible to him without restriction and had to carry out domestic work without pay for her master

¹⁵ Jean Allain, “Hadijatou Mani Koraou v. Republic of Niger: Judgement no. ECW/CCJ/JUD/06/08,” *American Journal of International Law* 103, 2 (2009), 311–17; Helen Duffy, “Hadijatou Mani Koroua v. Niger: Slavery Unveiled by the ECOWAS Court,” *Human Rights Law Review*, 9, 1 (2009), 151–70. See also the website set up to raise funds to produce a documentary on Hadijatou’s story, <http://www.hadijatou.org/en/>.

and his free wives.¹⁶ On 18 August 2005, Souleymane Naroua granted Hadijatou a ransom certificate after Hadijatou had given birth to a child. She refused to remain with him and left. Souleymane Naroua argued that (in his interpretation of Maliki Law) she was automatically his wife.¹⁷ The case was brought to Konni's local tribunal, which on 20 March 2004, ruled that there had been no marriage because no bridewealth had been paid, and that consequently Hadijatou was free to walk away from Souleymane Naroua.¹⁸ Souleymane appealed to a higher tribunal (*Tribunal de Grand Instance de Konni*) which on 16 June 2006, reversed the lower tribunal's decision and ruled that under customary law Hadijatou was de facto married to him.¹⁹

Witness Almou Wangara reported part of the Tribunal's discussion: "The Prefect told the ex-master: 'since you already manumitted this woman, what you should do now is pay bridewealth—we will try to convince her to accept the marriage'; but the ex-master stood up and said, 'no, how can this be! I purchase a woman and then I am expected to pay bridewealth?' After this reaction the Prefect said: look, there is nothing I can do, you should leave."²⁰ With the support of national and international anti-slavery organizations, Hadijatou brought her case before the Supreme Court of Niamey, which sent the case back to a differently constituted higher tribunal in Konni on 28 December 2006.

¹⁶ On concubinage in early Islamic and Maliki law, see Jonathan Brockopp, *Early Malicki Law: Ibn Abd al-Hakam and His Major Compendium of Jurisprudence* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 192–207; Joseph Schacht, "Umm al-Walad," *Encyclopedia of Islam* 4 (1913–1936), 1012–1015; John Hunwick, "Islamic Law and Polemics over Race and Slavery in North and West Africa (16th–19th century)," in Shaun Marmon, ed., *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1999), 43–68. For historical studies of concubinage in Northern Nigeria, see Paul Lovejoy, "Concubinage in the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903)," *Slavery and Abolition*, 11, 2 (1990), 158–89; Paul Lovejoy, "Concubinage and the Status of Women Slaves in Early Colonial Northern Nigeria," *Journal of African History* 29, 2 (1988), 245–66; Heidi Nast, *Concubines and Power: Five-Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). For works including testimonies by concubines in Northern Nigeria, see Beverly Mack, "Service and Status: Slaves and Concubines in Kano, Nigeria," in R. Sanjek and S. Colen, eds., *At Work in Homes: Household Workers in World Perspective* (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association Monograph Series, 1990), 14–34; Ibrahim Hamza, "Concubinage and the Legal Status of Property Inheritance in the Northern Nigerian Emirates" (unpublished paper presented at conference "Tales of Slavery," University of Toronto, 20–23 May 2009).

¹⁷ The most common interpretation appears to be that a concubine, even after having borne a child to her master and been manumitted, would only be free (to walk away and remarry) after his death. Other sources suggest that once manumitted a concubine would immediately be free to remarry. For a discussion of these positions, see Lovejoy, "Concubinage in the Sokoto Caliphate," 169–70.

¹⁸ Payment of bridewealth was the main criterion used by British colonial judges to determine whether a woman was a wife or a concubine; see Lovejoy, "Concubinage and the Status," 252.

¹⁹ Details and citations are taken from the text of the ECOWAS verdict ECW/CCJ/APP/08/08 of 27 October 2008.

²⁰ ECOWAS verdict ECW/CCJ/APP/08/08 of 27 October 2008. My translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Meanwhile Hadijatou married Ladan Rabo with the consent of her brother Koraou Mani, and Souleymane Naroua brought a complaint against her for bigamy. On 2 May 2007 the Correctional Tribunal of the *Tribunal de Grand Instance de Konni* sentenced Hadijatou, her husband, and her brother to six months' imprisonment and a fine of £50. They were imprisoned on 9 May. Rather than condemning Hadijatou's enslavement under the relevant national and international legislation, the judge argued that, "the marriage of a free man and a slave woman is legitimate [*licite*], if he does not have the means to marry a free woman and he fears to commit the sin of fornication."²¹

Hadijatou appealed her conviction and the Court of Appeal of Niamey gave judgment on 9 July 2007: it deferred its final decision pending the conclusive verdict of the divorce judge and released Hadijatou and her family, who by that time had served two months in prison. The Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) heard Hadijatou's case on 7 April 2008. In the case "Hadijatou Mani Koraou contre la République du Niger," Hadijatou claimed that Niger had failed to meet its international obligations to prevent slavery and discrimination and to implement its own laws against slavery. This was the first time that an ECOWAS court had heard a slavery case. Hadijatou won the case by Decree no. ECW/CCJ/JUD/06/08 of 27 October 2008.

How should this case be interpreted? In Niger, as in other former French colonies, the colonial regime formally endorsed the operation of "customary law." At independence, the new constitution continued to recognize the role of traditional law. Colonial native courts were replaced with regional tribunals (such as the tribunal of Konni mentioned above) where trained judges choose whether "modern law" or "customary law" applies on a case-by-case basis.²² These provisions leave a large margin of uncertainty in relation to the range of legal criteria that can be applied to any case. In Hadijatou Mani's case, the judge's argument that "under customary law" Hadijatou's "marriage" to Souleymane was legitimate is a clear example of the contradictions implicit in this system: from what is known to us about this case, Souleymane Naroua did not attempt to deny that he had bought Hadijatou. If anything, he publicly stated as much in order to avoid paying the bridewealth prescribed for legal marriage to free women. The judge could have reasoned according to two alternative paradigms of argument:²³ he could have followed the prescriptions of international and national anti-slavery legislation, or he could have applied "customary law," influenced by his interpretation of Islamic law on marriage and concubinage. He took the latter option.

Ambiguities inhere in the legal structure of countries like Niger. But in Niger the resolution of disputes and conflicts does not necessarily entail recourse to state tribunals,

²¹ ECOWAS verdict ECW/CCJ/APP/08/08 of 27 October 2008, p. 15, para. 83.

²² Barbara Cooper, "Secular States, Muslim Law and Islamic Religious Culture: Gender Implications of Legal Struggles in Hybrid Legal Systems in Contemporary West Africa," *Droits et Cultures* 59 (2010–11), 97–120; Barbara Cooper, "Injudicious Intrusions: Chiefly Authority and Islamic Judicial Practice in Maradi, Niger," in Jeppie, Moosa, and Roberts, *Muslim Family Law*, 183–218.

²³ John Comaroff and Simon Roberts, *Rules and Processes* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 84.

or even formally trained lawyers. Civil litigations in rural areas are often adjudicated by village chiefs and canton chiefs (*chefs de canton*). Today those occupying these positions are elected, but candidates are restricted to the members of certain families. Other administrative roles, such as regional judges, mayors, and other local-level bureaucrats tended—until recently—to be the preserve of local elites, or the so-called *chefferie traditionnelle*. Decentralization started to alter the composition of the local administration, and some positions can now be filled by candidates from any social background.²⁴ In municipalities where slave descendants formed a large proportion of the population, the local administration started including representatives of these groups. This was a major democratic breakthrough in African countries, where the political participation of slave descendants had been severely restricted.²⁵ However, it cannot be assumed that slave descendants will be more sympathetic to the plight of people from the same background as themselves. Working on the Haalpulaar MaccuBe of Mauritania, Olivier Leservoisier has showed that social and economic mobility often results in a denial of past enslavement and the adoption of elitist attitudes by people from low-status backgrounds.²⁶ Slave descendants who achieve upward social mobility would rather bury a shameful past than pursue an abolitionist agenda.

By contrast, slave descendants who are still struggling with extreme poverty and vulnerability often choose to reject an abolitionist stance because enduring dependence may offer safety from hunger and further impoverishment. In her study of the Iklan of Burkina Faso Anne-Marie Bouman described these circumstances as “benefits of belonging.”²⁷ Alliances between exploiters and exploited may appear paradoxical. But extreme vulnerability (to hunger, disease, and ultimately to death) pushes people to accept dependence even in its extreme forms. The victims’ acceptance of conditions that would be prosecutable as forms of slavery or unfree labor means that these circumstances go unreported. Indeed, it is not always clear how far these dependants would wish to challenge the hierarchical ideologies that define their lives.

So why is slavery allowed to persist? Part of the answer is easy: legal prohibition does not lead to the cessation of criminal activities. Those who gain from the exploitation of the labor of others, or of their sexual and reproductive powers, choose to act illegally and find ways to enslave others irrespective of the law. But slavery also continues because factors other than the priorities of international anti-slavery activism regulate the social perception and management of practices analogous to slavery. In these contexts,

²⁴ Eric Hahonou, “Past and Present African Citizenships of Slave Descent: Lessons from Benin,” *Citizenship Studies* 15, 1 (2011), 77.

²⁵ Eric Hahonou and Lotte Pelckmans, “West African Antislavery Movements: Citizenship Struggles and the Legacies of Slavery,” *Stichproben* 20 (2011), 145.

²⁶ Olivier Leservoisier, “Contemporary Trajectories of Slavery in Haalpulaar Society (Mauritania),” in Benedetta Rossi, ed., *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 140–51.

²⁷ Annemarie Bouman, *Benefits of Belonging: Dynamics of Iklan Identity, Burkina Faso* (Utrecht: University of Utrecht, 2003).

hierarchies rooted in personalized dependence offer desirable options to those who occupy higher *and lower* ranks of society. People exposed to extreme poverty who cannot opt for resistance often (not always) accept conditions similar to enslavement, or even collaborate in their own dependence, in order to be integrated in hierarchies that grant them a degree of safety.

In regions of Niger that are geographically and culturally close to Hadijatou Mani's area of origin, Hadijatou's experience is not unique. Fathers of slave descent who give their daughters "in marriage" to wealthy men do not always receive the customary bridewealth. Instead, a payment is made to the descendants of the parents' masters. In a village that I shall call Zango, these circumstances have been described to me with regret, as legacies of past slavery that continue to generate abuses in contemporary society. I collected these observations in the course of informal conversations with elderly men of slave descent who decried the inequalities between them and men of free descent, who invariably receive bridewealth when their daughters get married. It is noteworthy that these complaints had little, if anything, to do with indignation at the continuing enslavement of women. They exposed, at once, the persistence of slavery and the unproblematic nature of the commodification of women's bodies and persons across status groups.

For reasons I have discussed elsewhere, I do not think that the purchase of a concubine should be equated with the bridewealth paid to a father for the marriage of his daughter.²⁸ Yet it is symptomatic that cases such as Hadijatou's were first presented to me as a problem afflicting fathers of slave descent, not girls sold into slavery or forced to marry against their will. In contexts where arranged marriages are common for freeborn women, part of what evokes moral outrage in Western assessment of cases of concubinage is seen as unproblematic. Concubinage is an enduring form of female slavery. Its endurance owes much to how the status of women is portrayed in gender ideologies that see dependence on a male guardian as a woman's normal condition. It is also due to the fact that outside observers are likely to mistake concubines for freeborn wives or female domestics. Moreover, concubinage is sometimes defended as a positive institution that provides a dignified status to certain categories of women; arguments in its favor often resemble the statement attributed by General Daumas to a trans-Saharan trader: "Amongst you [in France], married women have nothing but contempt for female servants who give birth to a child of their master. If such a woman wishes to live an acceptable life, she can never say no. Amongst us, she is an *oum el-ouled* [sic]; she has her own home; her son is honoured; and both her and her son belong to the family."²⁹

Villages like Zango host a homogeneous population of slave descendants, where the last two generations of men of slave descent started acquiring marginal land and capital and building families of their own, a prerogative that would have been denied to their enslaved fathers or grandfathers. When exceptional economic mobility allows them to do

²⁸ Benedetta Rossi, "Introduction: Rethinking Slavery in West Africa," in Rossi, ed., *Reconfiguring Slavery*, 7–8.

²⁹ Melchior Daumas, *Le Grand Désert: Itinéraire d'une caravane du Sahara au royaume Haoussa* (1856; repr., Paris: Quintette, 1985), 220.

so, these men try to seclude their wives and thereby spare them the heavy workloads of formerly enslaved women. Wife seclusion signals upward social mobility and reproduces the strategies of distinction of free elites. It shows that in contexts where emancipation from slavery is a major social struggle, women's emancipation from patriarchy is not on the agenda.³⁰

Zango's inhabitants continue to interact occasionally with the descendants of their former masters. They can be considered closer to emancipation than persons like Hadijatou Mani's mother. Hadijatou's mother may have never experienced, or sought, any form of economic independence from the family of her master. Unlike Zango's inhabitants, who live at some distance from former elites, she probably grew up as a domestic slave (or concubine) in an elite family. In these circumstances, few options other than subservience would have been accessible to her. Acceptance of subservience assured her and her children safety from hunger—by no means a trivial achievement for a woman of her status in places like Southern Niger. Poor Nigerien women and men aspire to higher incomes that will protect them from hunger, disease, and untimely death. In these contexts, the “marriage” of a daughter (as a concubine) to a wealthy man like Souleymane Naroua may appear as a blessing for the entire family and for any girl who may be desired by such a man. The girl may be won over by the advantages of a life that promises security for herself and her offspring, some leisure, good clothes, and occasional luxuries in the form of nice jewellery and gifts.

Nowadays the meanings of concubinage are being renegotiated, and such unions are interpreted differently by different categories of actors involved in them. In Southern Niger I met women of slave descent who “married” elite men and chiefs. Men and women mention such cases in proud discourses of emancipation that emphasize how today, after the abolition of slavery, “our women” are sought and “married” by elite men. Their statements play on the ambiguity of concubinage—it is possible to refer to a concubine as the “wife” of a powerful man and the mother of wealthy adults. Elderly concubines who lived a life they have come to value may prefer not to dwell on negative experiences, such as moments in their youth when they may have resented intimacy with an older man who bought them and did not pay the customary bridewealth to their fathers.³¹ From these perspectives, Hadijatou Mani's resistance is seen as unproductive. Hadijatou is thought to have brought shame upon her whole community, a shame that persons of slave descent are struggling to overcome.

When I went back to Zango in 2010, I asked the men who had resented never receiving bridewealth for their daughter's marriage what they thought about the case of Hadijatou Mani. Naïvely, I expected expressions of triumph and the acknowledgement that one more step had been made in the long struggle for emancipation that they saw as their

³⁰ For a comparative example, see Miriam Cottias, “Gender and Republican Citizenship in the French West Indies, 1848–1945,” *Slavery and Abolition* 26, 2 (2005), 233–45.

³¹ The testimonies of Fatma Barka and Hajiya Ma'daki are cases in point. See Ann McDougall, “A Sense of Self: The Life of Fatma Barka,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32, 2 (1998), 285–315; Mack, “Hajiya Ma'daki.”

own. Surprised, these men asked me how had I found out about Hadijatou Mani's case. I replied that it had been in the headlines of European newspapers. They looked disconcerted and one of them cried out: "The name of the country is spoiled!"

Surely, in their own villages, these men are embittered by the legacies of slavery. They aspire to the lifestyles of wealthier Nigerien Muslims, and do not share the aspirations to autonomy and gender equality of Western feminists. They are self-reflexively aware of how their enslaved backgrounds are stigmatized by elite Nigerien, and they (men and women) confront the demanding challenge of simultaneously overcoming both extreme poverty and the stigma of identities sullied by slavery. Poverty sometimes requires them to reactivate dependence and seek the patronage of former masters. When this humiliation can be avoided, they try to silence a past that brings shame to men and women alike.³² They are aware, too, of how their poverty and the poverty of Niger is represented in international discourses, where Niger is often portrayed as a country where slavery is allowed to continue. Such representations—in which a civilized "West" lands the role of saving Nigeriens from backwardness—are resented. Many Nigeriens see the popularity of the case of Hadijatou Mani as contributing to these representations. While fighting to feed their families and establish their dignity at home, many people in places like Zango resent being represented internationally not just as poor, but also as uncivilized, to an audience that does not know or understand the contexts of their choices.

The case of Hadijatou Mani conflates elements of slavery and post-slavery. Through the brokerage of antislavery NGOs this specific case entered a post-slavery discursive field whereby it was deemed unacceptable by agents who occupied institutional positions of power *vis-à-vis* Souleymane Naroua and others like him (including some judges). But it is clear from Souleymane Naroua's statements, from the decision of some judges in Konni, and from the views of Zango's inhabitants, that Hadijatou's circumstances were and are understood differently by many Nigeriens, and indeed by people in other African countries. In these contexts, concubinage constitutes a licit type of sexual and social union between men and women. For some women of slave descent concubinage opens a path to "true emancipation" at the hand of a (former) master.

The demise of slavery does not depend only on the operation of anti-slavery legislation. Other factors are less amenable to regulation and reform, as they reflect the operation of economic and cultural forces. The social inequalities that structure relations between former slaves and former masters could be redressed politically. But politicians, bureaucrats, and administrators do not necessarily act in the interest of the most vulnerable and dispossessed groups. The marginalization of these groups is supported ideologically by cultural representations that praise the subservient behavior of a former slave, the selflessness of a mother, the deference of a wife, and the seductive powers of a concubine. These very ideologies narrow down the options available to members of these groups, seen as lacking the right "aptitude" (courage, intellectual sophistication, strength, leadership abilities) for being *anything* but a subservient slave, a selfless mother, a deferential wife, or

³² Martin Klein, "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget," *History in Africa* 16 (1989), 207–19.

an attractive concubine. These ideologies entrench the vulnerability of slave descendants, especially women.

But who are “slave descendants”? Do they share similar living conditions and a consciousness marked by their past enslavement, or is this group a figment of the historiography of African slavery? In a post-slavery situation we would expect those seen to come “from slavery” to form a unified constituency as a consequence of their perceived slave origins in shared discourses about a past that ought to have ended. This does not seem to be the case across African countries and regions.

What Is “Slave Descent”? Real and Classificatory Slavery in Morocco and Mauritania³³

What does it mean, after worldwide legal emancipation, to define groups or individuals as “slave descendants”? When slavery was legal, legal provisions distinguished slaves from other categories of “free” people and defined the nature of relations of production, reproduction, and property between different categories of slaves and their masters. But today, the vernacular terminology that identifies certain groups (Bellah, Buzu, Hratin, Abd, and others) is often an anachronism that bears no relation to the current economic and political status of the carriers of such labels. However, there are cases where slave origins continue to affect the everyday lives of people who never ceased being exploited by the descendants of their forebears’ masters. In many instances, the descendants of slaves struggled to conceal their origins, removing from our records the most successful cases of emancipation, and leaving us with a partial view of the conditions of persons of slave ancestry.

We cannot assume that we already know who is of slave descent and who is not, and what being of slave descent *does* to those who perceive themselves, or are perceived by others, as coming “from slavery.” If it is difficult to identify slave descendants, it is also unclear whether those designated as such actually share common circumstances. In order to understand who slave descendants are, today, we must study the relationship between labels and practices, and explore why some people carry certain labels (while others drop them); what labels mean in terms of social status; and what the economic and political implications are of being classed as a slave descendant at any particular time or place. Under which circumstances is slave descent invoked? When is it silenced? When do former masters remind the descendants of their slaves of their status? When do slave descendants themselves reclaim slave origins? When do politicians mobilize collective legacies of slavery as part of their political strategies? And what are the consequences of framing social, political, and economic relations in terms of slave and free descent?

We are confronted by two analytical problems. First, given the uneven trajectories followed by slave descendants (and their original differences *as slaves*), are researchers justified in studying people seen as coming “from slavery” as a single social category? Or are the *differences within* people of slave descent so great that “slave descent” cannot be

³³ I presented this section at the conference, “C’est qui, c’est quoi le ââtâni? Etude comparative entre le sud Maroc et la Mauritanie bidane,” organized by Anne McDougall at the Collège de France, Paris, 28–30 September 2011.

used for meaningful generalizations? We can call this the homogeneity problem. A second set of questions is related to the causal relevance of slave ancestry to contemporary social and economic conditions: is slave descent the causally relevant factor that explains the circumstances of the groups classified as slave descendants? There is a risk that using “slave descent” as an analytical category may make us attribute to slave origins conditions that derive from circumstances shared with other marginalized groups (for example, landlessness) and rooted in dynamics that owe little, if anything, to one’s ancestors’ enslavement. But is this always the case, or are there cases where “slave descent” is precisely what matters, by affecting in specific ways the opportunities of persons “coming from slavery”? We can refer to this second set of questions as the “causal relevance” problem.

As memories of actual enslavement fade away, it becomes necessary to question the relevance of slave descent as an analytical category. The *Hratin*—discussed in McDougall’s article in this issue—are a case in point, because the literature about them is divided between studies that qualify them as slave descendants and studies that see them as of free origins.³⁴ Many of the *Hratin* who claim free origins owe their low status to past or present landlessness and dependence upon exploitative landlords. Thus, the case of the *Hratin* illustrates with particular clarity both the problem of homogeneity (not all *Hratin* are seen as slave descendants, and “slave descendants” include both some *Hratin* and groups known by different names) and the causal relevance problem (the current conditions of some *Hratin* seem to derive from erstwhile enslavement, but other *Hratin* would appear to owe their marginality to other factors such as landlessness).

The testimonies collected in Mauritania and Morocco by Ann McDougall and her research team reveal what appears to be a paradox. In McDougall’s Mauritanian field sites those groups who were identified and self-identified as *Hratin* saw themselves, and were seen by others, as slave descendants. By contrast, in her Moroccan field sites persons classified as *Hratin* denied that either themselves or their ancestors had ever been enslaved.³⁵ Here, slave descendants are known as *abd* (literally, “slaves”), and—as shown below—the categories *abd* and *Hratin* (sometimes also called *isouquiyin* or *khammas*) are kept distinct. Hence, if “in terms of designation,” as McDougall clearly puts it, the comparable groups are the Mauritanian and Moroccan *Hratin*, in terms of social status

³⁴ See R. Botte, “Riimaybe, Haratin, Iklan: Les Damnés de la Terre, le Développement et la Démocratie,” in A. Bourgeot, ed., *Horizons nomades en Afrique sahélienne: Sociétés, développement et démocratie* (Paris: Karthala, 1999), 55–78; M. Villasante-de Beauvais, ed., *Groupes serviles au Sahara: Approche comparative à partir du cas des arabophones de Mauritanie* (Paris: IREMAM-CNRS éditions, 2000); O. Leservoisière, “Recompositions identitaires en Mauritanie (Maures et Peuls): Une illustration de la dialectique de la mémoire et de l’oubli,” in G. Gosselin and J.-P. Lavaud, eds., *Ethnicité et mobilisations sociales* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), 245–59; O. Leservoisière, “Enjeux des traditions inventées chez des groupes d’origine servile: Les Harâtin de Mauritanie,” in D. Dimitrijevic, ed., *Fabrication des traditions: Invention de modernité* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 2004), 163–74.

³⁵ Ann McDougall, “The ‘Invisible People’: Hratin of Mauritania and Southern Morocco,” (public lecture given at The Africa Talks, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 4 September 2012).

within their respective societies, the two comparable groups are the Mauritanian *Hratin* and the Moroccan *abd*—that is, the two groups for whom slave descent is indicated in local social classifications. McDougall suggests that, irrespective of the categories used, what mattered in terms of people’s status, opportunities, sense of self, and relationships with others, was their ability or inability to recollect the circumstances in which they, or their ancestors, had been *freed*.

The distinction between being “free” and being “freed” may appear trivial, but it is not so in contexts where being “freed” implies both the fact of having been enslaved, and the lingering social relations that tie descendants of slaves to descendants of masters. For Mauritanian and Moroccan informants, slave descent could only be (self-)ascribed in the presence of tangible and publicly acceptable evidence of past enslavement. Nowadays, such evidence is usually available only through people’s capacity to identify their former master(s) and document the circumstances of their manumission. Therefore, establishing who is, and who is not, a slave descendant amounts to establishing who has been freed *and can prove it*, and who cannot.

Proving that one’s freedom (or the freedom of one’s parents) has been granted by a particular master not only makes it possible to terminate an unwanted relationship, but also entitles the freed person(s) to claim support from past masters (who, in turn, can have legitimate expectations from former slaves). Paradoxical as this may appear from the perspective of international anti-slavery activism, the capacity to assert one’s slave origins by pointing to a master’s act of manumission works two ways: it can bring stigma to those seen as coming “from slavery” and encourage them to break all ties with the past; but it can also increase their safety by facilitating an alliance to former masters who have a moral obligation to act as patrons, if they can. Hence, classificatory slavery today is being discursively mobilized in two distinct narratives emphasizing legacies of exploitation and resistance, or, alternatively, legacies of relatedness and (skewed) reciprocity.

These ambiguities—the ambiguity of being *Hratin* (which means different things in different places, and therefore does not have a single translation), and the ambiguity of the slave descendants’ condition (which can be undesirable or desirable, depending on context)—suggest two considerations. First, the meaning of any one social identity depends on how, historically, that identity has been defined in particular regions and communities. While in Mauritania being *Hratin* implies past enslavement, in Morocco it only denotes low status, while other labels, such as “*abd*,” evoke slave ancestry. Certainly more research will be needed to reconstruct the historical processes that shaped this regional divergence of meanings for the same term. Yet the *Hratin* of Morocco have a long documented history of resisting the attribution of slave status. Today their refusal to be assimilated to slaves and slave descendants is nothing new.

The status of the Moroccan *Hratin*—are they slaves or are they free—has been the subject of much public debate since at least the seventeenth century.³⁶ The position of established Islamic scholars and—it seems safe to presume, even though sources are less generous on the perspectives of subordinate groups—of past generations of Moroccan

³⁶ Hunwick, “Islamic Law and Polemics,” in Marmon, ed., *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, 43–68.

Hratin, has been that unless their slave status could be proved legally, Sharia law required that they be presumed free. We do not know if (part of) the Moroccan *Hratin* are the descendants of slaves whose original enslavement cannot be traced, or if instead they suffered unjust classification as slaves due to racial logics that assimilated all blacks from the Sudan to slaves.³⁷ But we do know that in Morocco the historical contestation of the designation *Hratin* contributed to crafting its contemporary complex meaning, which could be summed up as “low status people who should not be presumed to be of slave descent.” This does not appear to be the case in parts of Mauritania, where individuals and groups known as *Hratin* have preserved ties to their former masters.

The problems of homogeneity and causal relevance concern historians seeking to identify analytical concepts conducive to a clear interpretation of the history of African emancipation. Historians need analytical concepts that can help them explain how different groups of enslaved persons achieved emancipation, and what obstacles and opportunities were available to them *as ex-slaves* in their struggle to share the privileges of the freeborn. Whatever this analysis may reveal, there is no guarantee that it will coincide with discursive regimes of African post-slavery. Should it become politically expedient to claim slave descent, political mobilization as slave descendants may start appealing to a broad constituency of people from different backgrounds. Such a mobilization would result in the discursive conflation of groups that historians would rather keep distinct as slaves, ex-slaves, slave descendants, or persons of free descent who may claim slave ancestry for reasons of political expediency.

Not historical analysis, but public usage of the label “slave descendant”—its growing mobilization or gradual dropping out of use—will eventually determine the meanings ascribed to “slave descent” in African societies, and the images that this identity will conjure in people’s minds. Post-slavery, then, will coincide with the consolidation of this discourse and of its practical consequences for social, political, and economic relations. Historians, particularly public historians, will have contributed to the reconfiguration of a post-slavery discourse through their writings. But such reconfiguration will follow from a realignment of interests, and not necessarily from the historical documentation of actual slave or free ancestry. I use the future tense to signal my view that as yet no single discourse of African post-slavery has taken shape. Uneven changes have been occurring at uneven paces in different African countries and regions. On the one hand, we have a discourse of resistance, such as that of Awad Yattara (Baz Lecocq, this issue) and Hadijatou Mani, who unfolded strategies of extraversion to turn international anti-slavery abolitionism to their own ends.³⁸ On the other hand, a discourse foregrounding relatedness to former masters remains strong. It supports the reproduction of what Lotte Pelckmans (in this issue) calls “stereo-styles”; and interpretations that convey a sense of reciprocity, such as the claim of Ann McDougall’s informants (in this issue) that their

³⁷ For a general discussion, see C. El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and B. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa 1600–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), see particularly Part I.

³⁸ On extraversion, see Jean-Francois Bayart, “Africa in the World: A Strategy of Extraversion,” *African Affairs* 99, 30 (2000), 217–67.

former masters “are generous, and so are we.” If anywhere, a unified African post-slavery is in the future.

What Counts as African “Post-Slavery”? Fragmented Memories, Heritage, and Commemoration in Senegal

A large part of what historians call *post-slavery* consists of public representations of *past slavery*. These representations inhabit the collective imagination and influence the consciousness of descendants of freeborn and slaves alike.³⁹ Official representations permeate national history programs in schools and shape the symbolism associated with memorials, monuments, commemorative events, heritage sites, and other *lieux de mémoire*.⁴⁰ They are political phenomena, and as such convey representations of the past that reflect the present interests of the groups responsible for commemorating it. The perspectives of those who are in a position to provide official representations influence prescriptive views of “what history should be remembered” more than the perspectives of less powerful people. Yet, the interpretations given to *lieux de memoire* by their publics cannot be entirely controlled: the “consumers” of *lieux de memoire* can attribute to these sites the significance they deem appropriate.⁴¹

The small island of Gorée that faces Dakar on the coast of Senegal has acquired the status of a site of memory, and Gorée itself was made a UNESCO world heritage site to commemorate the sufferings of enslaved Africans transported to the Americas. The UNESCO website quotes a message from UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura:

Gorée island is the historic site on the West African coast where hundreds of thousands of captured men, women and children were rounded up in chains to be shipped to servitude in the New World. This infamous spot is now a universal shrine, where all of us, from every continent, may come and commemorate, in sorrow, the tragedy once inflicted by human beings like us on so many of our own kind. This is why UNESCO has put Gorée island on its World Heritage List ever since 1978, and now observes, on every August 23rd, an “International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition.” Gorée’s significance and symbolism directly concern us all.⁴²

Senegalese public historian Boubakar Joseph N’Diaye attributed a special place to a particular house in Gorée, known as the “house of slaves” (*la maison des esclaves*), which became an important destination for all visitors to the island, from tourists to delegates of various countries and institutions on official visits to Senegal. Yet, from the mid-1990s, journalists and historians questioned the accuracy of this interpretation of the place of the *maison des esclaves* in the history of the Atlantic trade. In an article published in *Le Monde*

³⁹ Maurice Halbwachs, “The Social Frameworks of Memory,” in L. Coser, ed., *On Collective Memory: Maurice Halbwachs* (1925; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴⁰ Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de Memoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).

⁴¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiii.

⁴² <http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/en/matsuura.shtml> (visited on 15 June 2014).

of 27 December 1996, journalist Emmanuel De Roux argued that the history of this site, visited by thousands of tourists every year, is not representative of the events it supposedly marks. The piece ends with a strong statement: “The legend of the *maison aux esclaves* owes everything to the undeniable skills of Joseph N’Diaye, who in a dozen years forged a myth that today has force of law.”⁴³

Joseph N’Diaye apparently has argued that over a period of thirty-three years the House of Slaves held about twenty million enslaved Africans destined for the trans-Atlantic crossing.⁴⁴ When I visited the House of Slaves on 16 December 2012, a certified guide told me and a small group of tourists that during the period of the trans-Atlantic trade between 15 and 20 million slaves had left the island of Gorée for the Americas, and that this was part of about 100 million slaves who crossed the Atlantic from Africa as a whole. Standing in one of the rooms on the ground floor of the building (described as women’s cells, men’s cells, children’s cells, and a cell for the rebellious slaves in plaques outside each door), the guide gave detailed descriptions of the appalling conditions in which slaves were kept in these rooms and of their daily routines. He then showed us the “door of no return,” from which the incredible figure of 15 million slaves would have left Gorée and the African continent.⁴⁵

Citing Knight-Baylac, Jean Delcourt calculated that between 1677 and 1818, Gorée exported about 300 slaves annually, or in total about 40,000–45,000 slaves.⁴⁶ As for the “House of Slaves,” it probably never played a role in holding and sending off African slaves into the transatlantic trade. It has been identified with the private home of Anna Colas Pépin, one of the “Signares” of Gorée island, a category of entrepreneurial local women who established relationships with French officers stationed in the island.⁴⁷ The signares are known for their ability to retain considerable independence and achieve wealth and power as individual women, and not just as wives or lovers of Europeans. Anne Colas Pépin headed a prominent family in Gorée and owned domestic slaves. Her home could have been used as a symbol of the entrepreneurship of African women in a discourse aimed at highlighting African agency in the face of European imperialism, and indeed this is how it is presented in the award-winning book *Céleste, ou le Temps de Signares* by historian Jean-Luc Angrand, himself a descendant of Anne Colas Pépin.⁴⁸ Jean Serre’s

⁴³ Emmanuel De Roux, “Le mythe de la Maison des esclaves qui résiste à la réalité,” *Le Monde* 27 (December 1996), downloaded from the journal’s free online archive at www.lemonde.fr.

⁴⁴ Ibrahima Seck, “Esclavage et traite des esclaves dans les manuels de l’enseignement secondaire du Sénégal,” *Afrika Zamani* 15 and 16 (2007–2008), 114–15.

⁴⁵ This figure is larger than the estimate of about 12 million slaves sold across the Atlantic between the end of the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, <http://slavevoyages.org>.

⁴⁶ Jean Delcourt, *Gorée: Six siècles d’histoire* (Dakar: Editions Clairafrique, 1984), 72–74.

⁴⁷ Jean-Luc Angrand, *Céleste ou le temps des Signares* (Sarcelles: Éditions Anne Pépin, 2006); Mark Hinchman, “House and Household on Gorée, Senegal, 1758–1837,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, 2 (2006), 166–87.

⁴⁸ Text by Jean Serre, Académie des Sciences d’Outre-Mer, Paris 15 Dec. 2006, consulted on 12 June 2014 at http://jeanlucangrand.blogspot.co.uk/2008_02_01_archive.html.

commentary on the book, published online in the author's blog, supports the revisionist reassessments of Gorée and the House of Slaves: "Jean-Luc Angrand deserves recognition for challenging the solidly established myth, developed for tourists, which makes of Gorée a centre for the slave trade to the Americas [...]."49

Senegalese historians, writing on this matter, have warned against the dangers of "negationism" implicit in criticism of the role of Gorée island (and the *maison des esclaves*) as a symbolic site for commemorating the horrors of the slave trade. In his editorial opening a special issue dedicated to the "Syndrome of Gorée," Babacar Fall criticized positions denying Gorée a significance in the history of trans-Atlantic slavery, as "provocative negationism that strongly revisionist authors are trying to promote today to deny the genocide of African peoples."⁵⁰ As Ibrahima Seck pointed out, doors of no return that did not originally have this function have been attributed symbolic meaning in multiple African sites commemorating the horrors of the slave trade.⁵¹ The House of Slaves in Gorée island has a symbolic function: it acknowledges suffering, and is a monument to the enslaved that attests to contemporary respect for their terrible fate. The House of Slaves and other similar heritage sites demonstrate public willingness to honor those who were enslaved in the past. We cannot change what happened, but by writing and remembering history differently we can give recognition to those who were denied their humanity in their lifetime.⁵² This, of course, is a particular discourse of African post-slavery. But whose discourse is this, and how is it related to the fragmented discourses about the enslavement of Africans by Africans?

As Ibrahima Thioub has shown, the nation-building efforts that followed West Africa's independence resulted in the silencing of interior African slavery and the foregrounding, at least in official discourse, of trans-Atlantic slavery.⁵³ Until recently, in most African scholarly circles, African post-slavery has been imagined primarily as what happened after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This is a primary post-slavery discourse, which emphasizes legacies of unfreedom at the hands of European slavers, imperialists, and colonialists. At the time of independence, foregrounding trans-Atlantic slavery enabled African nationalists to stimulate a sense of shared national interests on the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Babacar Fall, "La syndrome de Gorée," editorial in "L'Esclavage et ses traits en Afrique: Entre discours mémoriels et savoirs inédits," Special issue, *Historiens Géographes du Senegal* 8 (Jan. 2009), 3–4.

⁵¹ Seck, "Esclavage et traite," 115. On the symbolism of doors of no return in other African heritage sites, see Thereza Singleton, "The Slave Trade Remembered on the Former Gold and Slave Coasts," *Slavery and Abolition* 20, 1 (1999), 150–69; Robin Law, "Commemoration of the Atlantic Slave Trade in Ouidah," *Gradhiva* 8 (2008), 10–27.

⁵² Paul Ricoeur, "Mémoire, oubli, histoire," VHS, Canal du Savoir, Art and Education (Mairie de Paris, 2000); C. Ginzburg, "La Preuve, La Mémoire, et L'Oubli" (paper presented at the conference "La négation de la Shoah," Brussels, Belgium, 8–10 November 1998), <http://www.vho.org/aaargh/fran/actu/actu02/doc2002/artium.html>.

⁵³ Ibrahima Thioub, "Regard critique sur les lectures africaines de l'esclavage et de la traite atlantique," in Issiaka Mandé and Blandine Stefanson, eds., *Les historiens africains et la mondialisation* (Paris: Karthala, 2005).

basis of a common opposition to European states framed as former slavers and colonizers. Colonization and colonial forced labor were metaphorically assimilated to slavery.⁵⁴ By contrast, the enslavement of Africans by Africans was passed over in silence: due to its continuing visibility in comparatively recent times, it had the potential to undermine a frail, and in many contexts purely nominal, national unity. The emphasis that African intellectuals placed on retaining the memory of a distant trans-Atlantic slavery while suppressing the fresh memory of African slavery was matched by a growing European readiness to publicly acknowledge guilt for having enslaved millions of Africans—and of course to commemorate *European* abolition and emancipation laws.⁵⁵ These commemorations have been criticized as Eurocentric and dismissive of the struggles of slaves in colonized societies.⁵⁶

Recent commemorations of European abolition, for example of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery (1848–1998) in France and of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in the UK (1807–2007), advanced the argument that the public commemoration of slavery should be seen as a moral duty. For example, in a letter to the Premier opening the report titled *Mémoires de la traite négrière, de l’esclavage et de leurs abolition* by the French Comité pour la Mémoire de l’Esclavage, Maryse Condé argues:

The vast majority of our fellow citizens issued from the world of slavery [*nos concitoyens du monde issu de l’esclavage*] are convinced that, in spite of the law of 21 May 2001, the history of the African slave trade, of slavery, and of abolition continues to be largely ignored, neglected, and marginalised. Our fellow citizens perceive this situation as a denial of their existence and their integration in the Republic. As citizens, they demand recognition for a past that has shaped not only their societies, but also France as a whole.⁵⁷

A parallel argument could be made in several African countries today with reference to twentieth-century dynamics, and indeed such an argument is at the heart of the struggles of the Mauritanian abolitionist Biram Dah Abeid and some other African abolitionist activists. Some African slave descendants and activists are beginning to make political claims on the basis of their erstwhile enslavement to African masters and demand public recognition for the past exploitation of African slaves and its lingering effects.⁵⁸ These

⁵⁴ Frederick Cooper, “Conditions Analogous to Slavery,” in Cooper, Holt, and Scott, *Beyond Slavery*, 138.

⁵⁵ This, from their perspective, is politically more expedient than openly addressing the question of how “Fortress Europe” has dealt with African migrants in recent times.

⁵⁶ Catherine Reinhardt, *Claims to Memory: Beyond Slavery and Emancipation in the French Caribbean* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), 5.

⁵⁷ Comité pour la Mémoire de l’Esclavage, *Mémoires de la traite négrière, de l’esclavage et de leurs abolitions*. Report to the First Minister, 12 April 2005, p. 2, <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/054000247/0000.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Eric Hahonou, “Slavery and Politics: Stigma, Decentralisation, and Political Representation in Niger and Benin,” in Rossi, *Reconfiguring Slavery*, 152–81.

claims to memory remind us of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's famous question: "Is it possible that the antonym of 'forgetting' is not 'remembering', but *justice*?"⁵⁹ But it is still the case that, in some West African societies, remembering slavery evokes, in the victims of past abuses, a sense of shame rather than justice. In these contexts people of slave descent prefer to silence a past that, in Martin Klein's words, they "would rather forget."⁶⁰ It is possible that, in contexts where past enslavement carries derogatory connotations, forgetting does more justice than remembering.

Should a unified post-slavery discourse develop that values the role of African slaves and their descendants, former slave owners will be expected to express shame for a past of slave ownership that—until recently—has been a source of honor for them.⁶¹ The trans-Atlantic slave trade will not be forgotten, but the post-slavery discourse in which it is grounded will be shared—as it currently is—with descendants of the African diaspora in the Americas.⁶² The consolidation of a new post-slavery discourse rooted in the process of twentieth-century African emancipation will have the potential to shape the identity politics, class consciousness, and class struggles of real and classificatory African slave descendants. That is, if it should happen.

Conclusion

Research in contemporary Africa reveals the continuing existence of various forms of enslavement, and this research is mobilized by present-day anti-slavery organizations with consequences for how African societies are represented in public discourse and the media. Anti-slavery organizations frequently produce slave headcounts suggesting that slavery and analogous conditions continue to exist in all continents. Free the Slaves counts "21 to 30 million people in slavery today."⁶³ Citing the International Labor Organization (ILO), Anti-Slavery International claims "20.9 million men, women and children around the world are in slavery."⁶⁴ Sources on Africa quote a variety of figures: the website Hadijatoumani.org states that 43,000 people are enslaved in Niger today. Without dismissing the gravity of present-day forms of slavery and human trafficking, slave

⁵⁹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Réflexions sur l'oubli," in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, ed., *Usages de l'oubli: Contributions de Yosef H. Yerushalmi, Nicole Loraux, Hans Mommsen, Jean-Claude Milner, Gianni Vattimo au Colloque de Royaumont* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1988), 7–21. Published in English as "Postscript: Reflections on Forgetting," in Yosef Hashim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, repr. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 117.

⁶⁰ Klein, "Studying the History."

⁶¹ The "happy memories" (*mémoires heureuses*) of slavery was the main theme of the workshop, "Questions d'Esclavage Africain: Journée d'études à l'Université libre de Bruxelles," 14–15 November 2013.

⁶² On the different interpretations of this discourse among Africans and African Americans, see Thomas McCaskie, "African American Psychologists, the Atlantic Slave Trade and Ghana: A History of the Present," in Rossi, *Reconfiguring Slavery*, 45–62; Katharina Schramm, *African Homecoming: Pan-African Ideology and Contested Heritage* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010).

⁶³ <https://www.freetheslaves.net/aboutslavery> (accessed on 13 April 2014).

⁶⁴ http://www.antislavery.org/english/slavery_today/what_is_modern_slavery.aspx (accessed on 13 April 2014).

headcounts in African contexts cannot be accepted uncritically. It is often unclear how the information provided in activist reports was obtained, from which sources, and whether those asking questions and those giving answers understood particular phenomena, and the terms used to describe them, in the same way.

The use of an anachronistic terminology that designates entire groups of slave descendants as “slaves” is common in many African societies, but this does not mean that the people thus labeled live in conditions comparable to enslavement. In various contexts labels that used to imply slave status have acquired new semantic connotations, and primarily indicate ethnicity, race, or class rather than *de facto* enslavement.⁶⁵ It is important to distinguish analytically between actual slaves and classificatory slaves, that is, persons and groups who do not live like slaves, but are classified as such in their societies. Moreover, the English word “slave” fails to convey the nuances expressed in vernacular names that distinguish across distinct categories of slaves and slave descendants.⁶⁶ The use of vernacular terminology is not always a satisfactory solution, because the living conditions of the descendants of those who occupied these statuses have been changing: Martin Klein talks of “Creole slaves” to indicate degrees of integration in the society of the free.⁶⁷ Lotte Pelckmans talks of “mixed” and “pure” descent to distinguish between the offspring of two freeborn parents and the offspring of a free man and his slave concubines.⁶⁸

In Africa these complexities are the norm, not the exception. Yet they are rarely discussed in the reports of anti-slavery organizations, whose estimates of the incidence of “slavery” cannot be accepted uncritically. In the aftermath of the Hadijatou Mani case the Republic of Niger made headlines in the British press, where it is usually remarkable only for its absence. It made its appearance as a country where slavery is rampant, and where (Western) emancipatory (and civilizing) action is needed. These policy representations are instrumentally manipulated by various African actors. As Mahaman Tidjani-Alou has noted, African anti-slavery activism can work as a form of development brokerage (*courtage*).⁶⁹ There are incentives for African activist organizations to mobilize the notion of slavery, which tends to attract immediate international response. All this suggests that we must be critical of information circulating on the occurrence and incidence of slavery in

⁶⁵ See Philip Burnham, “Discourses on Slavery: Reflections on Forty Years of Research,” in Rossi, ed., *Reconfiguring Slavery*, 208.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Robert S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (1929; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 34 ff.

⁶⁷ Martin Klein, “Descent and Social Status in Sahara and Sudan,” in Rossi, ed., *Reconfiguring*, 30–31.

⁶⁸ Lotte Pelckmans, “Having a Road: Social and Spatial Mobility of Persons of Slave and Mixed Descent in Post-Independence Central Mali,” *Journal of African History* 53, 2 (2012), 235–55, see particularly 243–44.

⁶⁹ Mahamane Tidjani-Alou, “Courtiers Malgré Eux. Trajectoires de Reconversion dans l’Association Timidria au Niger,” in Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Pierre Chauveau, and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, eds., *Courtiers en Développement. Les Villages Africains en Quête de Projets* (Paris: APAD-Karthala, 2000), 279–304.

Africa today. However, as the case of Hadijatou Mani demonstrates, undeniably in some African contexts slavery is still considered a legitimate institution.

Slavery, not post-slavery, is alive and well in some African societies—although not quite as “well” as it used to be, and increasingly under threat. By contrast, the main post-slavery discourse that informs public commemorations of “African slavery” focuses narrowly on the legacies of Atlantic slavery. It silences the legacies of the more recent enslavement of Africans by Africans and the slow process of emancipation that has been taking place in the twentieth century. There exists no consolidated post-slavery discourse about this chapter of African history, not even amongst the victims of past abuses. Given definitional problems, diversified circumstances, and fragmented discourses, how useful is the notion of post-slavery for African research? Not very, or not quite yet. But, if discursive and political transformations were to turn the stigma of slave descent into a stigma of slave ownership, it might become so in the future.