

Preface to the Second Edition

When *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* was first published, it made two main contributions to the field of African slavery studies. Firstly, it shifted the focus away from the 'end' or 'death' of historical slavery and highlighted slavery's reconfigurations throughout the twentieth century and into the present of West African societies. Secondly, by moving away from slavery's 'end' and directly addressing the slow and tortuous process of emancipation, it prioritised the lived experience of slaves and their descendants. Unlike earlier studies that produced bird's-eye views of slavery (and its supposed demise), this book's focus on 'trajectories' revealed strategies that were invariably 'from someone' and 'from somewhere' (Haraway, 1988) – strategies anchored in particular social landscapes and unfolded by individual men and women, youths and elders, ex-slaves still in contact with their former masters, or slave descendants generations removed from the enslavement of their forebears.

Seven years after the publication of the hardback edition, the themes of *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* continue to be relevant to the study of slavery and post-slavery in West Africa. Empirically, the case studies discussed in these pages are representative of circumstances that are still commonly found in many West African societies. And, analytically, it is still necessary, as suggested in this volume's introduction, to think of slavery today not as a unified reality, but as a fragmented phenomenon that requires qualification: *de facto* slavery, classificatory slavery, metaphorical slavery and extraverted slavery refer to distinct social and historical phenomena. These concepts were not introduced in an attempt to construct a rigid typology; they are qualifiers aimed at adding nuance and precision to the analysis of slavery in Africa. They continue to have heuristic potential for distinguishing across a plethora of practices characterised as 'slavery' in academic writings, heritage discourses, humanitarian appeals and policy reports.

Preface to the Second Edition

This second edition comes out at a moment when the research field has on the whole embraced the emphasis on the experiential dimension of emancipation advocated in this volume, as attested by the multiplication of efforts to collect and analyse African testimonies on slavery and the slave trade, whenever possible by enslaved persons. This is an important historiographical turn, which has the potential to break a silence and integrate perspectives that had hitherto been marginalised (or altogether ignored) in the study of Africa's past and present. The very high slave/free ratios found in most West African societies up until the end of the nineteenth century imply that slaves were major contributors to the making of African societies. A renewed focus on their experiences, and on the collection of sources that foreground their experiences, will result in more accurate historical and anthropological analyses based on a polyphony of voices, with each voice considered critically to reveal the partial and circumstantial viewpoint of its author.

To be sure, there have been important precursors to this methodological reorientation (Curtin, 1967; Olivier de Sardan, 1975; Romero, 1988; Wright, 1993; to name just a few). But the last few years have witnessed an unprecedented effort to collect, analyse and make available to specialists and non-specialists alike African sources on slavery, including sources by slaves and their descendants. Examples include critical editions of African sources on slavery and the slave trade, such as the volumes edited by Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene and Martin Klein (2013; forthcoming); books and articles with an explicit focus on the biographic trajectories of enslaved persons (McDougall, 1998; Rasmussen, 1999; Lovejoy and Law, 2003; Greene, 2011; Getz and Clarke, 2011; Pelckmans, 2011; and many others); textbooks that emphasise the diversity of slave experiences in African history (Stilwell, 2014); and monographs detailing the options and choices of enslaved persons (e.g. McMahan, 2013; Rossi, 2015).

Part of this work is being carried out by African researchers, and this constitutes a major reorientation in an African historiography that has been treating interior African slavery as a taboo research topic until very recently (Thioub, 2005). This is beginning to change, as African researchers are turning to the study of slavery and emancipation in their societies. Research centres focusing on African slavery and its contemporary vestiges have been created in several West African countries – suffice it to mention as a key example the *Centre Africain de Recherches sur les Traités et les Esclavages* (CARTE), which brings together researchers working on slavery in the Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (Senegal), Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey (Niger), Université de Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), Université de Yaoundé 1 and Université de Ngaoundéré (Cameroun), and Université d'Etat d'Haïti.

Concurrently, slavery-focused NGOs have been collecting sources and making them available for research and public debate. The Nigerien NGO

Preface to the Second Edition

Timidria supported the publication of a study on slavery in Niger that included case studies and quotes by persons of slave descent variously affected by the vestiges of traditional slavery (Galy, 2010). In 2014 the Malian NGO Temedt published a volume containing 101 Malian ex-slaves' testimonies with the support of the Rosa Luxembourg foundation (Temedt, 2014). This volume of testimonies followed the publication of Temedt's study *L'esclavage au Mali* in 2012 (Temedt, 2012). Both volumes were developed under the scientific direction of Naffet Keita. In Mauritania Mohamed Yahya Ould Ciré, founder of the Association des Haratine de Mauritanie en Europe (AHME), published a collection of his own articles on slavery and racism in Mauritania that discuss case studies on contemporary legacies of slavery (Ould Ciré, 2014). These volumes are but a few examples that testify to the rise of African anti-slavery activism and growing engagement by African intellectuals with slavery's survival in their countries.

In the last few years documentaries have been realised that illustrate how enslavement is remembered – or still experienced – by Africans of slave descent. *Les Esclaves d'Hier*, directed by Eric Hahonou and Camilla Strandbjerg, which combines an overview of the contemporary situation of Gando societies in Benin with a moving autobiographical testimony, is a case in point. This has been followed by *Endam Bilaali: Renégocier les identités en situation post-esclavagiste*, produced by CARTE under the direction of Ibrahima Thioub, Abderrahmane Ngaidé and Ibrahima Seck (CARTE, 2014). Also in 2014 appeared *The Diambourou: Slavery and Emancipation in Kayes*, directed by Marie Rodet (Rodet and Challier, 2014). The Nigerien NGO Timidria, in collaboration with Alternative Productions, produced *Hadijatou Mani: La Courageuse*, directed by Abba Kiari Arimi (Arimi, n.d.). All of these films foreground the words of ex-slaves and slave descendants. They make the issue of internal African slavery accessible to a potentially wide public within Africa and in the world.

The field of African slavery studies has changed over the last seven years and new sources have become available. While the first edition of *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* probed researchers to fill a void, in today's transformed research field this new edition should encourage nuance, criticism, perhaps even a certain dose of scepticism. As a multiplicity of 'voices of slaves' become accessible, they force us to ask: whose voices, really, are they? Which agendas do they represent? Which voices attest to a life confronted with *de facto* enslavement, and which ones attest to the experiences and aspirations of people who this volume characterises as classificatory slaves? Which ones illustrate the metaphorical mobilisation of slavery as a powerful trope in African political fields reshaped by decentralisation policies? Which ones correspond to strategies of extraversion that flag 'slavery' as a word with high media-shock potential in global humanitarian discourses? This volume

Preface to the Second Edition

provides conceptual and methodological tools for coming to grips with these new questions, and its case studies serve as a laboratory to develop and test new answers.

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Preface to the Second Edition

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