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Researching the Aftermath of Slavery in Mainland East Africa: Methodological, Ethical, and Practical Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article examines ethical, practical, and methodological challenges in researching the aftermath of slavery in continental East Africa away from the coastal plantation belt. Interest in post-slavery there is recent and inspired by the apparent contrast with West Africa, where the issue is much more salient. The article explains this silence by highlighting politically-motivated avoidance of the issue in colonial sources and the preference of post-colonial historians for 'useful' pasts. Further, it questions the balance of successful integration and continuing marginalization reflected in the apparent obsolescence of slavery. It argues that tracing the trajectories of ex-slaves requires attention to all forms of social inequality and dependency, to the potential status implications for informants of speaking about slavery, and to the variety of terms and fields of meaning relevant to freedom, unfreedom and dependency. Recent research in this vein shows that slave antecedents remain a matter of *aiibu*, shame, and that ex-slaves' disappearance as a social category took lifelong efforts on their part. While the social valence of slave antecedents is relatively limited in mainland East Africa, slavery remains a problematic and painful heritage that demands great circumspection by researchers.


KEYWORDS

Slavery; memory; post-slavery; research methods; ethical questions; East Africa

Introduction

In recent years, research into the aftermath of slavery in Africa has been developing rapidly.

Particularly in West Africa, major contributions to the understanding of post-slavery concur in highlighting the persistence of social hierarchies with roots in slavery and the persistent need for slaves to struggle to change them, often through migration, negotiation of patronage ties, marriage strategies as well as religious allegiances.¹

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They also highlight the startling variety in the individual outcomes of these efforts. While there has been some new work also concerning East Africa and the Horn, the topic has been less salient there.² This appears, at first sight, as a function of the greater obsolescence of slavery in East Africa, especially away from the former plantation belt on the coast. Nowhere in East Africa are inequalities as stark and as clearly derived from slavery as for the Haratin in Mauritania, for example.³ Yet this obsolescence of slavery in mainland East Africa is the outcome of historical processes that deserve examination. It is plausible that the failure of ex-slaves to attract the attention of contemporary observers or later historians reflects a relative ease of integration for ex-slaves in colonial-era peasant societies, where political authority was often decentralized, historical memory relatively short and migration routine.⁴ Still, there are questions to be asked on how this outcome was achieved across societies as different as the Buganda kingdom, nomadic herders in the plains, headman-led matrilineal villages, or the Ethiopian Empire.

In particular, it remains an open question whether the absence of up-country ex-slaves in historical research is a function of their easy ‘disappearance’ into the general population, or rather of a politically and socially conditioned process of silencing that needs examination in itself. References to slavery largely disappear from written sources, both mission and official, once colonialism was fully established; in other words, at the point when reference to continuing servitude would have undermined the narrative of East African colonialism as a successful abolitionist intervention. This avoidance, then, is clearly political. The contrast with independent Ethiopia, where international attention to slavery persisted, is telling.⁵ In contemporary debates, speakers tend to ‘externalise’ slavery by associating it with ‘the Arabs’, placing it in a dark and distant past or simply focusing on other things.⁶ There appears to be a need to make sure that slavery is either safely in the past or someone else’s problem.

The relative disinterest in ex-slaves also reflects implicitly political priorities among researchers. In the post-colonial period, the disinterest in heritages of slavery reflects the need for social cohesion and nation-building in the region’s post-independence states: the effort to focus on usable rather than painful and divisive histories.⁷ Again, it is telling that after 1942, when the Ethiopian government was reconstituted after the Italian occupation with international endorsement, attention to post-slavery in Ethiopia waned.⁸ There are some impressive studies of the East African coast, where slavery was the most salient and where it could be framed within the region’s distinctive urban and Islamic history.⁹ For the East African mainland, Jan-Georg Deutsch’s 2006 study, which demonstrated the quick disintegration of slavery as a labour system in German East Africa, stands alone. Beyond that, researchers until recently appeared content with the notion that the peasant societies of the inter-war period readily reabsorbed ex-slave populations.

It remains unclear, then, to what extent this silencing reflects an actual leveling-out of the differences between slave descendants and those of owners, whether it reflected the preferences of ex-slaves themselves, and whether it mitigated or perpetuated slave descendants' marginal status, or perhaps did both. What is clear is that hundreds of thousands of people were emerging from slavery in the East African interior in the first decades of the twentieth century, but there is so far little research asking explicitly how they did so and to what effect. There is, however, work that is relevant to these questions, albeit not focused on them. Drawing on and bringing into conversation the disjointed works on West Africa, on the East African coast and on Ethiopia, the aim of this article is to facilitate research on how mainland East Africa's slaves managed their remarkable disappearing act.

The Ethical Dilemmas of 'Dragging up the Past'

Given the silences in the written archive, oral history research has to be central to understanding post-slavery. But there are practical and ethical challenges in asking oral informants about an aspect of the past that may be associated with lingering trauma, may have the potential to undermine present-day entitlements, and is unwelcome in the discourse of post-colonial nationhood.¹⁰ Since the rethinking of approaches to heritage is ongoing in East Africa, not all of this speaking and commemorating, thankfully, is pursued from abroad.¹¹ Still, researchers may need to approach their interest in the aftermath of slavery laterally. They may seek to avoid stating it in so many words, at least until the politics of asking questions about slave origins in a given setting have become clearer. In the terms typically set by major funding bodies, though, the attempt to soft-pedal an interest in ex-slaves and their histories could be seen as invalidating participants' consent, since it would not have been fully informed. Conversely, a very explicit approach to the interest in post-slavery risks provoking or exacerbating tensions around lingering status differences, potentially creating what ethics boards call 'unexpected findings' that would oblige the researcher to intervene.

More broadly, researchers must face up to the possibility that they may bring into the open social distinctions and tensions that may currently be liveable precisely because they are not explicated. They need to tread carefully with the assumption that the way to deal with past injustice is to 'air' it and be aware that there are risks attendant to this process. Ann McDougall's work in Mauritania shows that increasing distance in time cannot be expected to 'defuse' these problems. On the contrary, she found that informants whose life stories had referred relatively openly to slave antecedents in the early 2000s were no longer willing to be as explicit some years later. What had intervened was the rise of a more assertive anti-slavery movement with international backing. An incident in 2011, when the leader of this movement had publicly burned

the passages of the Quran referring to slavery, had made the movement somewhat notorious and informants more hesitant to talk about the slave past. Evidently, the representations of the slave past that people provide today continue to change in response to tensions around slavery in the present, and they may become more rather than less divisive.¹²

Under these circumstances, specifying an interest in slave origins risks driving away or heightening the social vulnerability of precisely the people who had to struggle the most to shed slave antecedents, and who are potentially the most important informants. It can therefore be both ethically advisable and productive to put the notion of slavery into circulation among potential respondents, but without addressing specific individuals and 'see what happens'. Even if this means that some respondents are lost, the responses, including evasions and confrontations emerging when slavery is mentioned, are bound to be themselves informative. Conversely, not using the precise term 'slavery' arguably does not necessarily amount to disinformation, given that the social taxonomies of the people addressed are anyway unlikely to contain one single analogue to the terms 'slave' and 'ex-slave'. Introducing the notion of 'slavery' or 'slave descendants' upfront may therefore have the ethically questionable effect of narrowing informants' choices for describing social hierarchies derived from slavery. Moreover, the problems of ex-slaves were embedded in broader processes of social differentiation and the renegotiation of social hierarchies in the era of colonial cash-cropping and labour migrancy. 'Researching post-slavery' and 'researching rural inequality', then, amount to almost the same thing.

It is in any case evident that researchers must make, justify and explicate a great many choices concerning the terms used to frame their work and the safeguarding of their informants. In the field, researchers have to think on their feet, making moral and practical judgments in pursuit of both accurate and comprehensive information and the safety and dignity of their informants. The outcome of any attempt to trace post-slavery histories will be shaped profoundly by these decisions and all the people contributing to them, including the lead researcher, research assistants, and informants.

Moreover, as anyone with oral history research experience will recognize, behind this short enumeration of research participants lies a whole landscape of asymmetrical relationships. 'Researchers' in Africa are still often of non-African background. The status accorded to them as foreigners with resources, often white, educated and connected, is liable to shape the answers given to them. Meanwhile, African researchers have to perform a distinctive kind of labour in a bid to draw level with the status of the foreigners in their profession, while also working with their perceived or actual cultural affinity with their interlocutors.

How exactly these post-colonial power imbalances shape any one researcher's material depends on contingent circumstance, personalities, and personal

relationships as much as on the imbalances themselves. One implication that can be clearly drawn, though, is that researchers have to reckon with interviewees telling them what they think they (the researchers) want to hear, adapting their narratives to assumed audience expectations. They have to think about how they are being perceived and what preconceptions and loyalties are likely to be attributed to them. Explicit denials of ascribed characteristics cannot be relied on to be convincing. Rather, researchers need to develop an ear for where such obliging assertions show up in their materials. This may mean reasoning with their interlocutors' tone, choice of words and gestures, acknowledging the processual nature of oral history research.

Place-specific, Polyvalent Terms and the Role of Local Mediators

The variety and slipperiness of terms related to former slave status is evident in the findings of Salvatory Nyanto from Tabora region in Western Tanzania.¹³ While observers have generally relied on guesswork, it is safe to assume that Tabora contained a six-digit number of slaves around 1900, the majority of them field slaves on plantations whose produce fed the caravans moving along the central route. A German administrator put the number at approximately 250,000 in one district alone.¹⁴ Nyanto was pointed towards a handful of informants, all women, who were said to have slave origins: two of them eventually confirmed this. The gender bias itself is suggestive: did it reflect the preponderance of women among slaves, or were men keener on and more successful in protecting their non-slave identities from the taint of slave origin?

The process whereby these ex-slave informants were identified highlighted the multiplicity and ambiguity of social signals potentially denoting slave antecedents. Names were often important. On surviving German-era certificates of freedom (*Freibriefe*) from Tabora, names such as 'Mbembe' and 'Turimbembe' are said to denote Congolese origins.¹⁵ One of the women who acknowledged slave origins, Kiluvi Malunga, had her origins marked by the surname Kongo, while the other was known as Kalekwa which was said to translate as 'abandoned slave'.¹⁶ The interpretations were provided by a Kinyamwezi-speaking research assistant who also expressed doubts about the initial, fairly harmonious life stories provided by the women. He encouraged Nyanto to ask again, and the women's later responses acknowledged that there had been shame around their slave origins.¹⁷

Identifying these informants and drawing out their stories depended on a kind of local, socially embedded, routine and typically unquestioned knowledge provided by the research assistant, whose accuracy is hard to assess. While the association of the name 'Kongo' with Congolese origins is plausible, that does not make it true. There is at least a chance that a researcher known to be out 'ex-slave spotting' may be led to people, such as elderly women who are considered

'easy targets' for association with slave status, especially if they do not have much status to lose anyway. This highlights the difficulty of distinguishing between ex-slaves and other low-status groups. For instance, in Western Tanzania, Ha ethnic identity was associated with colonial-era poverty rather than slave antecedents, but that made it similarly marginal.¹⁸ If these diverse forms of marginalization can be traced, though, a case can be made also for accepting the authority of at least those elements of embedded local knowledge that appear plausible when correlated with the known historical record. For example, given that many slaves were brought into the Tabora region from the Manyema region further west, it is plausible that many people of Manyema ethnicity now living in Tabora had slave origins. This does not preclude recognition that one ethnic designation does not always imply the same trajectory. Thus, the Manyema form part of a network of ethnic groups in the Great Lakes region for whom movement over significant distances was routine in the late pre-colonial period. People, including Manyema, moved for many reasons and not only enslavement.¹⁹

More broadly, the much-noted flexibility of ethnic designations complicates their use as proxies for slave antecedents. Notwithstanding the term's association with slavery, there may have been a variety of hard-to-recover reasons that led some people to refer to themselves as Manyema. The slipperiness of designations of descent is further illustrated by the notions of *uungwana* and *ustaarabu* inter-war Tabora. Originally, it denoted the status of a free-born citizen of a coastal town, ability to speak fluently Kiswahili and conversion to Islam. The designation was adopted by people who had returned from stints as labour migrants on the coast to signal their greater worldliness compared with those who had stayed at home (*washenzi*, *washamba*), the contempt they encountered at the coast notwithstanding.²⁰

The status overtones of ethnic designations, then, can be highly ambiguous. On the coast, Laura Fair and Abdul Sheriff demonstrated how 'Swahili' identity went from a fairly exclusive indigenous status to one associated with slave ancestry.²¹ How long-term and diverse these transformations can be is illustrated by the shifting use over time of the designation 'Barya' in Amharic. Barya was applied initially to 'enslavable' communities of present-day western Eritrea/Ethiopia during the Aksumite kingdom (4th century). In the nineteenth century, the term had come to include all people targeted by raiding on the margins of the expanding state, denoting classificatory 'black', servile people.²² Today, the diminutive 'baricho' is a general appellation which may be used jokingly and affectionally for people with notionally 'African' features like dark skin complexion or tightly curled hair. Yet both terms, 'barya' and 'baricho', still carry much contempt, echo with racial/ethnic hierarchies and can be exceedingly hurtful depending on the context.²³ Under these circumstances, the local knowledge of research assistants

and other intermediaries in the field are both indispensable and in need of careful interrogation. Time, patience, and careful observation are needed to enable the researcher to get a sense of the social position as well as the intellectual and ethical commitments of research assistants and interviewees. The process demands repeated, open-ended interviews. Building trust is an essential part of the research process; yet at the same time the researcher has to be reflective in examining the social allegiances and possibly partisanship they acquire by gaining the trust of some people and not others. The positionality of all parties involved needs to be (re-) evaluated constantly.

Moreover, the spatial and temporal setting of interviews is crucial. Recent work from West Africa shows that both the researcher's and the informant's place in time and space had a profound influence on what could be said.²⁴ Lotte Pelckmans obtained crucial information only because she stayed for months, and during this time encountered informants in settings that allowed for the discreet communication of charged personal information. Things could be said when meeting at a public crossroads or in the interior of compounds that could not be said during formal interviews. It matters who interviewers and interviewees speak to, but also where they speak. In Eric Hahonou & Camilla Strandbjerg's documentary film, the ex-slave protagonist asserts that he can only recount his life history and marginal origins because he now is in a good place, a good position and a good moment in time.²⁵ 'Good' here denotes not only that he was safe and his status secure, but also that it was a moment when his message could be heard, when it could find an audience and where he could be proud of it or at least was at peace with it. Meanwhile, the strategic nature of speaking about slave pasts also in terms of its audiences directs attention towards the importance of the concepts brought to the issue by researchers.

The Charged Nature of Researchers' own Terms

The terms that outside researchers arrive with are no less problematic than the ones found among research assistants and informants. In particular, the term 'slave' itself is a very blunt instrument. We know that there were many different pathways into, through and out of servile status, and there is no reason why languages in the East African interior should not have had terminologies for servility and dependence as complex as that which existed in coastal Swahili. Thus, asking people to identify 'slaves' among the ancestry of those living nearby risks flattening a great deal of difference. If terminological distinctions were made between more and less marginal or more and less alien people of servile status, then lumping these together under the label 'slave' risks heightening the marginality of the people so designated. It is more useful for researchers to think of 'servility' as a broad category that includes a variety of different social arrangements and to survey this semantic field in the languages

of the people they interact with, while paying attention to shifting meanings of certain terminologies over time.

A similar issue, of possibly reifying or reinforcing a means of marginalization by naming it, attends to the notion of 'shame'. Nyanto found that *aibu* (shame) or *dhalili* (contempt) was a widely cited reason why informants in Tabora were reluctant to be recorded discussing slavery. Yet as an emotion, shame is an interior state and a learned reaction. The question, then, is who gets to say what is shameful and who is or should be feeling ashamed. There is a thin line between asking about what is shameful and encouraging people to think of certain facts as shameful. If the term or cognates such as 'stigma' are used to characterize a collective social reaction against slave-descendants, the researcher risks reinforcing the notion of slave antecedents as shameful, all the more as *aibu*, shame, is very often used as a reproach in Swahili-language exchanges.

Against this background, a woman of slave descent being able to tell her life story without naming her struggles with her ancestry arguably shows her having reached a place of safety, similar to Hahonou's interlocutor. This is what Nyanto observed with one interviewee, Bibi Kiluvi, in Tabora: over several different conversations with her and her descendants, different versions of her life story emerged, with the painful aspects related to servitude articulated gradually. At times, it was her relatives who acknowledged her pain on her behalf.

For her to be in a position to smooth over what was painful or shameful in her life history can also be seen as a moral victory.²⁶ This suggests that researchers need to avoid trying to establish the 'correct' version of a respondent's life story.²⁷ Poking holes in this respondent's positive version of her life in the name of accuracy would be the height of condescension. Rather, plural and contrasting versions of the same life story can be made to work together to give a fuller sense of the process of living with slave heritage. Researchers need to trace how respondents learned to use certain terms and attach subtle social valences to them, even if this means examining apparently ephemeral childhood recollections, songs, stories, or sayings.

Moreover, especially with elderly people surrounded by concerned family, they need to pay attention to the dynamics between the respondent and their wider family, and how those colour the information provided. Meanwhile, similar complications to those that arise around the naming of forms of servitude and stigma arise also in connection with their apparent opposite, freedom.

'Freedom' and its Cognates

A widely cited argument in the study of post-slavery in Africa holds that the strategizing of ex-slaves is better understood with reference to the notion of 'belonging' as their aim than to that of 'freedom'.²⁸ The cases of successful

emergence from slavery found so far, such as the grandmother in Tabora, chime with the focus on belonging. Nevertheless, recent work on post-slavery in West Africa has moved away from treating 'freedom' and 'belonging' as dichotomous, instead interrogating their interdependence and proposing the notion of 'freedom from below'.²⁹

This work is important partly because it helps dislodge self-serving claims about the concept of freedom as intrinsically Western and facilitates examination of the relationship of enlightenment notions of freedom with racialized and colonial hierarchies and Transatlantic slavery. Further, accepting that the notion of personal freedom as desirable has cognates in Africa enables more complex understandings of the way people there negotiate the personal ties often seen as so foundational to their personhood.³⁰ Close practical interdependence, in other words, does not negate individuals' desire to set their own agendas. Families may be better described as networks of individuals struggling with and negotiating the tensions between different members' conflicting plans and desires than as comforting, identity-conferring collectivities.

There are possibilities for locating analogues to the notion of freedom in East African societies beyond struggles for emancipation. For the pre-colonial past, this case can be made, for instance, with reference to the highly individualistic trickster and migrant hero figures that people folk story collections and political origin myths.³¹ When discussing the colonial and post-colonial periods, arguing for Africans valuing autonomy means questioning a large literature that emphasizes interdependence in Africans' personhood as distinct from the individualism associated in the same literature with the West.³² Yet material for making such arguments can be found in a number of places. Recent literature on youth in Africa, for instance, has emphasized the open-ended, tentative, and individualistic nature of young people's search for ways forward.³³ Similarly, the literature on the struggle for economic survival, both in the cash-strapped countryside and in urban informal economies, shows individuals and households strategizing in ways that are often egocentric or focused on one household alone.³⁴

In the impoverished countryside of Njombe, central Tanzania, James Giblin has traced tensions between individual advancement and family loyalties within one family over generations.³⁵ Within the context of the anthropology of development, too, Maia Green has shown how Tanzanian participants in supposedly community-based development projects tend to foreground projects of personal, individual development, often focused on family homes.³⁶ There is also a growing body of work on political thought, both popular and elite, since the mid-twentieth century. Though much of it avoids the heritage of slavery, it does trace ideas of personal responsibility and patriarchal agency.³⁷ Making the case for 'emic' notions of autonomy or freedom is all the more important since recent Europe-focused cultural history at times actually

reinforces the claim that European notions of personhood, rights and liberties are the outcome of very distinctive historical processes.³⁸

These complexities of 'freedom' highlight that understanding how ex-slaves emerged from their socially debased state requires very careful consideration of the notions of personhood and forms of autonomy at play in the contexts that slaves found themselves in. In addressing this issue, researchers find themselves moving backwards and forwards between present-day views and practices and whatever signposts in the past they can establish from sources such as mission ethnography, travel writing or oral tradition. It is likely that it will be easier to pinpoint certain tropes as dating from periods when the original generation of ex-slaves would have been aged: for instance, in Tanzania Nyererean slogans referencing freedom and equality have stayed in popular memory. His insistence that *watu wote sawa*, all humans are equal, was a means to assert that Africans do not depend on Europeans for governance, but it also spoke to divisions within Tanzania's societies. In Lindi town on the southern Tanzanian coast, one descendant of slave owners quoted it with contempt, while in Lindi's satellite town of Mingoyo, formerly its biggest slave settlement, Nyerere was praised as a bringer of freedom.³⁹ Some concrete evidence of how personal status and interdependence were reasoned through can be found in family conflicts or local scandals. Michelle Greenfield-Liebst's work provides examples.⁴⁰

How ambiguous 'freedom' and its cognates can be in the context of everyday struggles is highlighted by the fact that under some circumstances, ex-slaves or their descendants have chosen to *emphasize* their status as former slaves because it was a precondition for asserting that they had been properly emancipated. In Mali, being a 'freed' person who had had their new status conferred on them in socially accepted terms was preferable to being 'free' but without history, owing their free status to government actions widely seen as illegitimate.⁴¹ Similarly, ex-slaves who sought the status of a free person in early colonial Tabora spoke of it as '*kutafuta cheti*', 'seeking the means to acquire a certificate' in allusion to the 'letters of freedom' issued by the German government. Obtaining such a *cheti* meant bringing witnesses to attest to the relationship between slave and owner, thus owning up to ex-slave status.⁴²

Once obtained, the letters became a kind of identity paper, failure to carry which exposed the holder to official mistrust. In this way, they mediated a new kind of subjection to authority, recalling the words of one Tanzanian informant who recalled 'the Germans' as arriving with the message that 'you are now all slaves of the government'.⁴³ Further, missionaries claimed the allegiance of ex-slaves on their stations by making them hand over their letters in a stark reminder that relationships with missionaries were also ones of dependency. In the case of mission stations, the hierarchical nature of relations between missionaries and converts was public. The same is not true of households and families which nevertheless must have been among the most important sites

of the struggle to emerge from slavery, especially for female ex-slaves. While the status difference between patriarch and ‘the rest’ was often very clearly marked, status differences between free and unfree or formerly unfree women found expression in the sphere of domestic labour and marriageability which is harder to access.⁴⁴

Sites of Struggle: The Ambiguity of Family Ties

While Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff’s construction of belonging as an alternative to freedom has been challenged widely, their emphasis on the role of family networks in making persons out of ex-slaves remains widely accepted. Such networks differed enormously: they could be patrilineal, matrilineal or bilineal, highly stratified or relatively cooperative, extended or limited, and located in large multi-generational or small nuclear.⁴⁵ Their ability and readiness to shed or retain marginal or recalcitrant members varied with these factors not only in relation to ex-slaves. Further, West African evidence shows absorption into family networks to be a multi-generational process, and one that leaves traces in the form of subtle differences in status and in classifications separating the descendants of slaves from others.⁴⁶

Strongly patriarchal, exclusively patrilineal families could be highly integrative. An extreme example is the household of the Sultans of Zanzibar, where the daughters of enslaved concubines were princesses.⁴⁷ The large households with strong direction from the top found in Buganda seem to have achieved something similar, judging by the apparent disappearance of ex-slaves in this setting. But there is evidence that difference was more persistent than first appearances suggest. In West Africa, this could take the form, for example, of the acceptance of ‘milk kinship’ between children nursed by the same mother as *conditionally* equal or the pairing of slave-descendant and owner-descendant children to grow up as ‘friends’, whose closeness retains a subtly hierarchical character.⁴⁸

Researchers in East Africa have to look for similarly subtle signals. Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel’s work from the early post-colonial coast shows that apparently descriptive and respectful terms like *mama*, mother, could be used to describe former slaves from whom deference and domestic labour was still expected.⁴⁹ Terms denoting close, direct descent relationships, then, were redeployed in the context of much more distant and hierarchical interactions. More broadly, terms for family relationships and connections by descent are often used widely and vaguely in East African contexts, despite some patricians’ emphasis on their ancient lineages. Importantly, they both mask the hierarchical nature of these ties for slave descendants and, through the avoidance, perpetuate it. Concomitantly, too insistent questioning of the fine detail of these relationships’ risks coming across as rude.

The slipperiness of terms of descent means that family relationships are not fully defined by either innate or routinely ascribed status. Rather, the bearers of

designations such as ‘uncle’ or ‘cousin’ are expected and therefore also have a modicum of choice to live up to the roles that the terms denote. This observation again highlights the performative, simultaneously political and intimate character of family ties and the variability of relationships denoted by identical terms. Tracing such relationships in the past or the present inevitably depends on patience, perceptiveness, tact, time, and luck. Every version of the past obtained will be strongly positioned. Researchers must be willing, then, to acknowledge and problematize their own presence in their findings, to reflect on biases or peculiarities that they or their interlocutors contributed to.

Under these circumstances, the attempt to trace ex-slaves’ pursuit of autonomy within families entails trying to trace elusive and ambiguous forms of agency. It is important to recognize that not everyone will struggle, and not all action or even struggle is strategic.⁵⁰ Often, ex-slave family members will have been busy coping, muddling through without a plan to follow. It is likewise a challenge to make sure not to miss forms of agency that are more indirect than we are wont to expect. A term such as ‘autonomy’ suggests an ability to ‘go there, do that’, in pursuit of personal aims. But sometimes agency may consist in patiently, carefully moving into position to prevail upon others to prevail upon yet others to perform a specific action or take a specific view.⁵¹ Moreover, as Marcia Wright has observed for the pre-colonial period, so too for the colonial period, the dividing line between being owned outright as a slave and being controlled as a dependent wife or child in a patriarchal household is not clear.⁵² Researchers, then, have to cast their net widely, considering varied relations of intra- and inter-familial dependency for their relationship to post-slavery. Evidently, family membership could work out in very different ways for ex-slaves. But families also connected individuals to wider ritual and religious contexts, within which similar considerations apply. They were the means of inclusion that at the same time perpetuated difference.

Ritual and Religious Belonging and Exclusion

In both West Africa and Ethiopia, the assertion of higher status by owners’ descendants is often connected to their religious and ritual roles: to claims to better access to higher forms of Islamic knowledge, the legal elaboration of slave status in Ethiopian Christian laws, or notions of purity connected to caste or nobility.⁵³ At first sight, this constitutes perhaps the most striking contrast with East Africa, where Sufism has long been recognized as a force for the social integration of ex-slaves in coastal towns.⁵⁴

And yet, at second sight, it appears that in both East and West Africa, the role of religious and ritual inclusion or exclusion was highly ambivalent. Notwithstanding ex-owners’ claims to privileged religious knowledge, Islam in West Africa was also a means for ex-slaves to construct unspoiled identities, especially through Sufi movements.⁵⁵ In East Africa, the integrative role of

Sufi orders is better known than any exclusionary politics connected to Islam. As far as we know, converts away from the coast also stripped Islam of its associations with notions of nobility and caste, a process made easier by the highly individualistic notions of status prevailing in the mobile, decentralized societies of much of continental East Africa.⁵⁶ Nyanto's findings from Tabora again show that formerly servile people could play an important role in the process, making the Manyema mosque a focal point for the social life of 'new-comers' to the colonial town.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, in some coastal locations in East Africa, there remain strong connections between notions of religious purity and purity of descent that challenge the characterization of Islam as a force for integration.⁵⁸ Sometimes, 'up-country' Muslims acknowledge that coastal Muslims tend to position themselves towards them as 'owners' of an Islamic tradition to which they retain privileged access.⁵⁹ In up-country locations, too, the way Muslims construed the hierarchies of Islamic knowledge and interacted with hierarchies derived from slavery was and is an important part of the renegotiation of status in the post-slavery period. Nyanto's findings about the Manyema indicate the interlacing of ethnic and religious designations.⁶⁰

As on the coast, outcomes are highly ambivalent. Belonging in Muslim congregations mitigated ex-slaves' marginality, but – since the Manyema remained classificatory strangers even after generations of living in Tabora – also perpetuated it. Similarly, the peculiar taunt *Mwarabu koko* signals the precariousness of these self-reinventions. Traceable in locations as far apart as Southeast Tanzania, Tabora, Nairobi and Zanzibar, it denotes a person who aspires to Arab-ness but does not quite get there, for reasons to do with varied combinations of physical characteristics, cultural knowledge, habitus, and wealth. In Nairobi, a woman of fully African parentage was taunted as *Mwarabu koko* when she took Arabic lessons at the mosque; in rural Lindi district, people who showed some remnants of Arab ancestry in appearance and inherited possessions, but without present-day connections to the region or command of Arabic were referred to as such.⁶¹ The term, then, shows both that it was conceivable to improve one's status within a Muslim community by adopting certain cultural norms and, as a term of derision, indicates that such bids could fail.⁶²

For Christianity in East Africa, meanwhile, missions' role in ending slavery has become part of a founding myth, but at close quarters, this redemptive story also needs qualifications. In the quasi-salvific narrative, mission stations became places of safety that rescued former slaves from both servility and religious ignorance.⁶³ Recent work, though, has made clear that this process was highly ambiguous and conflict-ridden. Sometimes mission stations employed slaves; sometimes ex-slaves perceived missions as new owners rather than liberators. Missions were stingy employers and the education they imparted was not always of much use.⁶⁴

Moreover, typically ex-slaves had to negotiate for status both within the missions and in surrounding African communities. These struggles are unusual in that they are much more likely than others to have a written substratum in mission logbooks and periodicals. This information is still partial and highly partisan.⁶⁵ Still, the prominent role of early converts in entrenching Christian education and religious practice beyond mission stations shows that up country, ex-slave antecedents did not preclude their bearers from obtaining positions of respect in contexts of widespread religious innovation. Given the quasi-canonical status of the narrative of mission-educated elite success, unearthing the histories of those for whom affiliation with a mission did not 'work' in this way remains challenging. Greenfield-Liebst's findings in Zanzibar show that here, mission affiliation tended to entrench marginality, whether for religious reasons or ones related to post-slavery.⁶⁶

These circumstances make the fact that the history of African Independent Churches took a relatively restrained form in East Africa even more striking, since Christian independency would appear as a plausible way to address these tensions. Yet while the so-called 'East African Revival' divided mission church communities, it did not lead to the proliferation of independent churches seen in West and Southern Africa.⁶⁷ So far, the social differences involved in Christian religious dissent have not been mapped on to ex-slave versus freeborn or ex-owner distinctions anywhere in East Africa. Thus, while conversion to Islam and Christianity were similarly ways to claim unspoiled forms of belonging, ironically the heritage of slavery within Christian communities goes out of focus rather more quickly than it does in the historiography of Islam in the region.

Similar questions surround the role of indigenous religious and life cycle rituals which, notwithstanding the exponential growth of both Muslim and Christian allegiance in colonial East Africa, retained a great deal of importance.⁶⁸ Since there are few studies of the history of indigenous religion, there is also little information about social hierarchies and divisions in their practice. However, there are some things that we do know. While those considered competent to offer sacrifices at trees or pools typically claimed a kind of 'first-comer' or *mwenyaji*, 'owner of the land', status, such shrines typically accepted sacrifices from all comers.⁶⁹ Given that missionaries often found themselves fighting to keep their students out of life cycle rites they considered heathenish, it is unlikely that practitioners of these rituals would have turned away people because of their ex-slave background.⁷⁰ Still, whether or how ex-servile status affected participation is a question for future research.

At close quarters, then, the apparent contrast between the evident role of ritual hierarchies in maintaining slavery-derived social status difference in West Africa, and the role of ritual congregations in integrating ex-slaves in East Africa, becomes softer. Ritual was integrative also in West Africa

and could be divisive also in East Africa. Nevertheless, there remains a puzzling difference in emphasis. Perhaps, the role of Christianity in fostering social mobility through education is part of the explanation, directing attention towards different kinds of social distinction. More broadly, the flux and diversity in religious observance in mid-twentieth-century East Africa where, the coast excepted, both Muslim and Christian congregations were newer than in West Africa, arguably made it relatively easy for people of diverse social backgrounds to find ritual and religious niches not defined by the heritage of slavery. The importance and ambiguity of familial and ritual ties, and the persistent uneasiness around histories of slavery, can be observed further in the life story of Bibi Kiluvi, Nyanto's informant in Tabora.

Marginality, Shame, and Survival: Bibi Kiluvi's Story

During research trips in 2019-20, Nyanto found that descendants of the formerly enslaved in Unyamwezi still feel uncomfortable talking about 'stories of slavery', saying it was disreputable and shameful to do so. Similarly, Oscar Kisanji explained that his grandmother Kiluvi Salome Malunga Kongo (one of the two women averring slave ancestry) 'hakuwa na furaha alipokuwa ana-simulia' (was unhappy when she told her story). She told the story *kwa masikitiko* ('with despondency') insisting that '... I have no relatives here; you are my only relatives'.⁷¹ Kiluvi's words show that the experience of slavery lingered not only as a source of social stigma but also of emotional strain. Further, her rhetorical question, 'we unadhani matatizo nimeanza leo? ... nimeanza zamani' (do you think I started having problems recently? ... I began long ago) suggests that problems rooted in slavery persisted in post-slavery Tabora.⁷² Interviews also hint that Nyamwezi society associated slavery with ritual impurity (*najisi*), and therefore excluded slaves as 'outsiders' (*wakuja*) from ritual activities (Map 1).⁷³

In this vein, we learn from Kisanji that after Kiluvi's husband passed away when she was young, she could not remarry, because 'she could not be cleansed' (*asingetasika*). The purity or lack of it of persons is a category that is distant from the minds of Western researchers, in whose home societies the notion of 'purity' is typically applied to objects, food especially, rather than people. In African research settings, however, it is known to have a wider and more important currency implicated in ritual and social acceptance.⁷⁴ Thus Kiluvi's experience is a reminder that purity can come into play in negotiations for belonging, social status, and access to such every day and fundamental things as married domesticity. Inasmuch as purity – here often taken as a characteristic of a person's blood or descent – was implicated also in the continuing stigmatization of ex-slaves in West Africa, this observation again softens the contrast with West Africa.



Map 1. Trade routes in nineteenth and twentieth-century Western Tanzania.

Kiluvi's grandson also claims that residents did not accord Kiluvi respect, calling her a 'child of the slave' (*ng'wana wa musese*).⁷⁵ Therefore, Kiluvi left the territory of Ugunda in Southern Unyamwezi with her children for Tabora district, where she was unknown. Her daughters got married to Nyamwezi men because, being based in Tabora, 'they did not know our grandmother'.⁷⁶ Her decision to move was part of a pattern. The Kinyamwezi expression 'ulakatolele kule' (go get married farther) retains the memory of the expectation that former slaves would go to marry in distant villages 'to hide their shame' (*kuficha aibu*).⁷⁷ For others, moving into and marrying within mission communities, where the cultural norms that stigmatized slave origins were attenuated, offered a way to start a family.⁷⁸ The role of mobility in easing stigma without quite erasing it has many parallels in the history of post-slavery.⁷⁹ The recollections of Kiluvi's life also highlight her intensely personal and painful struggle with her slave origins. They show that, however thin

its traces in the historical record, the ‘disappearance’ of mainland East Africa’s slaves was neither easy nor simple. Moreover, it involved different people in very different ways.

The Need for Contrasting Perspectives

It follows from the difficulty of locating slave descendants that researchers need to talk to people from a variety of backgrounds, not all of them ex-slave. This outcome constitutes an opportunity as much as a problem. It is important to include the perspectives of owners’ as well as slaves’ descendants.⁸⁰ In part, this is because owners’ descendants are in a position to provide exclusionary and restrictive views on slave descendants’ social position that help elucidate the struggles that ex-slaves faced.⁸¹ They retain memories of struggles that complement those retained by slave descendants.

More broadly, though, and notwithstanding their conflicts, ex-owners and ex-slaves were and continue to be part of the same life-worlds and moral universes. Owner-descendants’ fear of and struggle against loss of social status and livelihood, or conversely their satisfaction with and efforts to maintain continuing material and social advantages, filter into these shared life-worlds. In this sense, ex-owners and ex-slaves are inseparable. Moreover, how ex-owners dealt with loss and decline is in itself an important question. The bitterness occasioned by such loss may linger for many years and inform political allegiances down the decades. This is very evident, for instance, in the narratives of victimhood now widespread in coastal East African settings, such as among Zanzibari separatists and Mombasa-based critics of Kenyan policies towards the coast. These narratives draw on and elaborate owners’ descendants’ experience of post-colonial dispossession. Yet they have become a rallying cry for many people who do not share such exclusive antecedents. For instance, the supporters of Zanzibar’s *uamsho* movement in the mid-2010s included many young men of mainland African background, who nevertheless readily identified with the narrative of Zanzibar as a beacon of *Arabicate* civilization threatened by mainland-African interference.⁸²

While similar outcomes are possible on the mainland, there is some evidence that, by contrast, references to ancestral involvement with slave trading can be used to undermine claims to present-day moral legitimacy. This has occurred, for instance, with certain chiefly families in the Northeastern Congo.⁸³ Nearer the coast in Tanzania, Shabani Mwakalinga observed a conversation in which a Sheikh who tried to make a point about correct Islamic observance was addressed with the words: ‘of course you know a lot about Islam, you are from among those who used to sell people like us’. The Sheikh responded with: ‘ah, leave your *utani*’, assimilating the comment to a form of semi-ritualized joking that is widely used by Swahili speakers to smooth over tense situations.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the comment undercut his assertion of ritual expertise.

The effectiveness of such allusions in challenging status indicates a shift in hegemonic values of great importance to slave descendants. At the same time, the divergence from the Zanzibari outcome highlights the importance of subsequent political history in shaping conditions for both ex-owners and ex-slaves, and – for instance through the salience of coastal Muslims’ bitterness over scarcity and economic decline – the role of struggles over material resources.⁸⁵ Researchers, then, have to pay attention also to the effects of changing post-colonial regimes and to the struggles for access to public and private goods that states mediated, from security of land rights to school places. Again, the history of slavery shades into that of social inequality more broadly.

Occasionally, colonial politics could catalyze reversals of fortune for former slaves. The Tanganyikan government-sponsored educational magazine *Mambo Leo* (‘Matters of today’) retains the story of one former slave, Ingereza (‘England’) Ng’wana Sweya, who obtained sponsorship from a colonial agricultural officer in Tabora region as a ‘poster child’ for ‘modern’ agriculture. According to the magazine, he had gone to the coast several times and then settled in Mbogwe village, Kahama district, as a farmer. He prepared his farms early, applied artificial fertilizer and planted seeds on terraces, all of which he had learned from the coast. The agricultural officer supporting him extolled his ‘modern’ farming method as a model for other farmers in the village and beyond.⁸⁶ While this portrayal of a ‘progressive farmer’ is a cliché of late colonial developmentalism, it shows that this former slave could both access land and mobilize official support in mid-twentieth century Tabora. Again, then, pathways out of slavery were tangled and variable.

Conclusion

Three main conclusions arise from the discussion above. Firstly, it was observed that the same institutions and practices that helped mitigate ex-slaves’ marginality also preserved a persistent substratum of hierarchical social difference. The mission stations, families and Sufi orders that helped the formerly enslaved become someone other than a former slave also retained a memory of their subjection. Concomitantly, post-slavery in East Africa is characterized by a persistent tension between the apparent obliteration of slavery, exemplified by its near disappearance from written sources, and the persistence of oblique allusion to and of social discomfort and shame around the practice.

This finding is interesting in its own right, not least for how it echoes analyses of slavery itself.⁸⁷ It also, secondly, has important implications for both the ethics and the methods of researching post-slavery in East Africa. To deal with the ethical implications first: when setting out to trace these elusive ex-slaves, researchers cannot be sure whether they are about to poke a wasps’ nest of lingering exclusionary attitudes and resentment, chase the shadows of a safely forgotten past, or invite the production of sanitized, standardized

recollections that themselves help keep the past in check. They could also find themselves drawn into emergent social conflicts. Given the painful and potentially divisive nature of the heritage of slavery, they have to proceed with great care and constant attention to the unintended consequences of their interests. Recent work in Tabora, as earlier near the coast, indicates that there are people who want the slave past to be remembered.⁸⁸ For and with them, researchers can perform a service – albeit with trepidation, since the further uses of these pasts cannot be predicted.

Methodologically, the inevitable reliance of research on post-slavery on oral methods, necessitated by the limitations of the written archive, entails that the results produced are strongly positioned, shaped by the social processes that went into the making of the sources. There is no way to even pretend to produce disinterested, ‘neutral’ or definitive histories under these circumstances. Rather, narrative strategies need to explicate the positionalities of researchers and respondents where possible, and to accommodate diverse perspectives while tracing their interaction with their holders’ personal connections to the era of slavery. This necessity chimes with the focus on diverse and personal voices and trajectories already developed by West Africanists.⁸⁹

Work in this vein will help make sense of the puzzling evanescence-cum-persistence of slavery in East Africa. It is puzzling because, the coast aside, the topic has been so easy to avoid and yet, when addressed, appears full of hard to articulate but possibly disruptive social valence. Moreover, in this setting, the dynamics whereby the memory of slave origin and its stigma were retained, quietly yet persistently, are not evident. Somatic and ethnic distinctions derived from slavery were harder to elaborate and maintain in East Africa than in post-slavery contexts in the diaspora, and there was none of the elaborate institutional and legislative effort to maintain racialized distinctions derived from slavery found in, for example, the U.S.

Against this background, the fact that the slave past remains *jambo la aibu*, a matter of shame, suggests several things. It challenges characterizations of rural societies in East Africa as proactively egalitarian and focused on togetherness rather than hierarchical distinction, produced by observers as diverse as Julius Nyerere and liberal economists.⁹⁰ Instead, it suggests an aptitude for making very subtle distinctions articulated intermittently. Further, it serves as a reminder that apparently limited differences in status or access to resources may have been of great significance and worth struggling over in contexts of widespread deprivation.

More fundamentally still, the lingering shame raises the question of how and why the past matters, and how change is made sense of. For the communities surrounding Ghana’s slave-exporting forts, Bayo Holsey has argued that their reluctance to address this past, other than for consumption by tourists, arose from a long process of exchange with the West in which slave exporting was trotted out as evidence of Africans’ moral and political failings.⁹¹ A parallel

argument can be made for East Africa. But there are other possibilities. For instance, many informants acknowledge that slavery, whatever its hardships, used to be merely normal, the 'done' thing, and that it ended not by individual ethical choice but as part of processes bigger than those caught up in them.

From this vantage point, avoidance of the slave past can be seen as a gentle approach to both trauma and guilt, to the often-unacknowledged pain of the enslaved and the moral failings of the enslavers. It is a way of addressing trauma that contrasts strongly with the processes typically used in restorative justice or truth and reconciliation commissions, which make articulating and explicating the injustice suffered indispensable. For researchers, this creates another dilemma, as there is no clear way to judge whether informants' discretion is based on choice. After all, sometimes informants raise abuses only once they feel safe, but then make it clear that they want them recorded.⁹² At the same time, it would be arrogant to uphold the protocols of restorative justice as the only way to deal with historical trauma. Arguably, the quiescence of the slave past in much of East Africa constitutes an achievement. Clearly, the slave past will remain challenging for researchers in East Africa, even if the region's inhabitants have found ways to work around it.

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