

Periodizing the End of Slavery

Colonial Law, the League of Nations, and Slave Resistance in the Nigerien Sahel, 1920s–1930s*

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Chronologically, the first consequence of European abolitionism in Africa was to legitimize imperial conquest. A self-given antislavery mandate sanctioned France's rule over its West African colonies. Yet in the first years following occupation French abolitionist ideals remained a dead letter: although slavery and the slave trade were abolished in a series of legal acts culminating in the comprehensive decree of December 12, 1905, these laws were rarely enforced.¹ Then, in the 1920s, pressures

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1. A circular of February 1901 abolished slavery and the slave trade in the French Sudan, but this initial measure had limited repercussions. It is discussed briefly by Jules Brévié in his *Islamisme contre “naturisme” au Soudan français* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1923), 243. In 1903 a law was passed that denied slavery recognition in French courts for the whole

by newly founded international governmental organizations forced colonial empires to implement their own abolitionist agenda. Abolitionism became an internationally imposed standard against which the legitimacy of colonial rule was measured and scrutinized in the international arena.² The French administration was well aware of this: “More and more the great colonial questions escape the strictly national domain; whether we like it or not, international organizations have become increasingly involved, this is a statement of fact that no one would presently dream of challenging.”³ International surveillance eased the transition from *de iure* to *de facto* abolitionism. But change happened gradually and partially.

of Afrique occidentale française (French West Africa, hereafter “AOF”): this meant that masters could not continue to use French courts to reclaim fugitive slaves. The main law abolishing slavery in AOF was the law of December 12, 1905. Its first article declares that “Whoever, in the territory of Afrique-Occidentale Française and the French Congo, concludes an agreement aimed at alienating, with or without compensation, the freedom of a third party, will be punished with imprisonment of two to five years and a fine of 500 to 5000 francs. The attempt will be punished like the crime. The money, goods, or other objects or valuables received in fulfilment of the said agreement or as deposit for a forthcoming exchange will be confiscated.” Article 4 specifies that these dispositions did not affect in any way the rights pertaining to the marital or tutelary authority of a husband or father over his wives or children, as long as he did not impose a temporary or permanent servitude upon them. Decisions made by French courts would prevail in cases subject to the authority of both native and colonial courts. The text of the 1905 law was published in *Journal officiel du Sénégal*, January 18, 1906, pp. 51–52, Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter “BNF”) microfilm M-5530; governor-general Ernest Roume commented on this law in his opening speech at the session of the government council of AOF: *Journal officiel du Sénégal*, December 14, 1905, pp. 641–43, BNF microfilm M-5530. The first two articles were amended on August 8, 1920: “French Congo” was changed to “French Equatorial Africa,” and the Ministries of the Colonies and Justice were made responsible for the execution of the law. For a discussion of slavery’s legal abolition in AOF, see François Renault, “L’abolition de l’esclavage au Sénégal. L’attitude de l’administration française, 1848–1905,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 58, no. 1 (1971): 5–81. The abolition of 1905 was prepared through a series of studies and reports that have been published in Paul Lovejoy and Alexander Kanya-Forstner, eds., *Slavery and Its Abolition in French West Africa: The Official Reports of G. Poulet, E. Roume, and G. Deherme* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994). I consulted the original files of these reports in Dakar at the Archives nationales du Sénégal (National Archives of Senegal, hereafter “ANS”), series K, “Esclavage et Captivité 1807–1915,” particularly K15 to K29. Martin A. Klein examines the ambivalence of the French administration with regards to abolition in the early 1900s in *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 131–40.

2. Glenda Sluga and Patricia M. Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms: A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); see also Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010); Barbara H. M. Metzger, “Towards an International Human Rights Regime during the Inter-War Years: The League of Nations’ Combat of Traffic in Women and Children,” and Kevin Grant, “Human Rights and Sovereign Abolitions of Slavery, c. 1885–1950,” both in *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c. 1880–1950*, ed. Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine, and Frank Trentmann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), respectively 57–79 and 80–102.

3. ANS, K60 (19), governor of AOF to the governors of the colonies, October 11, 1929.

When international institutions started monitoring slavery and abolition worldwide, there were no substantial changes in administrative arrangements. But, as Susan Pedersen observes, “the work of legitimation moved to Geneva.”⁴ Surveillance by the League of Nations (LN) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) compelled member governments to enforce their anti-slavery legislation.⁵ Now laws were enforced, but only when and where their infraction was discovered. Immense desert zones and elusive border regions remained partly autonomous from colonial control.⁶ In these areas, the hope that colonial law could actually be applied was and remained chimeric until the end of the colonial regime. As late as 1951, an official note commenting on the failure to implement French legal provisions in the nomad subdivision of the district (*cercle*) of Tahoua in the Colony of Niger stated laconically: “French justice is powerless.”⁷

This is how this story ends: in these regions colonial law was applied only partially and was scarcely internalized by local societies. Here legal abolition did not end slavery. What, then, if anything, did it do? In the first two decades following colonial conquest, the laws that abolished slavery were largely ineffective, as administrators in this region lacked both the will and the power to enforce them.⁸ But in the 1920s and 1930s the consequences of the internationalization of legal abolition under the aegis of the LN were twofold: first, the representatives of the colonial state were monitored closely and came under pressure to prosecute when cases of slavery or slave trading were brought to their attention; second, enslaved persons and persons vulnerable to enslavement realized that their accusations could no longer be ignored with impunity, and that resistance against slave-holding elites was no longer futile. Although these were the main trends, nothing was simple.

When the law could no longer be ignored, it became clear that Europe’s abolitionist project was doomed to failure: not only were its targets unachievable, but slavery’s complete eradication was not what colonial powers really wanted. French administrators posted in desert regions faced a conundrum: How to demonstrate success in eliminating slavery while operating in a society where slavery was ubiquitous and normal? Such was the magnitude of the problem that its eradication was simply impossible, given the limited means at their disposal. Unable to address

4. Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

5. On September 10, 1919, the co-signatories of the treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye revised the General Act of Berlin of February 26, 1885, and the General Act of Brussels of 1890. Article 11 of the new treaty stated that “the signatory powers exercising sovereign rights or authority in African territories will continue to see to the preservation of the native populations and the improvement of their moral and material conditions. They will, in particular, endeavor to secure the complete suppression of slavery in all its forms and of the black slave trade (*la traite des Noirs*) by land and sea.”

6. Sally Falk Moore, “Law and Social Change: The Semi-Autonomous Social Field as an Appropriate Subject of Study,” *Law and Society Review* 7, no. 4 (1973): 719–46.

7. Archives nationales du Niger (National Archives of Niger, hereafter “ANN”), 381, note on Muhammad al-Mumin, Tahoua, January 5, 1951.

8. Benedetta Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 142–58.

the phenomenon on its true scale, the administration reduced its *appearance* by redefining as “actual slavery” only a small proportion of the forms of unfreedom that existed locally, some of which were the direct result of colonial governance and recruitment practices. The solution to this impasse was thus rhetorical: local practices were redefined to suit the law. Officers anxious to avoid being accused of tolerating slavery talked of “voluntary servitude” and “tacit work contracts” in reports destined for broad circulation. These distinctions were primarily linguistic, but definitions had practical consequences.⁹

Forms of unfreedom supported by African slave-traders who procured slaves for African slave-owners were termed “slavery”; as such, they were condemned as intolerable and outlawed. On the other hand, forms of unfreedom that served the interests of the colonial economy directly or by supporting collaborating elites were maintained. Persons of slave descent who remained subordinate to their (ex-)owners were dubbed “voluntary servants” when supporting native slave-owners promoted political stability. Double standards were embedded in legal practice.¹⁰ The *Code de l'indigénat* backed the action of the French administration, which decided when and how to punish native slavery or recruit forced labor for colonial purposes.¹¹ Colonial administrators did not see these arrangements as problematic because they were commensurate with the racialized political thinking of the time. By contrast, those who might have been inclined to denounce these arrangements as unjust—*in primis* African unfree persons—were denigrated by the same racial stereotypes

9. Suzanne Miers, “Slavery: A Question of Definition,” *Slavery and Abolition* 24, no. 2 (2003): 1–16. For a recent analysis of similar strategies in the Central Asia context, see Elena Smolarz, “Speaking about Freedom and Dependency: Representations and Experiences of Russian Enslaved Captives in Central Asia in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 1/2 (2017): 44–71.

10. In his study of English capitalist industries, Marc W. Steinberg has shown that particular labor regimes are “embedded in legal institutions that bound both the ways in which the labor relationship can be perceived and the strategies by which the subordination of labor can be pursued”: Steinberg, “Capitalist Development, the Labor Process, and the Law,” *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 2 (2003): 445–95, here p. 484. See also Steinberg, *England's Great Transformation: Law, Labor, and the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). In this article, I follow Christopher Tomlins's understanding of the law as *not* external to the social phenomena that it regulates, but itself a particular manifestation of the moral axioms of its time: the law should be seen as “but one of society's authorizing discourses.” Unlike other discourses, however, “law's moral existence is founded ... upon a claim to transcend all other authorizing discourses”: Christopher Tomlins, “Subordination, Authority, Law: Subjects in Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 47 (1995): 56–90, here p. 67.

11. For a general discussion of the *Code de l'indigénat* in AOF, see Gregory Mann, “What Was the *Indigénat*? The ‘Empire of Law’ in French West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 50, no. 3 (2009): 331–53; Frederick Cooper, *Decolonisation and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also Babacar Fall, *Le travail forcé en Afrique-Occidentale française, 1900–1946* (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 47–52; Anthony Asiwaju, “Control Through Coercion: A Study of the Indigénat Regime in French West African Administration, 1887–1946,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 9, no. 3 (1978): 91–124.

that underpinned Europe's civilizing mission. Their views were unsolicited and disregarded. French officers portrayed themselves as liberators, but many of them doubted whether in practice African slaves could be trusted to handle freedom. Comments such as those made in 1931 by the officer commanding the district of Tahoua were not unusual: "Thieves, liars, looters—one would say that the guardianship of a master is [the slaves'] only claim to wisdom. ... If slavery (*captivité*) amongst the nomads is an evil, it is a necessary evil nonetheless!"¹² The universality of abolitionist ideals clashed with the hierarchies of race and status that informed colonial views of African society. Multiple normative criteria informed the colonial imaginary, generating ambiguities in the interpretation and implementation of the law. Actors with different institutional statuses and individual dispositions faced different pressures and opted for different courses of action.

The colonial administration's ambiguous enforcement of its own antislavery laws has received abundant attention.¹³ Studies ask whether European colonialists practiced what they preached; they often did not. But "European colonialists" is an internally diverse category: ministers of the Colonies and colonial governors were not subject to the same pressures as the officers in command of individual districts (*commandants de cercle*). Pressures by the LN set off a chain of requests for information at the imperial, regional, colonial, and district levels.¹⁴ Ministers and governors had to demonstrate to international institutions and European public opinion that slavery was being eradicated everywhere under their flag. In the 1920s this became a fundamental international standard against which the legitimacy of colonial rule was evaluated. Claims had to be backed with evidence provided by the men on the ground, and so district commanders were asked to write reports that would enable their superiors to showcase success in fighting the abolitionist cause. But these officers also had to negotiate with African commoners and chiefs, slaves and slave-owners.

In the Tahoua region of the Colony of Niger, by the first half of the twentieth century slavery had been a deep-seated institution for hundreds of years.¹⁵

12. ANN, 381.1, district commander of Tahoua to the governor of Niger, June 29, 1931.

13. See, for example, Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, eds., *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 19–25 and 42–47; Fall, *Le travail forcé en Afrique-Occidentale française*; Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, in particular 23–56; Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, 35–36. See also Camille Lefebvre "Histories of a Conspiracy, Zinder 1906: Rethinking Colonial Occupation," *Annales HSS (English Edition)* 72, no. 4 (2017): 945–81.

14. A close analysis of the debates and activities of these institutions can be found in Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century: The Evolution of a Global Problem* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003), particularly 58–366. See also Joel Quirk, *The Anti-Slavery Project: From the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2011).

15. This model has been described by Stephen Baier and Paul Lovejoy in "The Tuareg of the Central Sudan: Gradations in Servility at the Desert's Edge (Niger and Nigeria)," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 391–411; Stephen Baier, "Economic History and Development: Drought and the Sahelian Economies of Niger," *African Economic History* 1 (1976): 1–16; Baier, "Ecologically Based Trade

Abolitionism was alien to Tahoua's society,¹⁶ where slavery was inextricably embedded in, and constitutive of, authority and hierarchy. Until the eve of occupation it had been regulated by Islamic norms, which continued to shape people's sense of identity and justice. Elites followed local interpretations of Islamic law as they participated in the slave trade and formed relations with slaves.¹⁷ Subordinate groups who had been integrated into local hierarchies for generations did not mobilize collectively and object to slavery as an institution. Although their normative views were rarely recorded, the sources we have show that they did not see slavery in itself as a moral aberration. But when resistance became an option, they did strive to protect their safety and dignity. Although slave descendants in Tahoua were not abolitionists, in the 1920s they realized that the district commander could not turn a blind eye toward slavery and the slave trade as before. When threatened with a deterioration of their conditions, they took advantage of the changed circumstances. They resisted exploitation when they thought it safe to do so. They denounced owners and traffickers who caused pain to them and their loved ones. They engaged with colonial laws in the practical settings of tribunals as accusers and witnesses.¹⁸ Interviewed by colonial officers, they gave unambiguous answers that indicted slave-owners and traders.

and the State in Precolonial West Africa," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 20 (1980): 149–54; Baier and Lovejoy, "The Desert-Side Economy of the Central Sudan," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8, no. 4 (1975): 551–81.

16. Following Tomlins's definition, antislavery was not part of "society's authorizing discourses" in this Sahelian region: Tomlins, "Subordination, Authority, Law," 67.

17. On the tension between European and African legal cultures and institutions, see Richard Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005); Shamil Jeppie, Ebrahim Moosa, and Richard Roberts, eds., *Muslim Family Law in Sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial Legacies and Post-Colonial Challenges* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Richard Roberts and Kristin Mann, eds., *Law in Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991). On the notion of legal "hybridity," see 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, no. 1 (2011): 97–120.

18. A similar methodological focus on the practical and strategic usage of legal procedures is developed in Renata Ago and Simona Cerutti, eds., "Procedure di giustizia," special issue, *Quaderni storici* 101, no. 2 (1999), in particular pp. 307–11. M'hamed Oualdi has focused on the positions of the various parties involved in legal cases that cut across different legislations, see Oualdi, "Le 'pluralisme juridique.' Au fil d'un conflit de succession en Méditerranée à la fin du XIX^e siècle," *Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle* 48 (2014): 93–106. For an analysis of the law "in action" in twenty-first century Egypt, see Baudouin Dupret, *Le jugement en action. Ethnométhodologie du droit, de la morale et de la justice en Égypte* (Geneva: Droz, 2006). Lauren Benton's critical analysis of the "hierarchical model of legal pluralism in which state law subsumed ... all jurisdictions" is also valuable; see Benton, "Colonial Law and Cultural Difference: Jurisdictional Politics and the Formation of the Colonial State," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 3 (1999): 563–88, here p. 563. See also Emmanuelle Saada, "Citoyens et sujets de l'Empire français. Les usages du droit en situation coloniale," *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire* 53, no. 4 (2003): 4–24.

This article explores the strategies of colonial administrators, slave-owners, slave-traders, slaves, and slave descendants in the Nigerien Sahel in the 1920s and 1930s. It shows that passing laws is not enough: for change to happen, laws have to be activated. In the 1920s the internationalization of abolitionism resulted in the activation of antislavery laws. On the whole, change was determined less by anyone's will to end slavery in the Sahel than by the establishment of international surveillance mechanisms with the power to (de)legitimize colonial rule. The internationalization of antislavery turned out to facilitate slave resistance. What follows, then, reconstructs the social history of the alleged "end of slavery." It first looks at the broader legal and institutional context, and then turns to everyday social relations in Tahoua. Institutional change—the outcome of transformations in mechanisms of imperial legitimation and surveillance—mattered. But individuals, from French ministers of the Colonies (*ministres des Colonies*) to Sahelian slaves, were never passive. Their personal and circumstantial choices, too, shaped this history. If in general antislavery laws were enforced only when France risked being exposed on the international stage, some French officers pursued slave-traders and traffickers relentlessly. Their exceptional persistence persuaded some slaves to denounce their owners. Unlike those who chose to endure continued subservience, slaves who resisted risked everything: their safety, their lives, and the lives of their children—their resistance was also exceptional. Prosecuted slave-owners, on the other hand, experienced their predicament as unjust. Disposed to think of slavery as a sacrosanct institution, they harbored steadily hostile feelings toward Europeans. Exceptional actions marked people's imaginations and triggered reflections about the legitimacy of slavery or, alternatively, of European abolitionism. These reflections informed people's choices and shaped a history that in the Central Sahel has not yet ended.

The Magic of Words, or How Colonial Discourse Made Slavery Disappear

At the third General Assembly of the LN the attention of member states was drawn to "the problem of slavery and the recrudescence in Africa of this deplorable institution." Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, the New Zealand delegate, expressed concern over the increasing number of cases of slavery in Abyssinia. His intervention reignited debate on this issue, and in September 1922 the League agreed that it was necessary to conduct a general inquiry into slavery, not only in Abyssinia but in all of Africa. Gabriel Hanotaux, the French delegate, urged the LN not to collect information based on generic rumors, but to carry out a detailed inquiry founded on the collection of "precise facts."¹⁹ It was agreed that member states would provide information on this issue to the League's Council. The French minister of the Colonies wrote to all governors-general asking them to provide reports addressing four points: the results of France's fight against slavery in their respective territories; the administrative

19. ANN, 381.1, minister of the Colonies to the governor-general of AOF, October 27, 1922.

measures taken by local colonial offices to repress slavery, including a list of the prosecutions relative to slavery cases; the presence of clandestine slave trafficking in border areas between their regions and neighboring countries; and finally whether slavery persisted in their territories and what was the situation of domestic slaves.²⁰

The idea that these inquiries would generate, in Hanotaux's words, "precise facts" collected by "experts" entrenched colonial power by emphasizing objectivity and impartiality.²¹ But this language disguised the intrinsic circularity of the work of the LN's Committee of Experts on Slavery. Its inquiries were not independent from the abolitionist policies whose effectiveness it had been tasked to assess. The experts overseeing the inquiries were high-ranking colonial officials, and the "precise facts" they chose to present at the meetings of international organizations highlighted problems that invariably called for more colonial "civilizing" interventions. Unsurprisingly, these inquiries endorsed and entrenched colonial rule even when they revealed its shortcomings.²²

In a circular dated December 8, 1922, the governor-general of Afrique occidentale française (French West Africa, hereafter AOF) passed on the minister's request to the lieutenant-governors of each territory under his command.²³ In turn, on February 12, 1923, Jules Brévié, the lieutenant-governor of Niger then residing in Zinder, instructed district commanders to conduct an inquiry based on the four questions listed above in their respective districts.²⁴ Commandant Paul Marty, senior colonial administrator and author of several studies on Islam in West Africa, was at that moment the acting district commander in Tahoua. In the three-page report he drew up in response to Brévié's circular, Marty left little doubt as to the persistence of slavery in his district. He suggested that such resilience was explained by the fact that it was not actual slavery, but a milder dependency that should be tolerated in the interest of those slaves who benefited from benign masters. At the same time, manumission would be granted to all those who requested it:

In the district of Tahoua slavery continues to exist both among the settled groups (Hausa and Aderawa) and among the nomads who used to be the tyrannical masters of the country. But just as before our occupation, the situation of slavery is harsher amongst nomads than sedentary peoples. This is due to the nomads' profound dislike for the black race, as well as

20. ANN, 381.5, governor-general of AOF to the lieutenant-governors of the colonies and the superintendent of the government general of Niger, circular no. 158, December 8, 1922.

21. Michel Foucault discusses official inquiries as a typical example of power-knowledge that developed in nineteenth-century Europe and legitimated the state's control over the population: Foucault, "Truth and Judicial Forms," in *The Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 3, *Power*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 2000), 31–45.

22. Emmanuelle Sibeud, Claire Fredj, and Hélène Blais, introduction to "Sociétés coloniales. Enquêtes et expertises," special issue, *Monde(s)* 4, no. 2 (2013): 6–22.

23. ANN, 381.5, governor-general of AOF to the lieutenant-governors of the colonies and the superintendent of the government general of Niger, circular no. 158, December 8, 1922.

24. ANN, 381.1, lieutenant-governor of Niger to the district commanders, circular no. 24 BP [*bureau politique*], February 12, 1923.

*to their rigid feudal regime. ... But it would be a mistake to think that [domestic slaves] are all forced to remain subjected to their masters. Many were born in the masters' camps or were acquired at a very young age, and are devoted to their masters somewhat like those old servants that one still finds in the French countryside and whom their masters consider almost as relatives. Others, well fed and well treated by benign masters who give them usufruct rights over part of their belongings, are loyal and grateful to those masters. Some ex-masters granted manumission freely, or in exchange for a symbolic payment, to their ex-slaves, who continue to serve them willingly. Often the master took as his concubine the daughter of his captive. ... Captives declaring that they want to be liberated present themselves constantly at the subdivision headquarters. Freedom is always granted to them, and their families are protected from possible retaliations on the part of their masters.*²⁵

This reasoning conjured the image of devout and willing old servants serving benign masters and of safe, straightforward liberation for those who opted for independence. Were it not for its adamant claim that “slavery” continued to exist everywhere, the report would seem to render the whole inquiry almost pointless. This logic nevertheless led to an apparent paradox, for it seemed to imply both that “slavery” was not a problem and that, if or where it was one, it could be easily fixed.

The appropriateness of the terminology was often questioned. For example, the report from the district of Agadez asked whether “it is really possible to argue that domestic slaves (*captifs de case*) are actual slaves (*esclaves*). They should rather be seen as voluntary servants who choose freely to serve their masters.”²⁶ Some reports emphasized the alleged psychological consequences of past enslavement on the consciousness of ex-slaves and their consequent inability to leave their masters. The report from the district of N’Guigmi noted that:

*enslavement has marked so profoundly the spirit of the ex-slaves that they are unable to act on their own initiative. Used to obeying without discussion or reflection the orders given to them, they continue to obey orders, and remain passive when they do not receive any.*²⁷

Theories of “natural slavery”—the view that slaves need a master by nature and cannot lead a normal life without one—have been the strongest arguments for the tolerance of slavery at least since Aristotle’s *Politics*. The idea that enslavement had made slaves incapable of self-governance was an adaptation of this; it exonerated an administration unable or unwilling to fulfill the abolitionist agenda and allowed slavery, glossed as nominal or voluntary, to continue. No one asked why former slaves sometimes chose to keep working for ex-masters; no one asked what alternative forms of employment, possibly to be sponsored by the colonial state, were available to them.

25. ANN, 381.1, report by Captain Marty, district commander of Tahoua, requested by the circular no. 24 BP on slavery, Tahoua, April 11, 1923.

26. ANN, 381.1, Captain François, district commander of Agadez, to the lieutenant-governor of Niger, March 8, 1923.

27. ANN, 381.1, Captain Garner, district commander of N’Guigmi, to the lieutenant-governor of Niger, February 28, 1923.

Another recurrent topos was the comparison between French and British antislavery policies.²⁸ The British were denounced repeatedly as being less committed to the emancipation of slaves than their French counterparts. Ending slavery had been the banner under which European powers had occupied Africa, and the alleged effectiveness of abolitionism in the colonies was used as a standard of success in a race to outperform rival colonial empires. But periodic reports from the districts show that in actual practice the ambivalence attributed to British officers in northern Nigeria was the norm, too, in the French administration in Niger.²⁹

Political necessity was adduced to justify French slowness. The report issued in 1923 by the governor of Niger drew on the district-level reports. It distinguished between the abolition of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery, arguing that while the former had been immediate, the latter had to be delayed to avoid open revolt and economic crisis:

*It is obvious that the masters, whom we would have deprived of a highly valuable capital without notice, would have risen against us and might have demanded financial compensation for the expropriation [of their slaves] (indeed, France compensated the slave-owners of the French Antilles). Moreover, [the masters] were not used to manual labor, and did not know how to carry out work that required physical qualities that they lacked. ... Finally the slaves, left to their own devices (as seen elsewhere) and improvident as they are, would have stopped working altogether; and furthermore if left alone suddenly, how would slaves have bought tools and seeds, how would they have survived waiting for the harvest?*³⁰

The passing of the LN's Slavery Convention, signed by the French government on December 11, 1926, and ratified on March 28, 1931, marked a new threshold.³¹ The secretary-general nominated a new Committee of Experts on Slavery charged

28. See, for example, the report from the district of Tessaoua, which denounces the British administration's alleged inability to bring about immediate emancipation, in contrast to French policies and "active propaganda aimed at freeing the slaves, and [our efforts] to make servants and vassals understand that they are free and should stop working for their masters or making customary payments to them." ANN, 381.1, administrator of the district of Tessaoua to the lieutenant-governor of Niger, March 20, 1923.

29. See, for example, the arguments of the lieutenant-governor of Niger in response to the clarification requests from the district of Bilma: "The high slave/free population ratio prevents us from encouraging emancipation all at once because, as you remark, an immediate reorganization [of society] might harm the economic development of your district and upset the tranquility of the region. Hence for the current year you should limit yourself to facilitating the liberation of captives enslaved after our occupation and of youths and children born after that date. The strict application of these measures will force slave-owners, still too numerous, to reflect on our determination to end slavery once and for all. You will then proceed to the completion of your work progressively." ANN, 381.1, acting lieutenant-governor of Niger to the district commander of Bilma, June 7, 1923.

30. ANN, 381.1, acting lieutenant-governor of Niger to the governor-general of AOF, June 1, 1923.

31. The text of the convention can be found on the website of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SlaveryConvention.aspx>.

with conducting a study of slavery and analogous institutions, and a new list of questions was passed down the administrative ranks. It asked whether slavery, the slave trade, or other practices susceptible to limiting individual freedoms existed in the colonial territories. So-called “analogous practices” included serfdom, traditional forms of unpaid involuntary service imposed by landlords, debt-bondage, and pawnship, as well as child exploitation under the guise of adoption, the purchase of wives, widow inheritance “implying the subjection of a woman to a man she has not [freely] chosen,” and forms of prostitution of women and children implying the exercise of property rights upon them. Respondents were required to provide a detailed description of relevant institutions and customs, to explain what measures had been adopted since 1926, and to outline the results of the application of such measures.³²

This inquiry gave rise to another set of reports written by the district commanders.³³ These reports represented ex-slaves as lacking in dignity, work ethic, and the ability to act autonomously.³⁴ In 1931 the officer commanding the district of Tahoua did not hesitate to declare that slavery “continues to exist more or less everywhere, especially in the districts at the edge of the Sahara peopled by nomads of Berber or Arab origins. There is nothing exceptional in this situation: a law cannot from one day to the next, from one year to the next, modify an ancestral mentality, an institution that so-called civilized peoples took centuries to reject.” His report reiterated the theme of voluntary servitude linked, as it often was, to the view that “slaves” were slaves in name only, due to “the magic of words” that lingered on even after the phenomena they referred to had disappeared: “Slaves are in a state of semi-slavery, but entirely of their own will. Servants accept readily the destiny that custom attributes to them, all the more so since—if we discount the magic of words—such a destiny has hardly anything in common with the slavery of the past.” The text continues with a long description of all the ways in which the living conditions of slaves had changed, including a reference to the willingness of ex-slaves to denounce their masters if they dared to impose conditions they found unacceptable. This, however, refers to the state of

32. ANN, 381.1, telegram no. 1735 AGI, United Nations: questionnaire on slavery and servitude, May 11, 1931.

33. As solicited by ANN, 381.1, telegram no. 1735 of May 11, 1931.

34. For example, the report from the district of Bilma argues that when the master (*le patron*) travels, the slave (*le captif*) “takes advantage [of his absence] to steal shamelessly, and this is how certain slaves have been able to make considerable profits. ... The district commander often receives complaints from masters regarding the [dis]honesty of captives or former captives, but no complaints are made or actions taken with a view to alienating the freedom of ex-slaves, and no transactions involving them take place. The current situation of ex-slaves is that of a worker who does not receive a salary, but is fed and clothed, in exchange for which he owes his labor [to his master]. Upon the death of the master he can stay with his master’s descendants or leave them as he wishes. In fact these are captives in name only, and those who are still called ‘*captif*’ are in the same situation as emancipated slaves who remain with their former owners voluntarily.” ANN, 381.1, Captain Lafitte, district commander of Bilma, to the governor of Niger, August 3, 1931.

affairs amongst sedentary groups only. By contrast, slavery in nomad societies is presented as resilient and unchanged: “The slave trade still exists. The nomads of the north (Hoggar and Iforas) come to acquire slaves in our regions, and the trade happens without us finding out, with the tacit or overt complicity of the whole population.” Rather than asking why “the whole population” apparently did not share the colonial abolitionist ethos, the officer attributes slavery’s persistence amongst nomads to the slaves’ baseness:

*The slave (bellah amongst the Tuareg, hartani amongst the Moors and Arabs) is an integral part of nomad society. ... They have taken the language of their masters, but of their masters’ mentality they took the defects only. Thieves, liars, looters—one would say that the guardianship of a master is their only claim to wisdom. If they are freed and left to their own devices, when they do not decide of their own volition to become the servants of a new master, they become chronic visitors of our tribunals and constitute the prisoner workforce of our administration. To end slavery in the nomad region would be tantamount to destroying the Arab or Tuareg societies. ... If slavery amongst the nomads is an evil, it is a necessary evil nonetheless!*³⁵

In October 1931, Gérard Esperet completed a general study “on the situation of servile labor in AOF.”³⁶ This report resembles the others in its logic: a portrait of a generic and undifferentiated “past” is contrasted with changes following the action of the French administration in the aftermath of occupation. It goes on to describe the challenges faced, drawing a marked distinction between nomadic and settled populations with respect to the resilience of practices similar to slavery, seen as more enduring among the former than the latter. The terminology is problematized: the habit—in both administrative and indigenous contexts—of referring to persons of slave descent as “captives” is denounced as confusing, because this category often covers a large proportion of people who are “captives” only nominally and who work as voluntary servants.³⁷

Marking an important change from previous discussions, Esperet’s report compares vestiges of “traditional” servility and forms of “obligatory public works” that include colonial prestations. A section entitled “Where does free labor begin?” includes an assessment of the widespread practice of ex-slaves carrying out farming work for a former master in exchange for being housed, fed, clothed, looked after, and often given a part of the harvest. This type of labor relation is seen as comparable to salaried labor (*travail salarié*), allegedly a concept alien to African societies.³⁸ The coercive elements of colonial recruitment are thus justified as a necessary step to familiarize Africans with the notion of wages. Obligatory public works in the form

35. ANN, 381.1, district commander of Tahoua to the governor of Niger, June 29, 1931.

36. ANN, 5E2.5, Gérard Esperet, head of the financial bureau, *Étude sur la situation du travail servile au Niger*, October 31, 1931.

37. ANN, 5E2.5, Esperet, *Étude sur la situation du travail servile au Niger*, October 31, 1931, 3.

38. ANN, 5E2.5, Esperet, *Étude sur la situation du travail servile au Niger*, October 31, 1931, 30.

of prestatory labor and labor mobilized in the “second military contingent” constituted “training” that would gradually “accustom our subjects to the concept of free labor as we understand it: remunerated obligatory work is the necessary step between serfdom and free labor. It is the additional professional education (*école de perfectionnement*) indispensable for the development of non-productive territories and the education and improvement of the conditions of indigenous masses.”³⁹ In other words, forms of colonial labor management that were becoming increasingly unviable under the scrutiny of the LN and the ILO were presented as a necessary step that would accustom indigenous workers to free labor.⁴⁰ This logic emphasized the need to gradually teach ex-slaves freedom. Other logics were introduced to conceal the full extent of the problem: the majority of indigenous workers were represented not as ex-slaves, but as willing servants whose relations with their employers were regulated by invisible contracts.

The LN’s 1932 Committee of Experts on Slavery drew on the wisdom of seven senior officials, most of whom had occupied the highest ranks in Europe’s colonial empires.⁴¹ The committee regularly asked colonial governors for updated information, and governors forwarded these requests to the district commanders. In January 1935 new regional reports were requested, with an emphasis on the presence or absence of contracts.⁴² In the mid-1930s, under pressure from the ILO’s investigation into forms of forced labor, the French

39. ANN, 5E2.5, Esperet, *Étude sur la situation du travail servile au Niger*, October 31, 1931, 33. The French official position on compulsory labor is described in the preface to the law of August 21, 1930 (*Décret portant réglementation du travail public obligatoire aux colonies*), cited in Fall, *Le travail forcé en Afrique-Occidentale française*, 321–25.

40. See Jean Allain’s analysis of the Ethiopian case in “Slavery and the League of Nations: Ethiopia as a Civilised Nation,” *Journal of the History of International Law* 8, no. 2 (2006): 213–44.

41. These experts were allegedly persons with experience of African, Asian, and Arab slavery and were appointed at the request of their governments. In 1931 a committee of seven was selected, including a woman as stipulated by the LN’s Council for the Representation of Women. The experts were the Italian Tullio Zedda, secretary to the government of Eritrea, who was later replaced by Ercole Vellani, head of the Office of Studies and Propaganda in the Italian Ministry of the Colonies; Albrecht Gohr, director-general of the Belgian Ministry of the Colonies and formerly an official of the Congo Free State; Neytzell de Wilde, former president of the Legislative Assembly of the Dutch East Indies and an official of the Dutch Ministry of the Colonies; Julio López-Oliván, minister plenipotentiary at the Spanish Foreign Office, and formerly director-general of the Protectorate of Morocco and the Colonies; Virginia de Castro e Almeida, the Portuguese delegate to the LN’s International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation; Lord Lugard, formerly the British military administrator of Uganda, governor of Hong Kong, and governor of Nigeria. Lugard had served on the Temporary Slavery Commission and on the ILO’s Committee of Experts on Native Labor from 1925 to 1941. The French member was Gabriel Angoulvant, former governor of Ivory Coast and governor-general of AOF, a man known as an “authoritarian technocrat” who “advocated concessionary companies, compulsory crop growing, and forced labor for ... large-scale development projects,” according to Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, 199.

42. ANN, 381.1, minister of the Colonies to the governor-general of AOF, January 10, 1935. On the idea of the contract in French emancipation policy, see Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, 178–79; Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 51.

administration developed a two-tiered argument that, on the one hand, insisted on the existence of a “tacit contract” that regulated local labor relations; and, on the other, attempted to enforce the application of new contracts regulating the provision of services (especially herding work) by ex-slaves.

In his reply to the minister of the Colonies, the lieutenant-general of AOF provided the example of the district commander of Dori, who “explained [to Tuareg elites] the mechanism of the work contract that should be established between masters and servants, and which defines the rights and duties of both.”⁴³ Efforts were made to demonstrate that only a very small percentage of those designated as “captives” or “slaves” were actually enslaved. “Nominal captivity” and “tacit contracts” were closely connected:

*The voluntary servants (serviteurs) are tied to their employers by a work contract that lacks a fixed salary (unusual in this region), but provides food, clothing, and an allowance that usually includes a certain percentage of new-born animals from the herd guarded by the servant. These servants have the freedom to break the contract that ties them tacitly to their employers at any moment, and to complain, if they wish, to the representatives of the administrative authority. This freedom that they have to dispose of themselves prevents us from calling them “slaves” (captifs) even if they were enslaved in the past or they were born from enslaved parents.*⁴⁴

The existence of French laws that terminated the former masters’ right to force their slaves to work for them supposedly meant *ipso facto* that those who continued working for their masters without contract or salary did so voluntarily. This was presented as evidence for the existence of a tacit contract that regulated labor relations otherwise indistinguishable from the slavery of the past. French bureaucrats marveled at the “magic of words” that alone explained how such relations could possibly still be termed slavery. Yet one cannot but marvel at the magic of colonial discourse that conjured the appearance of contracts where none existed. The claim that these relations were regulated by some kind of invisible contract turned—as if by magic—thousands of relations that suspiciously resembled slavery into examples of free labor.

Having reduced the existence of slavery to a question of definitions, the administration emphasized rigor in their application. The governor of Niger wrote to the districts, demanding that the administrators’ reports distinguish between “voluntary servants” and “victims of the slave trade.”⁴⁵ This limited the potential

43. ANN, 381.1, lieutenant-governor of Niger to the governor-general of AOF, February 22, 1935.

44. ANN, 381.5, circular no. 29 CM [*cabinet militaire*], to all districts and divisions, January 29, 1936. My emphasis.

45. ANN, 381.5, governor of Niger to the district commanders, circular no. 29, January 28, 1936. This round of reports was requested by the Advisory Committee of Experts on Slavery, which had replaced the LN’s Committee of Experts on Slavery. Unlike its predecessor, this was a permanent structure, but met only every two years “if necessary.” Members were still selected by their governments, and included three from the old committee (the Dutch de Wilde, the Italian Zedda, and the Belgian Gohr).

repercussions of the reports: although it was impossible to establish the degree of consent under which unpaid dependents continued serving old and new masters, this rhetorical distinction concealed the connections between the two categories and circumvented the prevalence of the problem. The political consequences of distinguishing between these two groups were enormous. Although “voluntary servants” and “victims of the slave trade” faced different circumstances, the former (mostly persons of slave descent still connected to the families of their masters) were particularly likely to be sold, or to have their children sold and turned into “victims of the slave trade,” as demonstrated by the court cases from Tahoua discussed below. On the other hand, “victims of the slave trade,” especially when they had been kidnapped at a young age and had no recollection of their original families, were eventually likely to accept their destiny and become what French reports defined as “voluntary servants.” Keeping these two categories separate made the slavery problem appear significantly smaller than it actually was.

The World of Slaves and Slave-Owners in Tahoua

In the official discourse abolitionism itself attested to Europe’s moral superiority, which in turn legitimized European government in the colonies. But how far, if at all, was this rationale shared by African slaves and slave-owners? What did they think and do in relation to slavery and the slave trade? How did they relate to European administrators? And how did European administrators interact with African slaves and traffickers? Did their behavior differ, in practice, from what they wrote in reports to their superiors?

Ader is a mixed Hausa and Tuareg region in the south of the department of Tahoua that lies at the boundary between the desert to the north and the savannah to the south. Court cases that took place in the 1920s and 1930s illustrate the resistance of Tahoua’s slaves, who did not hesitate to denounce masters and traders to the colonial administration. These cases thus attest to reconfigurations of relations between parties who belonged to the same local hierarchies. Many of the slaves involved in these cases did not live together with their owners, but were recognized collectively as dependent upon specific elite families.⁴⁶ In colonial reports, the vast majority of these people were designated as “voluntary servants,”

Theodore Marchand, former governor of Cameroon, replaced the former French member, Angoulvant, who had died; Portugal’s José d’Almada, colonial advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, replaced de Castro e Almeida, whose involvement had been limited; the British replaced the aging Lugard with George Maxwell, a barrister who had served in Malaysia; and the Spanish member was Isabel Oyarzábal, delegate to the ILO and to the LN’s assembly. See Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, 217–18.

46. I analyze these relations and their transformations throughout the period 1800–2000 in Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid*. See also Rossi, “Without History? Interrogating Slave Memories in Ader (Niger),” in *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade*, ed. Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, and Martin A. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 536–54.

indicating that they were not forcibly tied to their masters and were apparently free to break off relations at any time. But many of them continued working for their masters, primarily looking after their herds.

Slave-owners felt entitled to be hosted by these subordinates at any time: they saw these communities and the resources they exploited as their own; male masters thought they had sexual access to women and could take children away to sell or give as presents. Those who lived in close physical proximity to members of their masters' families carried out manual and domestic labor; women of slave descent were the care-takers and wet-nurses of elite children. In return, they received some food, clothes, protection in moments of crisis (for example, they may have had access to food during famines), and occasional gifts. They appeared to be tied to the elites by a "tacit contract," entered voluntarily and hypothetically freely repudiated. But the ambiguity of their status—were they slaves, ex-slaves, or slave descendants?—made them vulnerable: they could be sold, turned into gifts, or used for sexual entertainment, leading lives subordinated to the lives of others.

Trials at which slaves entered into open confrontation with those who had owned and sold them shed light on the actual nature of the relations that figured as "tacit contracts" and "voluntary servitude" in French reports. They reveal, too, the matter-of-fact nature of slavery in Tahoua: owners were not ashamed to own slaves and talked of slavery as an integral part of their economic activities. The slaves who chose to denounce their masters revolted against particular actions that they found unacceptable. They were trying to improve their circumstances and those of people they cared for—not to eradicate slavery as a whole.

The 1920s Trials that Challenged the Moral Viability of Slavery

On September 14, 1920, Tougai, a *bellah*⁴⁷ woman of about thirty-five years of age, denounced the actions of her master Abdelkader to the colonial administration of Tahoua. Approximately ten days earlier, Abdelkader had taken Rhali, Tougai's ten-year-old son, and given the child to his "uncle" Ahmed ag Mohamed in exchange for 12,000 measures of millet. Tougai claimed that Abdelkader had intended to sell her son to Ahmed. Agodek, a *bellah* man from the village of Labanda, testified as an eyewitness to this transaction: he had seen Abdelkader reach Ahmed's dwelling with the child, and leave alone with the millet. Agodek believed that the millet was payment for the child, but Abdelkader and Ahmed denied the whole affair. They claimed that the millet had been given to Abdelkader on credit, and that he would have paid for it at a later date. "The witnesses lie," he stated. "I only *lent* the boy to my uncle, who needed a shepherd." The district commander told Abdelkader that he had no right to "lend"

47. In AOF the term *bellah* loosely designated slaves and slave descendants within Tuareg societies, and was used by Songhay speakers in the French Sudan. In Hausaphone contexts Tuareg slaves and ex-slaves are referred to as *buzu*, *buzaye*, or *bugadje*. The colonial sources cited in this article use the terms *bellah* and *buzu* interchangeably.

a child who was not his own, and that the two witnesses had given conclusive evidence. The accused replied: “These are *bellah*, captives, their word does not carry the same weight as mine.”⁴⁸ The officer observed that Tougai, who was Abdelkader’s servant (*domestique*), would not have complained unless she knew that her son had been sold to Ahmed. Abdelkader once again discounted the reliability of Tougai’s statement: “This woman does not know what she is talking about.”

The officer asked for the opinion of the two assessors, Muḥammad al-Mumin, chief of the Second Nomadic Group (Kel Eghlel), of Muslim status, and Abderhaman, chief of the Euddes, a Muslim nomad.⁴⁹ It was decided that Rhali had been exchanged for the millet and therefore that this was a case of slave trading. However, the gravity of the case was extenuated by the fact that the child had not been removed from the region in which he lived, that the accused had no criminal records, and that Islamic law did not stipulate any punishment for this crime. The sentence was reduced to six months of prison for Abdelkader and a fine of 150 francs for Ahmed. Tougai’s determination spared her son a forceful relocation away from her and into local groups that would have treated him as a slave and possibly one day sold him off to distant strangers. But Tougai’s case was an exception: most of the trials documented in the 1920s reports were not aimed at preventing enslavement but at restoring the freedom of women and children who had been sold and held in captivity for years.

On May 5, 1921, the district commander of Tahoua received a letter from his counterpart in the district of Gao in the French Sudan (present-day Mali). It informed him that he should expect the arrival of some slaves from Tahoua who had been sold by Almoussakares Arabs to nomads from Gao. Seima, a woman aged about forty, and her nine-year-old daughter Alguimat reached Tahoua’s administrative headquarters a few days later. Seima declared that she had been sold around 1913 by her masters Youssef Ould Belahi and his brother Mohamed. She and her daughter had been bought by a nomad from Gao who had recently been summoned by the Gao district administration. In Seima’s words:

*About eight years ago my masters Youssef and Mohamed sold me to Mohamed Ould M’barek of the Daoussak of Gao. My daughter was about one at the time. I stayed with my new master until one day he was summoned to Gao’s administration ... someone must have told the district commander of Gao that Mohamed Ould M’barek had bought me and my daughter, because he was arrested and brought to trial.*⁵⁰

48. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 4, case of Abdelkader and Ahmed ag Mohamed.

49. Muḥammad al-Mumin was the leader of the Kel Eghlel of Abalagh. He and his younger relative Muḥammad Ibrahim were influential religious scholars, respected by the colonial administration who relied on their advice and called upon their services in the Tahoua region. They also shared their knowledge (and their important manuscript collection) with some of the main scholars of Tuareg societies in Niger, including H. T. Norris, Edmond Bernus, Johannes Nicolaisen, and Ghubayd Agg-Alawjeli (Ghoubëid Alojaly), all of whom refer to these two *shaykhs* of Abalagh in their works. I had conversations with Ibrahim in Abalagh on October 9 and 10, 2005.

50. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 8, case of Mohamed Ould Belahi.

The sellers were summoned to appear in Tahoua. Youssouf had died, but Mohamed was arrested on May 19. He confessed that he and his brother had sold Seima and her daughter, but tried to justify himself by blaming his youthfulness at the time of the affair: "I wanted to oppose this sale, but my brother was the elder and he told me that we had to sell Seima and her daughter to get some cattle in their place. I was young and I did not want to contradict Youssouf's decision."⁵¹ Tahoua's tribunal sentenced Mohamed to two years in prison, but a handwritten note at the bottom of the dossier indicates that a chamber of the court of appeals (*chambre d'homologation*) reversed this judgment on August 18, 1921. Mohamed was eventually acquitted.

Transactions between Tahoua and Gao were not random. These two regions were linked by long-term ethnic, political, and trade relations. Tahoua-Tamaske was home to the Iwellemmeden Kel Denneq (or eastern Iwellemmeden), while Gao-Menaka hosted the Iwellemmeden Kel Ataram (or western Iwellemmeden). These two divisions of the Iwellemmeden were connected by ties of trade and intermarriage, and some of their chiefs had joined forces during the revolt of 1916–1917. Business between them was eased by a sense of common origins and frequent contact, sometimes hostile but characterized by the mobilization of segmentary principles. Slaves, like wives and traded commodities, traveled across the segments of Iwellemmeden groups and sub-groups, and could eventually be transferred to completely separate groups, like the Ahaggaren in Algeria or the Tuareg of the Adrar des Iforas in Mali. Slaves circulated between Tahoua and Gao across a number of ethnic and lineage-based networks built on long-established connections. The cases of Seidi, Absata, and Elgeme, discussed below, all occurred in this geographic and social space.

In September 1917 Oumar ag Ibrahim sold his slave Seidi, a ten-year-old girl from the eastern Igdalen, to Sahalla, a Daoussak from the district of Gao. In May 1921 the district commander of Gao discovered that Seidi had been bought by Sahalla, and had the latter arrested and brought to the administration's office. Sahalla gave away the identity of the seller, and the district commander of Gao sent Seidi to Tahoua, informing his counterpart of the facts. Oumar was found and arrested on June 29. Confronted with Seidi he recognized her immediately, though he initially tried to deny the accusation and shift the blame onto a certain Attaher. However, the girl provided extensive details, forcing him to confess. She was fourteen years old when she gave the following testimony:

*In September 1917 I was in the service of the accused. He brought me to the east and sold me to Sahalla of the Daoussak in exchange for three heads of cattle and two donkeys. Recently some guards (goumiers) from Menaka came to our camp and arrested Sahalla, who was brought to the district tribunal. I was taken away, too, and after Sahalla was sentenced the district commander sent me to Tahoua.*⁵²

51. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 8, case of Mohamed Ould Belahi.

52. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 9, case of Oumar ag Ibrahim.

Oumar was then asked whether he admitted that he had sold Seidi, his servant, to Sahalla: “Yes, I confirm that what Seidi said is the truth. She was not of great use to me. After the revolt of the nomads and the events at Agadez I needed to restock my herd, so I decided to exchange my maid for three oxen and a donkey. It is the fault of God who ill-inspired me (*c’est la faute de Dieu qui m’a mal inspiré*).”⁵³ Oumar was sentenced to five years in prison, though we do not know if the sentence was finally carried out. His sober explanation of why he sold Seidi is a powerful demonstration of the moral viability of slavery in slave-owners’ eyes. Slaves were sold to deal with routine economic matters, such as restocking depleted herds or—as in the case of Absata and Elgeme presented below—acquiring cash needed for daily business activities.

On February 15, 1921, Absata, a *bellah* woman of the Iragamaten, was sold with her son and daughter by her master Sibilla ag Shibebe of the Igdalen to a man from the Hoggar region whose name and ethnicity she did not know. A few days later, their new owner sold Absata’s daughter to a man from the Adrar des Iforas, but kept Absata and her son. While they were traveling northward, the pair escaped and reached Tahoua, where they filed a claim with the district commander. After over two months of searches, Sibilla was arrested and brought to Tahoua. At the same moment, a woman called Elgeme arrived with her two young children and a note from the district commander of Gao stating that she had been sold by a nomad from Tahoua to a certain Salimou, a nomad from Gao, who had been condemned for having purchased her.

Sibilla arrived in the administrative station on March 31. While he was being interrogated by the district commander, Elgeme reached the colonial administration’s headquarters and recognized her former master, who had sold her, and Absata, her old companion. Absata and Elgeme accused Sibilla of selling not only them and their children, but also many other women and children to nomads of the Hoggar and Adrar des Iforas regions. In her accusation, Absata stated: “Sibilla surely sold other women and children, because on several occasions I saw him arrive at the camp with people that he gave to other nomads in exchange for livestock and cloth. I do not know what happened to my daughter.”⁵⁴ Elgeme, too, was asked to testify:

*Sibilla sold me with my two young children to Salimou of Gao for thirty sheep and one donkey. Since my new master treated me harshly, I complained to the colonial administration of Gao. Salimou was arrested and sentenced. The district commander of Gao sent me back to Tahoua with a letter for Tahoua’s district commander. When I reached the administration’s building I was surprised to find my old master being interrogated by the district commander, to whom I gave the letter. Sibilla recognized me. He had sold several other of his servants, primarily women and children.*⁵⁵

53. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 9, case of Oumar ag Ibrahim.

54. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 7, case of Sibilla ag Kibebe.

55. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 7, case of Sibilla ag Kibebe.

Sibilla admitted that he had sold Absata and Elgeme, but denied having sold anyone else. When the district commander asked him whether he knew that French law had forbidden the slave trade and why he engaged in this traffic, Sibilla replied: “I needed the money and I was dissatisfied with the work of these servants.”⁵⁶ He was sentenced to five years in prison.

The Resistance of Enslaved Women and Mothers

What is the nature of the relations described in the cases above? In the first case, Tougai defended her son Rhali when her master Abdelkader tried to give, or sell, him to his “uncle” Ahmed. She convinced a man of slave descent called Agodek to act as her witness in court. In the second case, Seima and her nine-year-old daughter Alguimat had been sold by her master to a nomad from the district of Gao. They spent approximately eight years in the service of this man, until the sale was discovered and they were sent back to Tahoua. We do not know whether Seima (or Alguimat) had denounced their new owner, or whether their situation was discovered accidentally. In the third case, Seidi was ten years old when she was sold by her master to a nomad from the district of Gao. When the district commander discovered her circumstances, he sent her back to Tahoua. Again, we do not know if Seidi had informed the administration of her status, or if other events had brought to light her enslavement. These discoveries were made either at the initiative of enslaved persons themselves, who contacted the colonial administration in the hope of receiving support, or by administrators conducting the investigations required to complete their reports on the situation of slavery and the slave trade in the districts under their command. Whichever the case, when fourteen-year-old Seidi was interviewed in Tahoua and confronted with the former owner who had sold her, she did not hesitate to accuse him. His answer reveals that he found the transaction completely normal: as a servant Seidi was not of great use to him, and he needed to restock his herd, which had suffered severe losses after the conflicts of 1916–1917. His motivation was similar to that of the owners of Seima and her daughter, who stated that they had sold their slaves because they wanted to purchase cattle. In the fourth case, Absata and Elgeme were sold, each with their respective children, by their master Sibilla to Tuareg from other groups (Hoggar and Adrar des Iforas). Following the re-sale of her daughter to yet another man, Absata escaped with her son and turned to the administration to denounce her master. Meanwhile Elgeme, still with both her children, reached Tahoua from Gao where she had been “liberated,” though once again we do not know the circumstances in which her enslavement had been discovered. The two women incriminated their former master, accusing him of having sold many other persons. His explanation was curt and plain: he needed money and was displeased with their service.

These cases, all from the early 1920s, suggest that women of slave descent were particularly vulnerable. We do not know how Tougai, Seima, Seidi, Absata, and Elgeme had originally been enslaved. They may have been purchased as infants and grown up in a Tuareg camp or slave settlement with many other children who shared a similar destiny. Or they may have been born to a slave mother owned by someone who automatically owned them, too (as was the case for Idi, described in the next section, who stated that he had been born to a woman enslaved to his owner). Each woman probably led a relatively autonomous life and may have had only occasional contact with her master. Then a day came when the master decided that he needed money or cattle, or that he owed something to someone close to him, someone he could not disappoint, and chose to dispose of a person whom he considered his possession to fulfill his needs. These transactions had been legitimate until only two decades earlier. Their criminalization by the French occupiers, who had substantially undermined the power of former Tuareg elites in these areas, was a novelty. Slave-owners did not feel guilt for actions that were justifiable in their own cultural and normative universe—actions banned only recently by colonial agents whom they considered infidels, enemies, and usurpers.

A large number of slaves were bound to their nomadic masters by loose ties of dependence: all that was asked of them was, perhaps, to host the masters and their parties during their visits, or to carry out some domestic work, look after part of the masters' herds, and fetch water and wood. They owed their masters some customary gifts and prestations, but received some, too. In sum, for many of these persons slavery was bearable and there may have been benefits to having the protection of a master. But the most marginal amongst them lived under the threat that their master would decide to sell them and/or their children. A sale implied a deterioration of their circumstances: it involved abandoning familiar places and friends and facing the alienation of the newly enslaved, forcibly relegated to the lowest rung of another social hierarchy with a status that gave few, if any, entitlements. Slave mothers feared that their children would be sold and thereby lost to a life harsher than their own, far away where they could not protect and look after them. In the 1920s, some slaves faced with a deterioration of their circumstances chose to resist.

Most slaves had reasons to resent their masters. Some may have experienced enslavement and the eradication of all links to their original families, but even if they had been born into dependence their lives were harder than those of freeborn persons. Their workloads were heavier, they could be physically chastised, and slave girls were sexually accessible to elite men. This article examines a limited number of cases that are not statistically representative and do not allow generalizations. But the prominence of enslaved women corroborates the findings of other studies that in this period women and children formed the majority of slaves because they were more easily coercible than men of slave descent.⁵⁷ The

57. See Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Trafficking in Slavery's Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012). See also Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Joseph C. Miller, "Domiciled

experience of exploitation was highly gendered: these women had to endure the allegedly legitimate abduction of their children and violation of their bodies. After abolition, men of slave descent became labor migrants and accessed opportunities unattainable to many enslaved women in this region.⁵⁸ When in the 1920s colonial administrators were required to actively pursue slave-owners and traders in their districts, it seems that enslaved women in particular took advantage of these circumstances.

Tadoutchi's Courage

This case is more complex than the previous ones, since the actors involved did not belong only to Tuareg nomadic sections. Unlike cases that involved the sale of slaves across closely connected Tuareg networks, Tadoutchi's odyssey cut across status, ethnicity, religion, gender, and age. Tadoutchi was from Sabon Gari Kaora, a small hamlet near the village of Agouloum, north-east of Tamaske. Villages in the Bagey-Tamaske-Agouloum area were, and are, inhabited by a mix of Hausaphone Asna groups, different Tuareg groups (some nomadic, others settled), and small groups of slave descendants, some of whom were manumitted and had acquired the status of *liberti*: Ighawalen in Tamasheq or Gawalley in Hausa.⁵⁹ Notions of identity and hierarchy could not be more complex than in this small region of Ader, where Tuareg and Hausa/Asna ideas and institutions mix, and where members of the same family may not speak the same language.⁶⁰ In this area "slaves" could imagine occupying different positions in Ader's multiple hierarchies—they could perceive themselves, and be perceived, as manumitted slaves or poor Hausa peasants. Unlike Tuareg slaves who grew up in the camps of their masters, "slaves" like Tadoutchi and her "brothers" Mayaki and Idi were embedded in a multiplicity of hierarchies based on wealth, descent, rank, and spiritual criteria. Their names show that they were partially Hausaized.

and Dominated: Slaving as a History of Women," in *Women and Slavery*, ed. Gwin Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Miller, vol. 2, *The Modern Atlantic* (Athens: Ohio University Press), 284–312.

58. For an analysis of the migration of male slaves in Tahoua and generally in the West African context, see Benedetta Rossi, "Migration and Emancipation in West Africa's Labor History: The Missing Links," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 35, no. 1 (2014): 23–46. For a study of other contexts where women of slave descent were able to migrate in substantial numbers, see Marie Rodet, *Les migrantes ignorées du Haut-Sénégal, 1900–1946* (Paris: Karthala, 2009).

59. I describe these types of ethnic identities and relations, and specifically the settings of Sabon Gari Kaora and Agouloum, in Rossi, "Being and Becoming Hausa in Ader," in *Being and Becoming Hausa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Anne Haour and Benedetta Rossi (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 113–39. For a discussion of the relations between Hausaphone (including Azna, Asna, or Asena) and Tamasheqophone groups in the Tamaske area, see Francis Nicolas, *Tamesna: Les Ioullemeden de l'Est ou Touâreg "Kel Dinnik," cercle de T'âwa, colonie du Niger. Notes de linguistique et d'ethnographie berbères, dialectes de la tamâzəq-taullammét* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1950), 48–59.

60. For examples of this type of relation, see Rossi, "Without History?" 547–48.

In this world of interlaced hierarchies, one day Barao, a powerful man connected to the canton chief (*sarki* in Hausa) of Tamaske and active in Ader's multi-ethnic trade networks, sold a young boy called Idi. Tadoutchi denounced Barao for selling Idi, whom she qualified as her brother. Tadoutchi believed in herself, and possibly saw herself as endowed with magical powers.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the consequences of her denunciation were terrible: Barao sold the young woman and her child into the trans-Saharan slave trade. She was already deep into the desert when her destiny suddenly turned: the same forces that had led her into the Sahara pulled her back home. Under normal circumstances, Barao's revenge against Tadoutchi would have been easy to accomplish. But this time other interests were at stake: the colonial administration, under pressure from the L.N., had to pursue cases of slavery beyond what might have been considered reasonable earlier in the twentieth century. The district commander Adélarde de Loppinot was a man of relentless determination, as he had shown on several other occasions.⁶² And Tamaske's *sarki* Tuba dan Aga had private scores to settle with Barao. Under pressure by de Loppinot and determined to harm Barao, *sarki* Tuba became involved in the case. His men reached out to the Tuareg intermediaries who had sold and re-sold Tadoutchi and Idi further and further into the desert. Retrieved from these trafficking networks, Tadoutchi and Idi testified against Barao. They identified him as the man who had sold them and, facing him at the trial, denounced his lies.

Risks and Rewards of Resistance: Tadoutchi and Idi's Journey in and out of Slavery

In June 1930 Tadoutchi, a woman of about twenty-three years of age, filed a complaint with Tahoua's administration in which she accused her master Barao of selling her brother Idi as well as another young "servant" called Idrissa. She was given a summons to take to Tamaske, where Barao lived. Barao was seen setting off for Tahoua with Tadoutchi: they left Tamaske and walked together up the dusty lateritic plateau that stands just outside the village where the road branches off to Tahoua. But Barao came down from the plateau alone. There was no trace of Tadoutchi. In Tahoua's administrative headquarters he was asked to explain what had happened to the young woman, and replied that she had spent the night in Bagey and would reach them on the following day.

61. The name, or nickname, "Tadoutchi" indicates an association between this woman and a plateau, hill, or mountain (*ta douchi* meaning "the one of the rocks," or "the one of the mountains"). In the Bagey-Tamaske-Agouloum culture area, such nicknames are often given to individuals believed to hold supernatural powers. For example, I collected testimonies describing the supernatural powers of a woman known as *ta karfi*, or "the one of the jar," believed to have powers over the rain which she transmitted to her son Ibrahim Mai Ruwa (Ibrahim chief of the rain): fieldnotes, Kongo, September 13, 2005; Sabon Gari Kaora, September 19, 2005; Agouloum, September 20 and 21, 2005; Kongo, October 18, 2005.

62. Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid*, 175–92.

The days passed, and Tadoutchi did not reappear. Barao was imprisoned and searches were arranged to find the missing woman. The inquiry was dwindling for lack of evidence, when Tuba, the canton chief of Tamaské, came to see district commander de Loppinot with two testimonies, and declared that Barao had told him in person that he had sold Idrissa.⁶³ Barao was informed that he had the right to select a defense attorney amongst his relatives or the local notables, but he maintained that he would defend himself and did not need anyone else. Asked to make his deposition, Tuba stated:

One day I was going to the district administration, and Barao too had been summoned there following the accusations of his servant Tadoutchi who claimed that he had sold her brother Idi. I told Barao, "Tell me the truth, I am your father-in-law, did you sell your servant?" He replied: "It is not Idi I sold, but Idrissa." This happened along the way [to Tahoua], near Kolloma, and Rahimoun and Moussa were present. [Barao] added that he had sold [his servant] to Aggour of the Hoggar for four camels. He sold one of the camels to cover the expenses of his recent marriage; the second camel he exchanged for livestock that he exported for sale in Nigeria. He must have hidden the other two, I do not know where: he offered to give me a female camel to buy my silence and support in this affair.⁶⁴

De Loppinot asked Tuba whether he knew anything about Idi's sale; he replied that he had heard about it but he did not know for sure. When asked if he had any suspicions about Tadoutchi's disappearance, he replied that he found it troubling: following orders from the administration he had dispatched all the district guards and had hundreds of people searching the plateau and its surroundings but "no bones had been found." Rahimoun and Moussa, the two witnesses who were with Tuba, confirmed his deposition. Rahimoun added that Barao had offered Tuba one female camel, a blanket, and 250 francs in exchange for his collaboration. Asked to comment on these accusations against him, Barao replied:

All I know is that this is a conspiracy against me by my father-in-law, who is upset with me because I married the sister of the canton chief of Tahoua. He invented my statements and convinced two friends of mine to make depositions against me in order to harm me. I am a successful trader and I earn money through commerce: it is with this money that I was able to get married. My two servants Idi and Idrissa ran away (se sont sauvés), as did my servant Tadoutchi. I could do nothing about this, all slaves run away, they are probably in Nigeria.⁶⁵

63. Sarki Tuba was renowned for his magical powers, partly related to the potency of Arnei, the Sarki Bori, a *buzu* from a specialist well-digging group. He had close ties with the village of Agouloum Toudou, which is the main settlement near Sabon Gari Kaora, where Tadoutchi is from; fieldnotes February 19, 2005 (including interview with Alio Aga, the brother of Tuba); March 2, 2005; September 21, 2005; December 2, 2008.

64. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

65. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

This started a discussion between de Loppinot and Barao about statements made by the latter that had been shown to be false over the course of the investigation. De Loppinot accused Barao of lying: “these successive lies attest to how little trust we should place in your claims.”⁶⁶ The three witnesses swore on the Quran that their statements were true and declared that they had nothing to add. Barao, asked if he wished to add anything, said: “Nothing, only that they are lying in order to destroy me.” He was sentenced to five years in prison and the confiscation of a rifle and the four camels, or the livestock acquired through the sale of the camels. Then some weeks later, on August 21, Tadoutchi and Idi appeared unexpectedly at the administration of Tahoua. Tadoutchi made the following deposition:

About two months ago I came to Tahoua to file a complaint against my master Barao who had sold my two younger brothers Mayaki and Idi. The district commander gave me a paper for Tuba, the canton chief of Tamaske. When I brought the paper to the chief, he was absent, so I gave it to his nephew Maidoubou, who read it, gave it back to me, and asked me to wait for Tuba's return. On that same day my master Barao came to see me and told me: “You went to tell lies to the district commander. I have just arrived from Tahoua: the district commander told me to bring you back immediately. Bakary, the colonial interpreter, lent me his camel so that I could travel faster.” He asked me to give him the district commander's paper; then he went off to the village of Sabon Gida, came back, and told me to follow him. So this is what I did. He rode his camel and I walked behind him with my child on my back. When we reached the plateau of Tamaske he took me on the camel and we traveled like this until we reached the valley of Barmu at nightfall. Barao stopped only when he saw three nomads waiting for him. Then he told me: “You went to see the whites, now you can do anything you want, but you shall never see them again.”

The nomads gave him a rifle and a large woolen blanket from Hoggar, then they parted ways. Barao went back alone the way we had come, and the nomads, who were already in possession of my brother Idi, set off north with [Idi], myself, and the child I was carrying on my back. On the second day of our journey one of the nomads parted from us, heading eastward. We traveled by camel for about nine days, traveling overnight, from sunset until about midday. On the ninth day we reached the nomads' camp. We spent one week there, then we traveled five days westward and reached a valley where there were the camps of some Arabs with their tents and their camels. The nomads who had brought us there sold us to these Arabs: I for six camels, and my younger brother Idi for five. The nomad who had given the rifle and blanket to Barao kept my child (who had been weaned) in his camp with him. I stayed at the camp of the Arabs where we had been sold, but my brother was taken away by the Arab who had bought him to another camp located south of the first. A few days later, the nomads who had sold us came to look for us at the Arabs' camp and brought us to their chief, Moussa, who was camped about one day's march by camel west of the Arabs' camp.

Moussa told us that he had received a paper stating that Barao had been imprisoned and that a search had been launched for me. He asked us whether we would be able to return to

66. ANN, 381.1, verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

*Tamaske or Tahoua [on our own]; we said we could, and he let us go without giving us any food or water. After a two-day march we reached the camp of Muhammad al-Mumin [near Abalagh], where we were fed and given water to drink. Then we continued our trip and reached Tahoua. It took us twenty days in total to come from Moussa's camp to here. During almost the entire journey we ate leaves and drank water from the ponds scattered along the way.*⁶⁷

The account of Idi, who at the time was about fourteen years old, complemented that of Tadoutchi by adding details from his own story:

*My mother was a slave (captive) of Barao. I was born in his home and I always lived there. As soon as I was old enough to work, I did all kinds of jobs. I looked after the animals of my master, cultivated his garden, carried out tasks he assigned to me, and tried to be helpful on all occasions. One day, at the beginning of the rainy season this year, Barao's father beat me without reason and threatened to throw me in a well. I ran away in panic and sought refuge with Ikali, also known as Abubakar, of Tchinkaki. Barao found me there one month later, when he came to look for me to bring me to a certain Duadie. I spent one week in Tahoua with Barao, then we left and went to Bagey where we stayed for three days. When we were leaving Bagey, Barao told me: "Now we are going back to Tamaske." He took the road to Tamaske, but before reaching it he made a detour and stopped just after the village of Zangarata. We stopped in the bush. At sunset Barao started walking with me toward Tamaske, but instead of entering the village he stopped about two kilometers to the south, on a dune where we met a group of about ten nomads, all of whom had their faces veiled and long hair [i.e., they were Tuareg elites or imajeghen]. We spent the night on this dune with the nomads. Just before sunrise Barao woke me up and I had to leave with him and three nomads in the direction of Bagey. When Bagey was in sight, Barao said that he had forgotten the shackles for his horse and returned to Tamaske after telling me to continue with the nomads. I followed them until we reached the valley of Barmu. We camped there for three days, and it is there that I overheard the names of the nomads: Almina, Aguele, and a third who must have been a cleric (maraboutique) and was called Aliafare. On the evening of the fourth day, Barao arrived with my sister Tadoutchi carrying her child of about two years on her back. My sister told you already what happened afterward.*⁶⁸

On the following day, Barao, Tadoutchi, and Idi were interrogated together at the tribunal of Tahoua. This confrontation was chaired by Edouard Nafyn, deputy of the district commander de Loppinot.⁶⁹ Barao was reminded of his earlier statement, in which he had claimed that he had gone with Tadoutchi to the plateau

67. ANN, 381.1, record of the complaint, note attached to verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour. As these events took place toward the end of the rainy season, they would have found frequent ponds along the way.

68. ANN, 381.1, record of the complaint, note attached to verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

69. ANN, 381.1, proceedings of the Barao case, record of the confrontation, Tahoua, August 22, 1930, note attached to verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

of Tamaské, then continued on the road to Tahoua alone while she stayed overnight in Bagey with a certain Azzahara, and that after this he had never seen Tadoutchi again. He was asked if he would reconfirm this version of events, which he did. Barao was then informed that Tadoutchi and her brother Idi had been found and were accusing him of having sold them, together with her son, to three nomads called Almina, Agueli, and Aliafare. He was asked if this was true:

BARAO: If this is true, you should contact these people and they will tell you what price I asked them to pay.

NAFYN: Your accomplices will soon be arrested and they will betray you. It is in your interest to tell the whole truth from now on.

BARAO: The blanket which they say I received with the rifle as payment for the child of Tadoutchi ...

NAFYN: Who told you about the blanket and the price of Tadoutchi's son?

BARAO: I overheard people talking about it when I was carrying water yesterday.

NAFYN: What did you hear?

BARAO: I do not know, I heard this yesterday, ... there were some men who were talking between them.

NAFYN: Which men? You do not see that many men in prison.

BARAO: I don't know, I do not know them.

NAFYN: Continue.⁷⁰

Barao started a complicated story about Aliafare, the cleric mentioned by Idi, explaining that he owed him 850 francs for some trade exchanges that had occurred between them. Since this story departed from the focus of the court case, Nafyn asked him to explain how Tadoutchi and Idi had been given to the nomads.

BARAO: I am not lying, I do not know how they were taken by the nomads. I assure you that I have never sold anyone. You should bring the nomads here and interrogate them, and you will see that I am not involved in this affair. Aliafare is a family friend. Each time he comes down to the sedentary region, he stays with me.

NAFYN: Who asked you to talk about the nature of your relations with Aliafare?

BARAO: No one, it is just to let you know.

NAFYN: Do you insist on denying that you sold Tadoutchi, her son, and her brother Idi?

BARAO: I never sold anyone.

NAFYN (TO TADOUTCHI): Is this the man who sold you?

TADOUTCHI: It is.

NAFYN (TO IDI): Do you recognize this man, is he the man who sold you?

IDI: Yes, he is, he says nothing but lies.⁷¹

70. ANN, 381.1, proceedings of the Barao case, record of the confrontation, Tahoua, August 22, 1930, note attached to verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

71. ANN, 381.1, proceedings of the Barao case, record of the confrontation, Tahoua, August 22, 1930, note attached to verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

On November 15, 1930, one more witness in this case gave his testimony at the district of Tahoua to the deputy district commander Paul Guillaud.⁷² Bibi, a thirty-eight-year-old nomad from the group led by the Arab chief Moussa, with their main camp in Tamaia at the border between the districts of Tahoua and Tamanrasset, gave the following statement:

Moussa, my chief, found out that some individuals of the Taitoff fraction had bought two slaves, a man and a woman. He ordered me to go to look for this man and this woman among the Taitoff and to bring them back to him. I left for the Taitoff [camp] with some companions. ... We found the Taitoff in Tegidda, in the district of Agadez north-west of In Gall, at four days' march from that old station. I found the boy Idi with Mamma, and Tadoutchi at Mohamed's place. Moussa had recommended that we act cautiously among the Taitoff, pretending to want to buy back these slaves, nothing else. This is what we did, and once we had acquired the two slaves we brought them back to Moussa together with the Taitoff Mamma and Mohamed.⁷³

On December 10, 1931, this case came before the chamber of the court of appeals (*chambre d'homologation*) of Niamey. At Tahoua's tribunal of second degree the affair had been adjudicated as a case of slave trading, and Barao, Agueli, Almina, and Aliafare had each been sentenced to five years in prison and a fine of 500 francs. Moreover, it was decided that the goods exchanged for the slaves in the transaction (four camels, 2000 francs, a rifle, and a blanket) would all be confiscated. The chamber decreed that the judgment against Barao and Aliafare—who “had been the main instigators of the crime”—would stand, but Agueli and Almina's sentence was reduced from five to three years.⁷⁴ The court considered that the culpability of the Hoggar nomads was mitigated by the fact that they had “done nothing to provoke this sale” and “had not opposed any resistance to setting free the captives they had acquired when they received the order to do so by the chief of the nomadic tribe, Moussa ag Aklissou.” The transcript of the court's decision goes on to explain the logic that had resulted in the tribunal's final verdict:

The rules of humanity that must guide our decisions sometimes oblige us to suspend our personality and consider that things that are contrary to our feelings are sometimes seen

72. ANN, 381.1, record of the witness hearing, November 15, 1930, Tahoua, note attached to verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour.

73. ANN, 381.1, record of the witness hearing, November 15, 1930, Tahoua, note attached to verdict no. 12, case of Barao and Aggour. The “Arab” group referred to as “Taitoff” in these documents are better known in the literature as Taitoq or Taytoq, see Nicolas, *Tamesna*, 75; H. T. Norris, *The Tuaregs: Their Islamic Legacy and Its Diffusion in the Sahel* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1975), 4 and 14.

74. ANN, 381.1, public prosecutor of the chamber of the court of appeals of Niger to the president of the same court at Niamey, overturning of verdict no. 12, Niamey, December 10, 1931.

*as normal by these natives, whose mentality is somewhat primitive, and on whose spirits our civilizing influence has been acting only very slowly.*⁷⁵

Colonial Law, Ethnicity, Status, and Gender in the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade

Barao had already sold Tadoutchi's younger brother Mayaki when he took Idi away and sold him to Aliafare, a man from the Hoggar with whom he had close ties. Barao was a wealthy Hausaphone merchant—he bought livestock from the north and sold it in the south, probably in northern Nigeria: a lucrative form of trade for the businessmen of Tamaske who acted as intermediaries between the Tuareg nomads of the north and the busy Hausa city-states to the south of Ader.⁷⁶ He was involved in many axes of trade, and occasionally must have sold persons whom he considered his slaves.

When Idi was sold, Tadoutchi denounced Barao. He was a powerful man and her denunciation was a long shot and a potentially hazardous one. But sarki Tuba decided to intervene in her favor. As Barao stated, he must have had his own motives for getting involved. It is certain that Tuba had decided to harm Barao, perhaps out of jealousy. Barao had married the daughter of a powerful chief in the region, and Tuba himself was trying to make advantageous matches with women from old chiefly families in order to ennoble his own lineage. Chief of a rich farming canton bordering dry semi-desert regions, Tuba was a *homo novus*: he was the son of a rich farmer, Aga, who did not have chiefly credentials by descent. Aga, it is said, had been the Lissawan's chief of farming (*sarki noma*) before becoming the first canton chief of Tamaske at the direction of the French colonialists.⁷⁷ Aga and Tuba were perceived as legitimate chiefs by the local population, who resented Tuareg power. Thus in the 1920s French abolitionism became a weapon in the hands of Tadoutchi, who resisted the sale of her two “brothers” (subordinate young boys close to her who may or may not have been her biological brothers), and in the hands of sarki Tuba, who got rid of an adversary and strengthened his position by appearing to lend support to the abolitionist cause.

75. ANN, 381.1, public prosecutor of the chamber of the court of appeals of Niger to the president of the same court at Niamey, overturning of verdict no. 12, Niamey, December 10, 1931.

76. On these trade networks, see Stephen Baier, *An Economic History of Central Niger* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Baier, “Ecologically Based Trade and the State in Precolonial West Africa,” *Cahiers d'études africaines* 77–78 (1980): 149–54; Baier and Lovejoy, “The Desert-Side Economy”; Paul Lovejoy, “The Kambarin Beriberi: The Formation of a Specialized Group of Hausa Kola Traders in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 14, no. 4 (1973): 633–51.

77. This is based on my research in Ader, see in particular fieldnotes and interviews with Alio Aga (son of Aga) and Cheffou Tuba (son of Tuba) conducted in Tamaske on February 19, 2005; fieldnotes March 2, 2005 (in Agouloum Toudou); fieldnotes September 9, 2005 (in Keita).

This case sheds light on the internal workings of the trans-Saharan slave trade: Barao, settled in a village at the boundary between desert and savannah, was the Hausaphone business partner of Aliafare, a nomad of the “Hoggar” (Ahaggaren). He sometimes provided slaves to Aliafare, and the latter sold them on to men from other Arabo-Tuareg nomadic groups, such as the “Taitoff” (Taytoq). But in this case Moussa, the chief of Aliafare’s Hoggar nomadic group, interfered with his business, perhaps because of the intervention of Tamaske’s canton chief Tuba. Informed—probably by Tuba’s emissaries—that the French had launched a search for Tadoutchi and Idi, Moussa sent his men to find out the identities of those in his own group who had bought slaves from Aliafare and buy them back. Barao and Aliafare’s transaction was nullified by the intervention of their respective chiefs, Tuba and Moussa, who on this occasion chose to collaborate with the French administration. Tadoutchi and Idi were vindicated. But in this story Tadoutchi seems to have lost the unnamed child she was carrying on her back, kept by someone in Moussa’s camp and perhaps never returned to her.

None of the slaves who testified at the tribunal of Tahoua were strangers to their masters. Some had been born to one of their masters’ female slaves and were, therefore, second- or third-generation slaves in these highly stratified societies. But from their masters’ perspective they were disposable. Their status and racialized identities made them persons who could be transacted. Masters who knew that their slaves would oppose resistance to these transactions lied to conceal their real intentions: Barao told Idi that he had forgotten the shackles of his horse and had to go back to collect them, leaving him in the hands of those to whom he had been sold.⁷⁸ Idi did not want to leave Tamaske, but this was not because of any emotional attachment to his master, from whom he had already escaped once before, when Barao’s father had threatened to throw him in a well. The ties he felt were to his other enslaved relatives and friends, like Ikali who hid him when he ran away, or Tadoutchi who did not hesitate to denounce her master to the French to rescue him, an act of defiance that would provoke her own sale and the loss of her child. Indeed, were it not for the intervention of Tuba, Tadoutchi could have lost everything: her marginal liberty, her relatives and friends, and her recently weaned child. Fortune favored her courage, to some extent.

Tchimmou’s Return: Emancipation Remembered

We do not know how the slaves of Tahoua lived the rest of their lives, or how the experience of enslavement and emancipation affected their aspirations and

78. A similar subterfuge is described by Susan Rasmussen in an article on slavery amongst the Kel Ewey of Aïr: the master of Atakor (a pseudonym) lied to his slave, still a child at the time, when he tried to sell him. Atakor found out that his master was lying and was able to avert a sale that would have brought him to Hausaland; see Susan J. Rasmussen, “The Slave Narrative in Life History and Myth, and Problems of Ethnographic Representation of the Tuareg Cultural Predicament,” *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 1 (1999): 67–108.

perceptions of hierarchy. Following the trials, how did they relate to slave-owners and enslaved persons? Did they try to own slaves, or did they become abolitionists? The historiography of slavery in Africa is only beginning to ask these questions. Yet this is such a recent history that persons with memories of enslavement, and persons who have relations with their own or their parents' former owners, are not impossible to find in today's Tahoua (as in other regions of West Africa). In 2005 I interviewed an elderly lady called Tchimmou who lived in a village inhabited mainly by slave descendants in the rural hinterland of the region of Tahoua.⁷⁹ As a young girl, Tchimmou had been kidnapped and sold at the market of Bilma, then brought to the French Sudan by her new masters. She remained there until one day she obtained the help of French colonial officers, who liberated her and sent her back to her village. Tchimmou's experience was analogous to those of the slaves discussed earlier in this article. Her reminiscences reveal how she had come to think of these episodes of her youth.

Tchimmou was a fragile elderly lady, blind in one eye and bowed by old age. I had known her for many years and she had hinted at her story many times. Then one day she decided to give me a detailed account of what had happened to her in her youth. Tchimmou chose to start her account with the death of her mother, initially summarizing her experience in few sentences translated into Hausa from Tamasaghlalt by her "nephew": "When she was a little girl she lived with her mother. When her mother died, the *jajaye* kidnapped her (*sun kama ita*) and brought her to Tabotaki."⁸⁰ Tchimmou did not refer to a father figure: she probably never met her biological father. When her mother died, she became an orphan. This made her more vulnerable than other children and was the first memory that she chose to recall. I asked her whether she could explain her story in greater detail. So she restarted her account from the death of her mother.

After her kidnapping she was taken to Azawagh, where she was sold, and then on to Timbuktu. When I asked where in Azawagh, she told me that the Kel Eghlel Ennigger came and brought her to Tabotaki, where they gave her to the Igdalen, instructing them to "sell her for us." The Igdalen replied, "You won't sell this young girl!" "We are used to selling men with long beards, why wouldn't we sell this one?" retorted the Kel Eghlel. The Kel Eghlel and the Kel Gress owned and captured slaves, but did not sell them directly, whereas the Igdalen were like professional dealers (*dillalai*) of slaves at markets. Tchimmou remained four months with the Igdalen. She wore slave bracelets on both arms and had her head shaved before being brought to the market of Bilma, where she was sold for six male camels and one female camel. Usually

79. Fieldnotes, May 4, 2005.

80. This and what follows is closely drawn from my interview with Tchimmou, May 4, 2005, and owes much to her own words; the name of the village is deliberately not given. *Jajaye* is a mildly derogatory Hausa term for individuals belonging to Tuareg clerical groups, literally meaning "red." Tamasaghlalt is a variant of Tamasheq spoken by some groups in the Tahoua and Abalagh regions; see Jeannine Drouin, "Nouveaux éléments de sociolinguistique touarègue. Un parler méridional nigérien, la tamasaghlalt," *Actes du Groupe Linguistique d'Études Chamito-Sémitiques (GLECS)* 24–28 (1979–1985): 507–20.

the buyers would have had to pay six camels and a large *sakala* carpet of bands of cloth sewn together.

In Timbuktu, she looked after the herd of her new masters (*tana kiwo*). One day she was in the bush with the animals, when she saw a group of colonialists mounted on camels: about thirty African soldiers (*goumiers*, or *gummai*) and two white officers (*kufar*). When this group moved close to her, she ran to them and they started asking her questions—she said she was a foreigner. They asked her where her people were; she replied that she did not know, that she had been sold by *jajaye* and was herding her owners' livestock. One officer wrote down the information she had provided and decided to take her with them. It was sunset when they reached the place where they would stay for the night. In the morning they sent someone to fetch the man who had bought her. When Tchimmou's owner reached them and saw her with the colonial officers, he demanded, "Where do you think you are going?" The white man then asked the Tuareg: "How can you sell and buy people?" He kicked him, then they tied him up and made him lie on the floor. One white officer walked upon him in this position and they left him tied up on the floor overnight. In the morning they called another white man and told him to come and see the slave-trader. When he arrived, they asked what should be done with their prisoner. Then they killed him with one shot.

In the days that followed, Tchimmou was well fed and reassured that she would never be a slave again. She told the white men that she had been sold with two other slaves, a woman from Arzerori and another from Tabotaki, and they promised her they would look for them. Meanwhile, the white man who saved her, who was called "Gitna," traveled with her by car to Gangu (Gao), Timbuktu, Kidal, and Imorafan. Everywhere she received help in the military camps where they stopped (*bariki*). When they reached Kidal, women gave her new clothes, applied henna on her hands, gave her perfume, and braided her hair. Some men wanted to marry her but she refused, she wished to go back home. Gitna told them she would not marry anyone, that she was traveling and they should leave her in peace. Tchimmou took off her new clothes so that no one would look at her again. Finally, her uncle found her in Kidal, and they gave her to him. Together they traveled back to Niamey, because her uncle was afraid to stay with the soldiers even if Tchimmou was not. The sarki of Niamey, "Sauri," and his wife looked after both of them until Tchimmou's uncle died. They had funerary rites performed for him, and had a ram butchered, cooked, and distributed to people on the third day after his death.

The colonialists had initially planned to take her to many places in Niger to show that slaves were still being sold. But then they decided this would have involved too much traveling and changed their minds. Finally they brought her back to Tahoua by car, and then to Keita. Rabo, the sarki at the time, was unwell, so his assistant Alkassoum was charged with bringing her back to her village. When she arrived, all the men and women gave Alkassoum gifts of sugar, tea, salt, and dates to thank him. Even her relatives from another village—in particular her brother Amud, with whom she had grown up—sent gifts, even though they lived like nomads and moved

around all the time. She was the only one in her village to have been sold at a market. This is the end of Tchimmou's story as she herself narrated it to me.

Memories of slavery often have a specific function in the autobiographies of speakers: they may provide a justification for poverty or lack of success in life, or else signal initial powerlessness in a trajectory of self-realization. A speaker's age influences his or her testimony. The persons of slave descent to whom I talked described their erstwhile enslavement in the light of the life they had since lived. Events they may have experienced as terrifying when they occurred were reinterpreted as turning points in autobiographical narratives of emancipation. What might have induced uncontrollable fear, or helpless hesitation before the many possible turns that a situation might take in a future yet un-lived, was muted into the certainty of what had happened in the past. The retrospective interpretation of an event in the narrator's life transformed their original experience of it. For example, Tchimmou's account of her decision to seek the help of colonial officers after her sale and enslavement retains little—if anything—of the fear of being let down by colonial officers or found out by her owners, a fear that must have been only too real when these events took place. Her description of the confrontation with her owner preserves only some of the defiance recorded in the verbatim quotes from enslaved women speaking at the colonial trials discussed in the preceding sections of this article. I cannot state with any degree of certainty whether Tchimmou actually sought out the colonial officers to denounce her enslavement and seek help, or whether the events that followed occurred exactly as she narrated them to me. But her testimony is evidence of her assessment of the roles played by the different persons who owned her, sold her, freed her, or welcomed her back to her village. Her representations reveal interpretative choices. What, asks the colonial officer in Tchimmou's story, should be done with someone who "sells and buys people"? And his questions seem to find an answer in the actions that follow in Tchimmou's narration. You should step on him. You should kill him. Tchimmou tells her story and conveys her moral assessment of slavery.

Narrating the lives of enslaved persons raises a number of methodological difficulties.⁸¹ As shown in this article and in other studies, the "history of those who would rather forget" can be evinced from a variety of sources, all of which are biased and problematic.⁸² How representative are the French transcripts of testimonies given

81. Sue Peabody, "Microhistory, Biography, Fiction: The Politics of Narrating the Lives of People under Slavery," *Transatlantica. Revue d'études américaines* 2 (2012): <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6184>.

82. Martin A. Klein, "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery," *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* 16 (1989): 209–17; Marie Rodet "Listening to the History of Those Who Don't Forget," *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* 40 (2013): 27–29; Eve Troutt Powell, "The Silence of the Slaves," in *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam*, ed. John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2002), xxvii–xxx; Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Alice Bellagamba, "Reasons for

during colonial trials of the experiences of enslaved persons and slave-owners outside the courtroom? We must not forget that only exceptional cases of slave trade and slave resistance would have reached the colonial administration. The majority of slave-master relations were renegotiated without European intervention.⁸³ Furthermore, each type of source poses problems that are intrinsic to its nature. In the case of legal proceedings, the original testimony in Hausa or Tamasheq, as the case may be, is forever lost; what we have is a translation, possibly inaccurate or worded so as to minimize ambiguities. It is not inconceivable that interpreters or district commanders erased inconsistencies and nuances to provide a simplified record that would justify the final verdict. But it would be oversimplistic to imagine that the original statements, whatever they were, captured a hypothetical “truth” of slave-master relations. Statements made at trials reveal a mix of genuine conviction and strategic dissimulation, as accusers and defendants strove to prove their own innocence, or their enemy’s guilt. The context presented in this article was tense and competitive, and the sources reveal a struggle between the different perspectives and interests of slaves and slave-owners. The testimonies may or may not convey what actually happened, but they relate events that stakeholders found realistic. Those speaking at trials could not have provided unbelievable accounts, for doing so would have exposed them as unreliable witnesses or outright liars. All witnesses were under pressure to provide convincing narratives, accounts that judges, advisors, and other listeners would find plausible. In this sense, these sources, though not always verifiable and certainly not statistically representative, constitute reliable evidence on the world of slaves and slave-owners.

Tchimmou’s autobiographical testimony raises still other questions. People’s perceptions of a situation change as they age and rethink their past experiences. I had not yet found the colonial sources cited in this article when I collected Tchimmou’s testimony and I doubted its factuality. But the more I researched these phenomena, the more her story appeared realistic—not in its specific details, which I have no reason to doubt, but in the general plausibility of the circumstances it describes. The story that Tchimmou chose to tell about herself, an old lady looking back at her own life, provides a glimpse into her reflections on slavery and her sense of self in 2005.⁸⁴ It attests to transformations in the consciousness of slave descendants and ex-slaves who, in their youth, had experiences analogous to those

Silence: Following the Inner Legacy of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Contemporary Gambia,” in *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. Ana L. Araujo (London: Routledge, 2012), 35–53; George Michael La Rue, “Seeking Freedom in Multiple Contexts: An Enslaved Sudanese Woman’s Life Trajectory, ca. 1800–1834,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 1/2 (2017): 11–43. For a recent collection of African sources on slavery and the slave trade, see Bellagamba, Greene, and Klein, *African Voices on Slavery*.

83. Martin A. Klein, “Slave Descent and Social Status in Sahara and Sudan,” in *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories*, ed. Benedetta Rossi (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 26–44, here pp. 30–39.

84. This is a reference to Ann McDougall, “A Sense of Self: The Life of Fatma Barka,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998): 285–315.

of Tougai, Alguimat, Seima, Seidi, Absata, Elgeme, and Tadoutchi. Although many of its details are not verifiable, Tchimmou's testimony is so similar to those of trafficked slaves described in the colonial administration's records of trials that I see these independent sources as mutually corroborating. Undoubtedly emotion and moral judgment color these sources. But if the dispositions of the speakers compromise the objectivity of their accounts, they do offer glimpses into moral—as well as social—transformations. Because history does not exist outside the minds of people, Tchimmou's narrative has historical value. It attests to a turning point in the consciousness of one slave descendant; but it also attests to the beginning of the social death of the class of masters.

The slaves of Tahoua struggled to free themselves and their relatives from the violence and exploitation directed against them. Caught between two interpretations of slavery—one colonial, the other local—they opted for the one that benefited them most. Some of them took advantage of French abolitionism to resist an intensification of their exploitation. Reflection on these historical experiences has led progressively to the development of abolitionist ideologies and activism in the Republic of Niger,⁸⁵ and it is likely that Nigerien abolitionism will continue to grow. Concurrently, resentment against European abolitionism and colonization has been contributing to the rise of extremist Islamic movements that reject all forms of western-inspired education and advocate the legitimacy of slavery. Colonial antislavery discourse—like the rationale of intergovernmental institutions—saw abolitionism as a universally superior moral position and an inevitable normative evolution. Today this vision is questioned by the resurgence of proslavery ideologies amongst movements like Boko Haram, active in the region immediately to the south of Tahoua.⁸⁶ At the same time, Tahoua has continued to produce iconic examples of resistance on the part of enslaved women, as exemplified by the recent case of Hadijatou Mani.⁸⁷ Hadijatou benefited from

85. See Galy Kadir Abdelkader, ed., *Slavery in Niger: Historical, Legal, and Contemporary Perspectives*, March 2004, http://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/full_english_slavery_in_niger.pdf.

86. In May 2014 Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was quoted by CNN as saying that “slavery is allowed in my religion, and I shall capture people and make them slaves,” <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/06/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-analysis/>. See also Anthony Celso “The Islamic State and Boko Haram: *Fifth Wave* Jihadist Terror Groups” (working paper, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2015); Charlotte Alter, “Girls Who Escaped Boko Haram Tell of Horrors in Captivity,” *Time*, October 27, 2014, <http://time.com/3540263/girls-boko-haram-escape/>.

87. Jean Allain, “Hadijatou Mani Koraou v. Republic of Niger: Judgement No. ECWJ/CCJ/JUD/06/08,” *American Journal of International Law* 103, no. 2 (2009): 311–17; Helen Duffy, “Hadijatou Mani Koroua v Niger: Slavery Unveiled by the ECOWAS Court,” *Human Rights Law Review* 9, no. 1 (2009): 151–70; Benedetta Rossi, “African Post-Slavery: A History of the Future,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (2015): 303–24. For a general assessment of the political mobilization of slave descendants in Africa, see Lotte Pelckmans and Christine Hardung, eds., “La question de l’esclavage en Afrique. Politisation et mobilisations,” special issue, *Politique africaine* 140, no. 4 (2015), especially 5–22.

the assistance of Timidria, a Nigerien national NGO embedded in international antislavery networks which put pressure on governments to enforce global abolitionism. Since the 1920s, the internationalization of antislavery struggles has been providing legal and logistical support to enslaved persons and activists seeking to end slavery and its enduring legacies in the Sahel and beyond.

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