

Beyond the Atlantic Paradigm: Slavery and Abolitionism in the Nigerien Sahel

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Abstract

This article investigates the causes of the resilience of slavery in the region of Tahoua in the Republic of Niger in the West African Sahel. It attributes slavery's lingering vitality to the semi-autonomous evolution of slavery and abolitionism in this region. It illustrates the historical processes through which, following colonial legal abolition, slavery in Tahoua started being challenged, but not effectively eradicated. The article shows that slavery and abolitionism in the Nigerien Sahel are rooted in different historical processes and discursive genealogies than those that led to the development of colonial abolitionism and international law on slavery and trafficking. It advocates appropriate historical contextualization of slavery-related phenomena in regions where European abolitionism was initially tied to imperialism. In such regions different groups engaged critically with European attitudes toward local slavery. Following decolonization, the rise of Nigerien abolitionist movements was informed both by integration in international humanitarian networks and by engagement with the specific forms of slavery prevalent in local society.

Keywords: slavery, abolition, emancipation, Niger, Tahoua, Sahel, dependence, resistance, Atlantic slavery.

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Introduction

Souleymane stares into the camera and denounces the abolitionists who condemned his relationship with Hadijatou Mani. Defending what he perceives as his moral actions, he calls anti-slavery activists and lawyers unbelievers and brutes. He reasons that since God gave them power (Hausa: *iko*), today they are in a position to impose their decisions, but they shall be held accountable for their behavior on the day of the final judgment (*kiyama*).¹ Thus speaks in Lala Gomà's documentary Souleymane Naroua, who acquired Hadijatou Mani Koraou in 1996 for the equivalent of about US\$400 and made her his concubine. He was then about 46 years old and Hadijatou was 12.² The man who acted as intermediary in the sale of Hadijatou is also interviewed in the film. Asked to explain how he justifies the sale of people when the state nowadays condemns slavery, he answers to his interviewer (a Nigerien son of a concubine of slave descent): "your mother was sold, my mother was sold... these are our traditions."³ Similarly, in discussing the endurance of slavery in Niger, respondents to interviews conducted for a research project on this topic do not feign incredulity, but admit familiarity with the phenomenon, which many among them see as caused by poverty and by the free choice of enslaved persons to retain their relations with (former) "masters" as a form of insurance against risk.⁴ This is a context where slavery is not unquestionably seen as an aberration. The idea that slavery is a legitimate institution that has to be practiced correctly, but not necessarily eradicated, is widespread.⁵ However, since the 1990s national antislavery organizations and grassroots civil society movements have been trying to transform the ideological acceptability of slavery. They have been putting

¹ Lala Gomà and Rosa Cornet, *Hadijatou: J'Accuse*. Ikiru Films/Wonka Films, 2016. The documentary, with English subtitles, can be watched at <https://leslan.org/hadijatou/> (link checked and working on 18 February 2020). The passage cited here is at minute 45ff. The interviews with Souleymane Naroua featuring in the documentary were done in 2015-2016. The interview with the intermediary who sold Hadijatou to Naroua was made in 2010, see personal communication by Lala Gomà (director) in e-mail to Benedetta Rossi dated 8 July 2019.

² The status of concubines like Hadijatou is known in Niger as "wahaya" or "sa daka." For a study of the wahaya practice (as this form of slave marriage is known in Niger) see the report of Galy Kadir Abdelkader and Moussa Zangaou, 'Wahaya: Domestic and Sexual Slavery in Niger' for Timidria and Antislavery International, 2012, published online at <https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wahaya-report.pdf> (link checked and working on 8 July 2019). On the case of Hadijatou Mani, see Jean Allain, "Hadijatou Mani Koraou v. Republic of Niger: Judgement no. ECW/CCJ/JUD/06/08," *The American Journal of International Law* 2 no. 103 (Apr. 2009): 311-317; Helen Duffy, "Hadijatou Mani Koroua [sic] v Niger: Slavery Unveiled by the ECOWAS Court," *Human Rights Law Review* 1, no. 9 (Feb. 2009): 151-170.

³ Gomà and Cornet, *Hadijatou*, minute 17ff.

⁴ Research was carried out between November 2019 and January 2020 in the framework of the project "Legacies of Slavery in Niger" (LESLAN), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Network of the UK Global Challenges Research Fund in the framework of the Anti-Slavery Knowledge Research Network, grant number AKN00114. For more information on LESLAN, please see: <https://leslan.org/> Research for this article is based on archival research by the author in France, Senegal, and Niger; extensive field-based research in the Tahoua region conducted by the author in the period 1995-2010; and on more recent research supervised by the author in the framework of the LESLAN research project (2018-2020) and carried out by Nigérien researchers. The researcher responsible for the Tahoua Region in the context of LESLAN was the anti-slavery activist Ilguilas Weila, member of Timidria and President of the anti-slavery NGO ORDH. Quotes from interviews conducted by Weila in Tahoua are cited in the second half of the article.

⁵ Slavery as an institution shapes interactions between enslaved persons and slave-owners by rooting them in widely shared social norms. While agreeing with Joseph Miller's argument that if we are to understand how slavery works in different contexts we must distance ourselves from its peculiar moral and cultural connotations in our society, I disagree with his view that "contextualizing [the] master-slave dyad forces us to abandon the very notion of slavery as an institution" (Joseph Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012], 19). It is precisely the fact that slavery is institutionalized that gives meaning to the experiences of slaves and masters. For a critical response to Miller by one of the main targets of Miller's criticism, see Orlando Patterson's Preface to the 2018 edition of *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018 [1982]), xv; see also Paulin Ismard, *La cité et ses esclaves: Institutions, fictions, expériences* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), 14-17.

pressure on the state to intervene more firmly against slavery's survivals and legacies.⁶ Their actions run against the resistance of former slave-owners and others who continue thinking of slavery as viable.

Contrary to David Eltis and Stanley Engerman's dictum that today slavery "lost irrevocably the ideological struggle,"⁷ in the Tahoua region of the Nigerien Sahel ideologies that see slavery as legitimate have not completely disappeared. Here in the nineteenth century Islamic law recommended the good treatment of enslaved persons and, when possible, manumission as an act of piety. It provided detailed instructions on who was, or was not, legitimately enslavable. It regulated slavery, but did not condemn it for all categories of persons. In this Sahelo-Saharan context the discursive and performative dimensions of slavery differed from its manifestations in the Atlantic world. Eltis and Engerman's allegation applies to the latter, not the former. The systematic dehumanization of millions of enslaved Africans transported across the Atlantic to provide labor on American or Caribbean plantations was historically peculiar and engendered the strongest commitment to abolitionism. But slavery, exploitative by definition, did not assume the same features, or yield the same consequences, everywhere.

The atrocity of Atlantic slavery was fueled by the profit-maximizing logics of global capital. As exemplified in this issue by Karsten Voss and Klaus Weber's article on the expansion of sugar production in Saint Domingue, large-scale cash-crop production serving capitalist interests integrated in global competition and consumption dynamics resulted in systematic exploitation of labor, with African slave labor the most exploited and dehumanized. Global abolitionism began as a reaction to these Atlantic phenomena. The abolitionist revolution – a movement strong enough to eventually result in legal abolition worldwide – derived its moral strength from the dreadful magnitude of Atlantic slavery. Yet Atlantic slavery represented an extreme form of slavery. Slavery is an institution that has the potential of reducing humans to disposable chattel.⁸ The extent to which such potential has been realized varied historically. So have people's attitudes toward ending slavery. Where and when slavery was tempered by ideological or practical forces that contained its potential brutality, reformism prevailed over arguments advocating the total abolition of slavery for all categories of humans. Where and when slavery was not one status but many, with some slave positions relatively desirable and with assimilation into free society (emancipation) relatively accessible, *some* enslaved persons had at least some incentives to choose accommodation and loyalty over rebellion and resistance, for in those circumstances the rewards of the former may have appeared more attractive than the risks of the latter.

Slavery is part of the lived experience of many Nigeriens today. In all regions of Niger one can find "slaves" serving "masters," either under threat of violence or of

⁶ Mahaman Tidjani-Alou, "Démocratie, exclusion sociale et quête de citoyenneté: cas de l'association Timidria au Niger," *Journal des Africanistes* 70, no. 1-2 (2000): 173-195; Eric Komlavi Hahonou, "Slavery and Politics: Stigma, Decentralisation, and Political Mobilisation in Niger and Benin," in Benedetta Rossi, ed., *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 152-181.

⁷ David Eltis and Stanley Engerman, "Dependence, Servility, and Coerced Labor in Time and Space," in David Eltis and Stanley Engerman, eds., *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 3, AD 1420-AD 1804*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 1-21, 1.

⁸ Atlantic slavery is itself internally diverse and we should avoid essentializing it. But as David Brion Davis suggested already twenty years ago, looking at the Atlantic slave system from a broader perspective may not only help us see its peculiarities, but also its internal nuances better, David Brion Davis, "Looking at Slavery from Broader Perspectives," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 2 (Apr., 2000): 452-466. More recent authors have reiterated the usefulness of avoiding generalizations based on Atlantic slavery, e.g. Cécile Vidal, "Pour une histoire globale du monde atlantique ou des histoires connectées dans et au-delà du monde atlantique?" *Annales HSS* 67, no. 2 (2012): 391-413; Paulin Ismard, "Ecrire l'histoire de l'esclavage: entre approche global et perspective comparatiste," *Annales HSS* 72, no. 2 (2017): 7-43.

their own free will. This may appear paradoxical in light of the triumphant history of worldwide legal abolition, a process from which Niger was never entirely cut off. Slavery was first outlawed under the French colonial regime in 1905.⁹ After independence it was banned through multiple legal instruments: Article 14 of the Constitution of 25 November 2010 states that “no one shall be subjected to torture or slavery...” Law no. 2003-25 of 13 June 2003 criminalizes slavery in the Penal Code,¹⁰ Ordinance no. 2010-86 of 16 December 2010 bans human trafficking, and the Labor Code (Law 2012-45 of 25 November 2012) forbids forced labor. Successive Nigerien governments ratified all relevant international conventions.¹¹ The national legislation on slavery is unequivocal. The problem is one of legal implementation. In Niger today the terms “slave” and “master” are not legally recognized statuses. Although public officials should not countenance claims that mobilize these identities, in practice, there are contexts where their mobilization informs people’s behavior. In such contexts, slavery is a living institution that yields everyday practices and expectations, just as it informs the outrage of Souleymane Naroua for having been punished for his relationship with Hadijatou, whom he saw as his legitimate slave wife.

This article examines the causes and consequences of the lingering legitimacy of slavery in contemporary Tahoua, and asks why state legal abolition seems to matter so little to so many in this part of Africa. What are the dynamics underpinning the resilience of slavery and the relatively recent growth of Nigerien antislavery? The fact that these phenomena continue to exist should not lead us to argue that they are not “slavery.” Like marriage or kinship, slavery takes different forms in different places and times. This does not make translations meaningless: slave, *esclave*, *bawa* (Hausa), and *iklan* (Tamacheq) are terms that refer to analogous circumstances. The word “slave” can be used appropriately to refer to persons whose status and condition share much in common across Euro-American and African, Sahelian and Atlantic, worlds and, in all of these contexts, are perceived as distinct from “free” persons (including coerced and exploited free persons). But, as argued by Juliane Schiel and Christian De Vito in the introduction to this special issue, people’s attitudes toward slavery are contingent to specific social, economic and political processes, and change in time. Appropriate contextualization is a precondition for interpreting slavery’s transformations in historically specific hierarchies. Meaningful comparison depends on it.

In Niger today slavery’s eradication takes the form of anti-slavery intervention backed by the state. Yet Niger’s vast hinterland eludes the control of the central government. Its semi-autonomy results in a degree of normative pluralism: precolonial institutions and ideas with sub-regional genealogies continue to operate alongside the ones that reached this region as a consequence of European imperialism and that, as the first section of this article endeavors to demonstrate, were never fully applied. Tahoua (also known as Ader, the name of the historical region) is located at the edge of the Sahara, where sand dunes and rocky crevasses are interspersed with fertile valleys at the bottom of lateritic slopes. This region was particularly impervious to outsider penetration. Ader’s ecology facilitated resistance against aggression by conquerors and

⁹ In 1903 a law was passed that denied slavery recognition in French courts in the whole of French West Africa: masters could not continue to use French courts to reclaim fugitive slaves. The main law abolishing slavery in French West Africa was the law of 12 December 1905. The text of the 1905 law was published in *Journal Officiel du Sénégal*, 18 Janvier 1906, 51-52, *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (BNF) microfilm M-5530.

¹⁰ See Chapter VI: crimes against individual freedoms; Section 2: on slavery.

¹¹ Independent Niger ratified the League of Nations’ 1926 Slavery Convention on 25 August 1961; it ratified the ILO’s Forced Labor Convention on 12 March 1962; it ratified the UN’s Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others on 10 July 1977.

slavers. Only locals were familiar with the position of life-saving waterpoints and hideaways where incoming enemies could be taken by surprise. Local Tuareg and Hausaphone rulers were able to retain partial autonomy from more powerful neighbors, such as the Sokoto Sultanate to the south and Borno to the east. Northern Ader was first crossed by European explorers only at the turn of the twentieth century. After colonial occupation, French administrators imposed their policies half-heartedly. Ader's ideologies, though always connected with the outside world through trade and other forms of mobility, resisted foreign influence. Unsurprisingly, slavery and abolitionism followed rationales distinct from those of regions closer to the Atlantic.

If Ader's environment protected its inhabitants against foreign enemies, it nevertheless was not friendly toward local farmers and herders. It imposed harsh conditions on livelihoods. The totalizing dependence that slavery makes possible served the interests of slaveholders. It gave them control over the labor of enslaved persons, whom they could not remunerate (had they been inclined to) in the absence of viable conditions for commercial expansion. It also gave them unlimited access to the bodies of slave women, the pleasures that may be derived thereof, and control over their offspring. Enslaved children could be turned into gifts to allies; transacted for a payment or other material benefit; or exploited as free labor as soon as they were old enough to work. Slavery increased the slave-owners' status, as a large retinue of dependents, including slaves, was a fundamental mark of prestige. It enabled elites to perform according to codes of honor while counting on the service of ubiquitous dependents. With demographic growth, slavery endowed slave-owning classes with a monopoly over increasingly valuable productive capital that did not have to be shared with enslaved persons, who were denied ownership of land, or indeed any other valuable asset. Slave-owners derived benefits from slavery. Some enslaved persons, too, sought to make a virtue of necessity and benefit from their subjugation.

After abolition, social hierarchies endured partly because of the limited ability of those qualified as "slaves" to safely opt out of relations with "masters" in Ader's arid environment. They sought not simply a salary, but also other forms of support that were never provided through public welfare by either colonial or independent governments. Even today, enslaved individuals don't always seek emancipation. Attitudes toward enslavement depend on the circumstances of those enslaved and their descendants, who side alternatively with paternalist masters or with the champions of abolitionism. For some, being owned is preferable to facing absolute poverty, and the increased risk of death that such levels of poverty entail. Those lacking a minimum capital to invest in economic initiatives carried out on one's own account, or lacking fallback options in case of failure, have more (not fewer) incentives to embrace the exploitative relationships that tie them to slaveholders. The free choices of relatively choiceless people entrench their exploitation. From the perspective of masters, slaves are the category of subordinates over whom control is potentially greatest and obligations of reciprocity lowest. Because of the interests vested in slavery, pro-slavery ideas will not weaken their hold on people's minds without a struggle.

In Frederick Douglass' famous words, "power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."¹² Slavery in contemporary Tahoua is rooted in a durable set of dispositions that used to be legally, religiously and morally sanctioned and have only recently started being undermined by a growing abolitionist movement, tied into

¹² Frederick Douglass, "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies," speech given on 3 August, 1857, in John Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Vol. 3 (speeches, debates, and interviews 1855-63)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 195.

sub-regional and global networks. As slavery is increasingly seen as illegitimate in the eyes of growing numbers of people, demands for its end are becoming more pressing. This article describes how, in this context, slavery has started losing the legitimacy that it once had.

Colonial Interventions on Slavery in Tahoua

At the turn of the twentieth century Ader was almost unknown to Europe. In the nineteenth century, the first expeditions to reach areas close to Ader had been British. Hugh Clapperton, either alone or with other members of the British Mission to Borno, travelled to the east and south of Ader.¹³ In his second expedition, Clapperton reached Sokoto from Badagry on the Guinea Coast, but died there in April 1827.¹⁴ Heinrich Barth and the other members of the British-funded Central African Mission travelled north, east, and south of Ader in 1850–5.¹⁵ The following missions into areas near Ader were French-staffed and financed. Their main objective was to reconnoiter the border between French and British Central African territories. The region proved impenetrable and the border was the object of four renegotiations between 1898 and 1906.¹⁶ Nature's hostility and lack of familiarity with local rulers made European penetration difficult until as late as 1900, when French administrators entered Ader and established administrative outposts within it.

The groups who had ruled the northern part of the country before French colonial occupation displayed different attitudes toward the French: the Iwellemmeden Kel Deneg Tuareg resisted for as long as they could, engaging in an anti-colonial guerrilla tactic from their northern desert base; the Kel Gress Tuareg in southern Ader signed peace agreements after being militarily defeated in 1902, as they needed to resume their major role in regional long-distance trade; and sedentary Hausaphone chieftaincies had no choice but to sign peace treaties and accept French rule. The French administration began to apply their governmental rationales to the newly occupied region. This involved managing local labor and dealing with the "slavery question."¹⁷ While the slave trade and the harshest abuses against ex-slaves were actively opposed, in the first two decades of the twentieth century slavery was tolerated by French administrators who relied on chiefs to provide labor – mainly (ex-)slaves – for its worksites.¹⁸ France supported indigenous chiefs who served her cause. She allowed

¹³ D. Denham, H. Clapperton, and W. Oudney, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in the Years 1822, 1823, and 1824* (London: John Murray, 1826).

¹⁴ Hugh Clapperton, "Records of the Second Expedition, 1825–1827", in Paul Lovejoy and Jamie Lockhart eds., *Hugh Clapperton into the Interior of Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

¹⁵ H. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa: Being a Journal of an Expedition Undertaken Under the Auspices of H.R.M.'s Government in the Years 1849–1855. Centenary Edition in Three Volumes* (London: Frank Cass, 1965 [1857]).

¹⁶ The four conventions setting (or modifying) the Anglo-French border in the Central Sudan are the Declaration of 5 August 1890; the Paris Convention of 14 June 1898; the London Convention of 8 April 1904; and the second London Convention of 29 May 1906. They are cited and discussed in J.A.M. Tilho, *Documents scientifiques de la Mission Tilho. 3 volumes. Paris, 1910–14* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1926), xii–xxxii.

¹⁷ The most important reports are George Virgile Poulet's Report of March 1905 (ANS K17), known as "Enquête sur la captivité en AOF," based on a wide-ranging survey on the situation of slavery in French West Africa that had been ordered by General Governor Ernest Roume in December 1903. Poulet's report was accompanied by Governor Roume's report of June 1905, which described colonial administrative policies toward slavery. George Deherme's report "L'Esclavage on AOF" was completed in September 1906 (ANS K25). The full texts of these reports are published and discussed in Paul E. Lovejoy and Alexander Sydney Kanya-Forstner, *Slavery and Its Abolition in French West Africa: The Official Reports of G. Poulet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994).

¹⁸ For a general discussion of early French policy, legislation, and activities concerning the slavery problem in West Africa, see Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ch. 11; Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, "Introduction," in Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne

them to retain the services of former slaves. But as soon as slave populations realized that their masters were not free to impose demands on them anymore, they began to resist exploitation. Men of slave descent started migrating seasonally. In the south of Ader the economy of Kel Gress Tuareg, dominant in the area, had relied heavily on slaves and liberated slaves. Now Kel Gress dependents started to work on their own account. Administrators believed that the vestiges of slavery would gradually disappear, as stated in a 1908 report by Captain Marty.

The Tuareg calls himself “noble.” Nobility, for him, consists in doing nothing (*Le Touareg se dit ‘noble’. La noblesse, pour lui, consiste à ne rien faire*). He refuses to work and when, as is the case for the Kel Gress, he cannot pillage anymore, he prefers to live miserably rather than to look for a job that will improve his material condition. He disdains the opportunities that, with patience and perseverance, we offer him. . . In my opinion, I can only consider the Tuareg as useless. One might object that the Kel Gress have an industry and farming. [But] it is not the Kel Gress who works . . . it is his slave (*Bellah*) . . . and the *Bellah* is starting to become aware of his force. The *Bellah* is now rich. He resists the Tuareg who, most of the time, cannot force him to obey when the *Bellah* refuses to serve him . . . and the *Bellah* is indispensable to the Tuareg . . . and we are obliged to intervene. The *Bellah* now owns new herds. Groups of *Bellah* take shape and they nomadize in a specific region. They disregard the Tuareg’s authority and resist accepting our own when we exercise it through the intermediary of Tuareg chiefs. Besides, the *Bellah* is right, because when he will be as familiar to us as the sedentary farmer, a model toward which he is moving, he will deny the ancient authority of his master completely and work for himself rather for his master. I cannot, in the space of this report, deal with an extremely complex question that requires serious study. But it seems to me that one day we will have to take a clear stance for either the Tuareg or the *Bellah* and we will not be able to continue indefinitely this temporizing politics. . . The time will come when we shall have to decide if we want to sacrifice the Tuareg for the sake of the *Bellah*, or the *Bellah* for the sake of the Tuareg. Here, I simply pose the question. I should think it is an important question, susceptible of being one of the main preoccupations of the Commandant de Cercle who has under his authority Kel Gress and Iwellemmeden.¹⁹

Marty overestimated the capacity of the French administration to act on this situation. Moreover, his view of “the *Bellah*” and “the Tuareg” did not pay sufficient attention to the *differences within* each of these two groups. The poorest groups, which included the poorest slaves, opted for retaining relations with former masters because emancipation involved risks and investment. Slaves did not so much “want freedom,” as they sought material improvements to their living conditions. This is not to suggest they did not value autonomy from the arbitrary will of former masters. But they faced concrete trade-offs: when the risks and costs of freedom proved too high, many opted for dependence. For example, certain groups of Kel Gress slaves who had been classed administratively as dependents of their former masters requested permission to form independent communities. In March 1907, the French authorities created a mixed administrative unit (“*groupement mixte*,” including groups classified as both “nomad” and “sedentary”), designed to contain free Hausa villages and former Kel Gress dependents, who thereby were separated administratively from Kel Gress elites.²⁰ The latter lost rights to capital and labor:

Miers, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 3–84; Lovejoy and Kanya-Forstner, *Slavery and Its Abolition*, 6–13; Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), particularly chapters 8 and 11.

¹⁹ Capt. Marty, Rapport politique, October 1909, ANN 1E2.14.

²⁰ Rapports politiques, April and May 1908, ANN 1E2.14.

The liberation of the *Bugadjes*,²¹ classed as “sedentary” because they are millet farmers, delivered a substantial blow to the Kel Gress chiefs, not only because it deprived them of one of their means of existence but also because of their caravans. The majority of the teamsters of camel caravans were recruited amongst the sedentary *Bellahs*. If the break [with former dependents] had taken place abruptly, the situation would have been unbearable for the Kel Gress. But, luckily, many – roughly half – of the *Bugadjes* opt for remaining Kel Gress and continue to consider the Kel Gress their masters.²²

This administrative separation had been meant to support the progressive emancipation of groups of slave descent by giving them autonomous political representation and consequently greater leverage in negotiations with their masters. But it was short-lived. Ex-slaves had requested the separation to avoid paying taxes to former masters. Now they resented the higher tax they owed France as independent sedentary villagers. Kel Gress elites put pressure on the French to have their ex-dependents returned to them, and many slave descendants supported a return to their initial situation, which was restored in December 2008. Thus, slaves were reabsorbed under the administrative authority of the five Kel Gress chiefs (*chefs de tribu*), who even took this chance to claim rights on other former dependents.²³

The whole of the West African Sahel was hit by drought in 1913, resulting in a major famine that decimated the population.²⁴ In these difficult circumstances colonial recruitment operations in the cantons of Ader generated frustration and armed resistance. Unrest grew and Northern Ader and Aïr became involved in major anti-colonial insurgences, led by former chiefly families. Toward the border of Niger with French Sudan (today’s Mali) Firhun, the *amenokal* of the western Iwellemeden (Kel Ataram), broke out of prison during the night of 13-14 February 1916 and declared holy war against the French.²⁵ He was joined by the pre-colonial rulers of northern Ader, the Iwellemeden Kel Denneg,²⁶ headed by Elkhurer of the Kel Nan section.²⁷ Local groups followed three main courses of action: the former nomadic Tuareg ruling classes and elites opposed the French, whom they saw as usurpers, infidels, and whose rationales of government were incompatible with theirs. Sedentary old and new chiefs opted for peace under the French, whose demands they preferred to the constant violence of the former Tuareg warlords. And ex-slaves, who had been the main victims of elite ideologies of superiority, tried to seize opportunities in the French new regime and leave slavery behind. Some of them continued to serve their old masters and fight in an anti-colonial war that could not be won.

In the short term those who sided against the Tuareg *ancien régime* paid a high price. The assassination of Amajallad is a case in point. Amajallad was an ex-slave of the Tamejirt, former dependents of the Kel Nan (or, alternatively, Tillimidis), who worked as a guide for the French. He was brutally murdered by his former masters when he carried French orders to them, an act that in the slavers’ eyes compounded

²¹ The terms *Buzu* or *Bugadje* are synonyms, and refer to the slaves or former slaves of the Tuareg in Hausaphone areas. In Songhay-speaking regions, the same groups are called *Bellah*.

²² Rapport politique, April 1908, ANN 1E2.14.

²³ “Following the instructions of telegram 508 all the *Bougadjes* Kel Gress scattered in small camps without chiefs and without organization in part of Gobir Toudou and part of Ader have been placed back under the authority of the five Aghollas, chiefs of the Kel Gress tribes, and the taxes due for these *Bougadjes* have been redistributed amongst the chiefs.” Rapport politique du Cercle de Tahoua, January 1908, ANN17.8.10.

²⁴ Rapport politique annuel 1914, ANN1E7.38 bis.

²⁵ Francis Nicolas, *Tamesna: Les Ioullemeden de l’Est ou Tuareg Kel Denneg* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1950), 88–89.

²⁶ Reinsegnements sur Firhun et Alrimarett par le lieutenant Pelletier, Journal de Renseignements de la Subdivision de Tahoua 1912-1919, ANN17.8.9.

²⁷ Telegram from Sadoux Commanadant Cercle Madaoua to Gouverneur Territoire Zinder, 24 March 1916, SHD-BAT GR5H 207.

treason and arrogance.²⁸ Iwellemmeden raids inflicted enormous losses to those whom they considered their former subjects and who had accepted French rule. Their constant attacks proved the French powerless in the hinterland. In the words of Yves Riou, “this period, 1914–1918, was marked by our ‘embarrassment’ (it is the least one can say!).”²⁹ The Tuareg “rebellion” was sedated in the spring 2017. General Sadoux caught Kel Denneg camps in Tanout by surprise at the end of March 2017 and ended the rebellion in a blood bath that cost the life of almost all the adult Iwellemmeden Kel Denneg elites.³⁰

Following the repression of the rebellion of Tuareg elites and the end of World War I, French administrators came under heightened pressure to eradicate slavery spearheaded by the newly founded League of Nations. The *Code de l’Indigénat*, based on the Law of 30 September 1887, became increasingly indefensible.³¹ Before the Law of 22 October 1925 regulating indigenous labor in French West Africa, local labor was mobilized by application of the Indigénat code, with the collaboration of customary chiefs in colonial labor requisitions. Initial pressure to temper, and eventually abolish, the Indigénat came from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), created in 1919 as an agency of the League of Nations and from the French public opinion, inflamed by debates on the application of the Indigénat in Algeria. The coercive measures of the Indigénat lent support to the hierarchical logics that gave chiefs control over Ader’s low-ranking workers, many of whom were former slaves. Chiefs were supposed to embody the civilizing values of the colonizers and transmit them to African subjects at grassroots level.³² But their authority was grounded in personal hierarchies at the bottom of which were enslaved persons. Colonial government was entangled in networks of dependence rooted in indigenous slavery.

Tahoua’s workers were more recalcitrant toward forced labor recruitment than workers elsewhere in Niger.³³ The resistance of Ader’s population met with colonial repression. The harshest provisions of the Indigénat, which were progressively abrogated elsewhere, were maintained well into the 1940s and used to impose an order that proved hard to achieve by other means. Successive administrators of the Cercle de Tahoua requested that the Indigénat be maintained in its 1887 form, claiming that the “stubbornness” and “backwardness” of Ader’s populations, and particularly of former slaves, rendered necessary the maintenance of the harshest forms of rule. Slave descendants were accustomed to exploitation but resented the anonymity of colonial demands, which lacked the personalized reciprocity of traditional slavery. As soon as they could take control of their movement, they started migrating permanently or seasonally. Former slaves used their increased autonomy to control their labor as independent seasonal migrants, while relatives who stayed in Ader farmed lands which they started claiming as their own.

²⁸ Fieldnotes 30 September 2005, Alela; 4 October 2005, Intougouzout; 10 October 2005, Abalak. Cf. Nicolas, *Tamesna*, 91–92.

²⁹ Yves Riou, *La révolte de Kaocen et le Siège d’Agadez, 1916-1917*. n.d. SHD-BAT GR5H 208, 16.

³⁰ Télégramme du Capitaine Sadoux sur opérations nord-est du Secteur, 30 March 2017, ANN17.8.9.

³¹ *Décret du 30 septembre 1887 portant répression, par voie disciplinaire, des infractions spéciales aux indigènes non-citoyens français*. The full text is reproduced in Babacar Fall, *Le Travail Forcé en Afrique-Occidentale Française (1900–1946)* (Paris: Karthala, 1993), Annex 1, 305–306.

³² “The proper functioning of the *chefferies indigènes* is central to our indigenous politics (*politique indigène*), and therefore to the *mise en valeur*, because our colonies of French West Africa are not settlement colonies. It is fundamental to reorganise the chiefs, to adapt them to territorial changes . . . and allow them to meet effectively the increasing requirements of our administration . . . Clearly, this is in line with indirect rule, but the method also follows from our *politique d’association*, which is the foundation of our colonial politics.” Governor of Niger Choteau, Circular, 16 November 1930, ANN 2E3.4.

³³ Gouverneur Niger à Gouverneur Général, 23 April 1939, CAOM 11G31.

In 1930 the ILO Forced Labour Convention was passed.³⁴ Although France delayed ratification of the convention until 1937, administrative reports betray anxiety over the management of free and unfree labor.³⁵ In 1931, following Dakar's requests to examine the situation at the Cercle level, a report on slavery and the slave trade (*Captivité et Traite de Captifs*) argued against the eradication of slavery, which, it was suggested, would lead to the "destruction" of Arab and Tuareg society.³⁶ In the same year a study by Espéret, titled "The Problem of Servile Labor in French West Africa," explained the link between slavery and the regime of prestations, which he saw as an intermediary step between slavery and free labor: "it was necessary to give yesterday's slaves the time to learn freedom."³⁷ A 1932 circular from Dakar to the Colonies summarized the evolution of French policy and argued for "the necessity of a return to ordinary law . . . Abuses are particularly frequent in the regions that exceptionally retained the penalties [in their original form] of 1887."³⁸ But commandants retorted that the severity of the Indigénat was hardly excessive, especially towards the large contingents of former slaves. A letter from the Commandant of the Cercle of Tahoua written in 1940 exposes the administration's attitudes toward ex-slaves (*Bellah*):

The Cercle's populations are still far from a degree of evolution in which this regime [the Code de l'Indigénat in its 1887 form] would be considered excessive, and immediate sanctions are always more effective against primitives than penalties that sometimes may not occur until after a fortnight has passed [from the perpetration of an infraction of the code] . . . infractions are extremely frequent particularly amongst the ex-slaves (*Bellah*) who have become very independent now that they are not enslaved anymore and, having escaped the stick of the master, would pretend to evade all authority.³⁹

The Second World War diverted international attention away from problems internal to colonial society that were not directly related to the war. But in a 1942 report, the head of Tahoua's nomad subdivision, Maurice Vilmin, yet again acknowledged the persistence of slavery, and again warned against the potential "anarchy" which would result from its suppression.⁴⁰ As the war ended the reformist approach towards all forms of forced labor and slavery was asserted decisively. Shortly after the Brazzaville conference of 1944, the Indigénat, forced labor, and the prestations regime were all abolished. The Brazzaville conference of 1944 marked a change in France's attitude toward its African colonies, characterized by increased metropolitan engagement in their economic and social development. In 1946, France established a fund – the Fonds d'Investissements pour le Développement Économique et Social (FIDES) – that dispensed development capital to its colonial territories.

In 1947 Captain Reeb, head of the nomadic subdivision of the Cercle of Tahoua, completed his thesis on the *iklan* (Tuareg slaves).⁴¹ After the war, the proposed

³⁴ Cf. Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003), 145–8. The French, backed by Belgians, Italians, and Portuguese, had been able to retain the legality of the prestation or labor tax and to exclude military service from the definition of forced labor.

³⁵ The French official position concerning "the problem of compulsory labor," in response to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, is explained in a preface to the Law of 21 August 1930 (*Décret portant réglementation du travail public obligatoire aux colonies*). The text of the law is premised on a report by the Minister of Colonies, François Pietri, to the President of the French Republic, which highlights the main problems that the Convention posed for colonial government, cf. text cited in Fall, *Le travail forcé*, 321–325.

³⁶ Rapport sur la captivité et la traite de captifs, Cercle de Tahoua, 10/07 1931, ANN381.1 (Author: illegible).

³⁷ Etude sur la situation du travail servile au Niger, Chef du Bureau de Finances Espéret, 31/10/1931, ANN 5E2.5.

³⁸ Governor General to all Governors of Colonies, Circular, 4 August 1932.

³⁹ Commandant de Cercle of Tahoua to Governor of Niger, 22 May 1940.

⁴⁰ Rapport de Tournée, Adjoint Services Civils subdivision nomade Tahoua Vilmin, 08/06/1942, ANN 1E26.

⁴¹ Les Iklans ou les Touaregs Noirs. Memoire présentée au concours du stage du Centre des Hautes Etudes d'Administration Musulmane, 1948. ANN 5E2.5.

solutions to the slavery question, summarized in a 1949 circular, were to favor the development of sharecropping and introduction of employment contracts agreed and signed by (overwhelmingly illiterate) former slaves and masters.⁴² From the administration's perspective the issue of labor continued to be articulated around three fundamental questions: the changing status of people of slave descent; the problem of paying wages to the labor necessary to establish public infrastructure after the abolition of compulsory recruitment; and the problem of migration, through which a large part of the workforce opted out of the local labor market when its conditions were too exploitative. At the end of the 1940s, Tahoua's administration had not changed its attitude toward local labor in spite of the new legal framework. Strikingly, these comments were made only ten years before decolonization.

The question of the *iklan* (slaves) . . . is so acute in this area that one might ask if the entire economic future of the country does not depend on finding a solution to it. [...] We shall continue to be confronted with the weakness of the *iklan*, who for fear of assuming any responsibility will keep demanding to be registered with their masters rather than being established as independent families [in the census and tax lists]. In fact, the question of the remuneration of labor is related to the one of the *iklan*'s family life. [...] The families of domestic slaves [*iklans de case*] are currently almost always divided: the wife only very rarely joins her husband if the two partners belong to two different masters. The children are too often separated from their mother depending on all sorts of changing family circumstances of the masters (marriage, inheritance, etc.).⁴³

In the mid-1940s France had started carrying out development programs in its West African colonies, funded through metropolitan fiscal revenues. But on the eve of independence, many problems were unsolved. A 1959 report by Inspector Thill stated clearly that independent Niger would have to find ways to meet a substantial budget deficit, essentially caused by the country's intrinsic poverty, hitherto met through transfers from wealthier territories, primarily Senegal and the Ivory Coast.⁴⁴ Under Diori Hamani, the first President of independent Niger, ties with France remained strong.⁴⁵ France continued to design and sponsor development projects through FIDES, renamed FAC after decolonization. These development interventions represented the labor contributed by local communities as "human investment," a local contribution in kind to regional development.⁴⁶ Some of this allegedly "voluntary" labor was unremunerated, some was remunerated at roughly 50% the market salary. Slave descendants, who had been the first to be mobilized in colonial forced labor, were the majority of workers pressured to volunteer in the late colonial and early post-independence development projects.

Colonial abolitionism had been partially effective. No attempt had been made to seriously challenge local ideologies of hierarchy that legitimated slavery and facilitated French labor recruitment operations through the intermediary of collaborating chiefs. Colonial reliance on forced labor trumped colonial commitment to abolition. Forced labor was not slavery. But it relied on slavery, as slaves were the first to be mobilized. Labor recruitment in Ader was not massive, in part because of the workers' resistance. But the chiefs' loyalty was particularly valuable in a region where

⁴² Haut Commissaire de la République in AOF to Gouverneurs Mauritanie, Soudan, Niger, Dakar, 17 August 1949, ANN 5E2.5.

⁴³ Capitain Delon, Rapport de tournée, 11 February 1948, ANNIE37.22.

⁴⁴ Inspection de la France d'Outre Mer, Rapport de l'Inspecteur de 3e classe de la France d'Outre Mer Thill sur la situation financière de la République du Niger, 18 Avril 1959, ANF-CAOM, FM CONTR// 1042.

⁴⁵ For a chronology of Diori Hamani's presidency, see Martin, *Le Niger du Président Diori*.

⁴⁶ Benedetta Rossi "From Unfree Work to Working for Free: Labor, Aid, and Gender in the Nigerien Sahel, 1930–2000," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 92 (Fall 2017): 155-182.

maintenance of order was extremely costly. It came at the price of compromising on the slavery issue.

A large number of slaves migrated as soon as they could distance themselves from former slaveholders. Those who could or would not migrate gained from turning powerful slave-owning classes into patrons at the cost of continuing enslavement, especially as the potential harshness of slavery was checked by old religious injunctions to treat slaves humanely and by the new anti-slavery laws, which were ‘activated’ when cases of ill-treatment and trade of slaves were brought to the administration’s attention. In the first stages of abolition in Tahoua, Islamic piety tempered the brutality of a local discourse that saw slavery as legitimate, and colonial hypocrisy tempered the zeal of those mandated with enforcing a foreign discourse that banned slavery in all its forms.

Slavery’s Resilience and Transformations Following Decolonization

Slavery is a topic mostly avoided in polite conversation in Tahoua. Yet free people had all kinds of relations with slaves well into the twentieth century. They bought them and sold slaves; assigned various tasks to slaves, who provided labor in all spheres of production; had sexual relations with slave women, had children with them, and married them upon emancipation. They recognized ties of milk kinship with the offspring of slave women who had breastfed them. They befriended some slaves, who became the lifelong companions of their freeborn peers. They could afford to exploit them beyond what was considered acceptable for free people. They accumulated them as a form of capital that could be turned into other goods. They inherited them and bequeathed them as gifts. As one informant put it, before colonial conquest, “if one had food, one had slaves” (*in kana da abinci, kana da bayu*).⁴⁷

The slave category was diversified and stratified internally into gradations of dependence.⁴⁸ In theory if not always in practice, masters were responsible for their basic needs. The most marginal slaves could be sold. These were recently captured slaves, who had not been integrated in the society of the masters. In nomadic and semi-nomadic Tuareg groups a distinction is usually made between two main slave categories: slaves who lived with their owners and followed them everywhere, working for them and taking care of their immediate needs (in Ader’s Hausa these are called *bayun murfu*, lit. slaves of the hearth or domestic slaves); and slaves whose status as slaves of specific Tuareg groups or individuals was known, but who lived almost autonomously from their masters, in separate hamlets. They arranged their livelihoods independently, but their mobility in space was restricted to the camp and its vicinities. The latter were referred to as “slaves of the so-and-so,” or by their masters’ group names, or they sometimes had their own group names which were the known ethnonyms of enslaved groups.

Those who lived with their owners had no autonomy—they were always controlled by members of the masters’ class, but were also safer in case of famines because the masters were in charge of their basic needs. By contrast, those living in separate slave hamlets had fewer obligations toward the masters’ family (such as the duty to host them when they stopped in the hamlet during travels, or to host allies of the owners). They had limited usufruct rights over the resources they exploited, and

⁴⁷ Interview with Moussa in Tinkirana Tounga, 6 October 2005.

⁴⁸ Cf. Stephen Baier and Paul Lovejoy, “The Tuareg of the Central Sudan: Gradations in Servility at the Desert’s Edge (Niger and Nigeria),” in Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 291–311; Stephen Baier and Paul Lovejoy, “The Desert Side Economy of the Central Sudan,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8, no. 4 (1975): 551–581.

they had to provide for their own daily needs and fend for themselves in case of famines or other crises. They had to obtain their masters' permission to marry, and their offspring could always be taken from them to suit the requirements of their distant masters. The exact nature of enslaved-enslaver relations in these two categories of slaves varied on a case-by-case basis, depending on the actual history of relations between individuals in the "slave" and "master" groups. Nevertheless, both categories were labelled unequivocally as "slaves" (*bayyi* or *bayu* in Hausa; *iklan* in Tamacheq) by interviewees in Ader, whose explanations left no doubt as to the speakers' understanding of these identities as "slave" identities.⁴⁹

In Tuareg society individual slaves, or entire slave villages, could not be liberated from their servile condition. Freed slaves fell in two main categories, the *ighawellan*, who had enjoyed free status for a long time, and the more recently freed *iderfan*. Racialized discourses distinguished freed slaves from freemen (*ilellan*), also after they had been freed.⁵⁰ In Tuareg society, a slave could only aspire to become a "freed slave." Unless s/he found ways to manipulate or escape this system of classification, s/he could not become "free." This is one of the reasons why in Ader a large number of people of slave descent changed ethnicity and "Hausaised" as an emancipation strategy. This process lasted two or three generations and involved moving to a Hausa settlement and adopting Hausa language and lifestyle.⁵¹ To be sure, slavery existed in the Hausa society of Ader, but social mobility was easier than in Tuareg contexts.⁵²

Following colonial abolition, relations between the descendants of former masters and slaves became less exploitative, but did not disappear. Some slaves willingly or unwillingly cut ties from former masters, but others turned into clients and treated the masters like patrons as recommended in Islam. Self-ransom, and the ransom of wives of slave descent, continues being practiced. Slave descendants became enrolled in the main livelihood options available locally: farming and herding, trade, migration, and development. Groups of slave status who had lived in separate settlements and did not have frequent relations with former masters started thinking of the lands they cultivated as their own. Sometimes this gave rise to disputes with descendants of slaveowners. People of slave descent infiltrated the few axes of commercial agriculture at the margins, mainly as seasonally hired farm labor. They worked in livestock trade, provided labor for the transport of commercial crops (mainly cereals, onions, and dried tomatoes) and livestock, construction of granaries and houses, road repair, and infrastructure maintenance. Trade offered avenues of quick economic mobility to the most entrepreneurial slave descendants, but their status remained low. When I lived in the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s few of the wealthiest traders in Keita, Tamaske, and Ibohmane were rumored to be of slave descent. Wealth gave them power. But their origins were a public secret that carried stigma they struggled to erase.

⁴⁹ This distinction, based on my enquiries in Ader, matches the observations of Edmond Bernus, "L'évolution récente des relations entre éleveurs et agriculteurs en Afrique tropicale: l'exemple du Sahel nigérien," *Etudes sur l'élevage* 11, no. 2 (1974):137-143, 142; see also Bernus and Bernus, "Evolution de la condition servile," 33-35. Multiple interviews that I conducted in Ader referred to the distinction, described in greatest detail in the interview with Anafaran (pseudonym), Kourega, 29 October 2005, and interview with Moussa (pseudonym), Tinkirana Tounga, Friday 28 October 2005.

⁵⁰ Cf. Edmond Bernus and S. Bernus, "L'Évolution de la Condition Servile chez les Touaregs Sahéliens," in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *L'esclavage en Afrique Précoloniale* (Paris: Maspéro, 1975), 27-47.

⁵¹ I provided a detailed example of this process in Benedetta Rossi, "Being and Becoming Hausa in Ader", in Anne Haour and Benedetta Rossi, eds., *Being and Becoming Hausa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 113-140.

⁵² See, for example, Interview with Abubakar Keitawa, Keita, 7 September 2005.

Slaves had provided manual labor for the building of dwellings and wells, the production of most crafts and tools, and domestic utensils. After abolition many of them started carrying out these activities on their own account, but in recent decades their skills became obsolete due to the import of mass-produced objects from China and Nigeria on Niger's markets. While in the 1920s and 1930s their monopoly of these crafts constituted a concrete avenue of social mobility, since the 1980s they have been finding it harder and harder to meet their subsistence needs by practicing traditional crafts. Avenues of economic mobility are narrow. Local-level political structures became characterized by a peculiar hybridity, as relations with the external world followed the logics of global governance, while pre-colonial hierarchies continued to define local politics.

Following decolonization slavery became a taboo and disappeared from national research, the media, and public policy. This situation is not unique to Niger, but common to most of postcolonial Sahelian West Africa, where remnants of slavery were silenced because they threatened the stability of young African nations.⁵³ More than other phenomena, slavery attracted international scrutiny and interventionism. Its resilience, if documented, threatened the perceived legitimacy of independent governments, as had been the case for colonial governments scrutinized by the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s. Traces of slavery are rarely to be found in the post-independence archival records; but rare extant sources suggest that some groups still considered slavery unproblematic.⁵⁴

Towards the end of the first independent presidency of Diori Hamani, donors to Niger diversified. The Sahel famines of the early 1970s attracted international attention and funding. Seyni Kountché's coup in 1974 led to further distancing from France and the consolidation of a nationalist development discourse. Kountché qualified the nation as "the Development Society." He reorganized the administrative apparatus at all levels of the country: the entire body politic – from village- to national-level committees – had to unfold national development plans to end endemic poverty and modernize. This was a major effort that gave Nigeriens a stronger sense of belonging in the nation. Kountché's speeches addressed all citizens as equals. To this date, some persons of slave descent remember him as the president who did most to end slavery and the hierarchies that support slavery's legacies: "*Kountché ya hana aikin banza*,"⁵⁵ that is, Kountché stopped un-remunerated work (for elite private individuals). He also established the principle of "land to the tiller." While these ideas were progressive, national and international developmentalism were premised on the axiom that popular contribution to development should take the form of volunteering. The labor mobilized for development actions in Tahoua was not paid; slave descendants were the first to be recruited.

Questioning Slavery's Legacies and Survivals: The Rise of Nigerien Abolitionism

In semi-pastoral regions like Tahoua, where the masters' class was mainly nomadic, slave descendants have generally been able to farm scarcely productive lands left unused by former masters. The most productive lands surrounded Hausa farming villages, where slavery was relatively assimilative and slave descendants were

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

⁵⁴ See for example, the case of Manou Gaffi, a slave woman whose master was prosecuted in 1969, Procès verbal d'enquête préliminaire, Gendarmerie de Keita, 16 Décembre 1969, ART 1W22-20.

⁵⁵ Akano Ibrahim, interviewed by Agali Agalher for the LESLAN research project, Tigirwit, January 2019.

integrated in the families of slave-owners, although often with a lower status than relatives of free descent. Ex-slaves in pastoralist economies focused on acquiring ownership of livestock and building a herd of their own. Their efforts were often challenged by masters who did not recognize them as entitled to ownership. Today a master's refusal to allow a young slave some economic autonomy is often at the origin of the ex-slave's decision to end the relationship, as in the case of AA:

I grew up in Alabo, with my mother. My father I only learned that his name is A. but I never met him. I do not even know about his activities because I never met him in person. As for my mother, she worked as a servant in the house to her master. When I was a child I looked after my master's sheep. When I grew up and became strong, I rebelled against my master and took my freedom. I want to tell you why I left my master... I told you that my job for my master was as herder and breeder of [his] sheep. One day in the bush I picked up the rejected cud of a goat, which I took and kept for myself. It was a female and God made her prosper; in a few years she turned into a flock of more than a hundred heads of goats and my master wanted to take them [from me]. One morning he came to tell me that the Chief of the nomadic Group (*chef de groupement*) demanded that I bring him all the goats issued from the cud I had collected a few years ago. I said never, I'd rather die. That day I separated my goats from his sheep and left.⁵⁶

The other fundamental obstacle to gaining a share of capital for slave descendants is the prohibition of mixed marriages between slave and free descendants. This prohibition has many consequences. One of them is that capital is transmitted across descendants of the slave-owning elite through inheritance and that slave descendants are excluded from access to lands because they cannot marry into land-owning families. Moreover, exclusion from political and religious authority entrenches inequalities by removing slave descendants from positions of power where decisions are made. In contexts where resources are generally scarce, those at the top may concretely favor members of their families and class – for example by supporting claims on the labor and possessions of slave descendants.

International integrated rural development projects reached Tahoua following the catastrophic Sahel famines, and attenuated the consequences of crisis for some. But nomadic pastoralists were not consistently targeted by projects that prioritized interventions in favor of sedentary groups. International aid had almost no influence on the rising discontent of Tuareg constituencies in the northern regions of Tahoua, which had been severely hit by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. Toward the end of Kountché's presidency Tuareg discontent for the alleged marginalization of Tamacheq-speaking groups in national politics ushered into an armed movement known – yet again – as “Tuareg rebellion” (*rebellion Tuareg*) that affected the north of the country in the period 1985-1995.

The region of Tahoua played a central role in these dynamics. Tchintabaraden was the rebellion's epicenter. In the early 1980s a group of Tuareg migrants in Libya formed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Niger (*Front Populaire pour la Liberation du Niger*, or FPLN). The FPLN, and the rebellion that it spearheaded, contained multiple agendas of people positioned at different levels of the Tuareg hierarchy. Both rich and poor had suffered enormous losses during the droughts of the 1970s and early 1980s. They accused the government of ignoring the disaster faced by Tamacheq-speaking society. Slave descendants – primarily from the Tahoua region – represented a significant sub-group within the rebellion. They saw themselves as doubly oppressed, as Tuareg in a government run by other groups and as slave

⁵⁶ AA (man), interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Tchintabaraden, 15 January 2019.

descendants who had been exploited for generations, and in many cases continued being so. The experience of WB from a village near Abalak is a case in point:

I grew up at the home of my masters who are Tuareg Kel Eghlel from the second nomad group of Abalak. [...]. I lived with them as their slave until I turned 23. Then I migrated to Libya, where I joined a camp of rebel combatants who were training in armed fight. In Libya I found some Tuareg from my region of Abalak, who told me that they had decided to take arms against Niger because the state ignored our rights. Having escaped slavery, I too felt that my rights had been violated and I decided to join the group.⁵⁷

WB had been born to parents enslaved to a family of slave owners who ceded him to another family as a child, following the common practice to separate children of slaves from their parents and place them at the service of relatives and close acquaintances.⁵⁸ His father died a slave. After his father's death, his mother remarried with a man of slave descent who had abandoned the masters: she lived independently with her new husband when WB left for Libya. On his departure, WB entrusted a small herd of about twenty sheep and goats to his mother. This herd, WB's only possession, consisted of animals that the masters had given him as gifts and their offspring. Except for these few heads of livestock, he had never been remunerated for his work as a herder, but was fed 'so that he would remain strong' and work efficiently for them.⁵⁹ On his return from Libya, WB did not go back to live with his former master's family. He started working on his account as a farmer-herder in a hamlet near Abalak. Although he condemns slavery, his memories of relations with the masters are not entirely negative: he protests against a system that exploits and humiliates an entire social class too poor to defend itself. He qualifies his relations with former masters as having been both "very good" and "very bad": while he was never punished or beaten, or forced to work, he never once thought of returning to his master's place after he left. He has at least one fond memory of his ex-master when, in WB's defense, the master had challenged to a duel "another white Tuareg" whose son had entered into a fight with WB. WB thinks that slavery would not exist today if those enslaved did not allow it to endure by being too afraid to rebel or resist, and too vulnerable to succeed in a world that offers few, if any, opportunities.

The leading abolitionist NGO in Niger was founded in the years of the Tuareg rebellion. Timidria (Tamacheq: brotherhood, in the sense of the French term *fraternité*) was formed in Tchintabaraden on 15 May 1991.⁶⁰ Initially its main goals were to fight against injustice; stimulate the development of the Azawagh region (in northern Tahoua) and Niger as a whole; safeguard national unity; strengthen collaboration among its members; promote education; and support the peaceful cohabitation between farmers and herders.⁶¹ Timidria's founders' objectives had taken shape in the experience of exploitation and marginalization of black Tuareg. This was profoundly shaped by the legacies of slavery. Formally recognized by decree N°159/MI/DAPJ of 3 December 1991, Timidria took part in all the main conferences and meetings that led to the signature of the Peace Agreements on 24 April 1995. In the years that followed,

⁵⁷ WB (man), interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Abalak, 27 February 2019, emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ This practice, mentioned frequently in colonial reports, is also a standard feature in the testimonies of persons born in slavery collected for the LESLAN Research Project on a national scale in 2019.

⁵⁹ WB (man), interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Abalak, 27 February 2019.

⁶⁰ Agga Alhatt, "Communication sur l'expérience de l'Association Timidria, présenté à la 6^e Edition de la journée de plaidoyer en faveur de l'institution d'une journée de lutte contre l'esclavage au Niger, auditorium Sani Bako du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, 8 Juin 2019," unpublished presentation. I thank the author for sharing the text of his intervention with me at the end of the event.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

it engaged more and more in human rights issues, particularly the legacies of slavery. It started breaking the silence around slavery that had characterized the first 50 years since independence.

Silencing slavery in public discourse magnified its survivals. Little was done to support the emancipation of persons of slave descent locked in resilient pre-colonial hierarchies. The vitality of these hierarchies militated against actual emancipation. The descendants of the Tuareg chiefs who had ruled the Tahoua region before colonial occupation occupy positions of authority. Descendants of the Iwellemmeden Kel Denneg pre-colonial ruling elites – who had opposed strenuous resistance against France– monopolize traditional chieftaincy roles (*Chefferie de Groupement* or *Canton*) in Tchintabaraden today. In the words of the Honorable Hamzata Mohammed Elkhurer, Chief of the 3rd Nomad Group of Tchintabaranden,

I belong to the lineage of the paramount chiefs (*imanokalan*) of the Tuareg Iwellemmeden Kel Denneg of the Azawagh. My ancestors ruled over a state and not a department, as I do as 14th Chief [from the same lineage]. With the advent of French colonization my ancestors lost their state and obtained a department, which was further fragmented into four departments that today are Tchintabaraden, Tassara, Tillia, and Abalak. With the fall of [our] sultanate at the hand of French colonialists in 1917, between 1918 and 1920 the same region was subdivided into 6 nomadic groups, each headed by a group chief. This structure was inherited by independent Niger which initially left it as it was. With demographic growth eventually the same space came to be subdivided, today, into 19 chiefs of nomadic groups.⁶²

The speaker denies forcefully that any traces of slavery continue to exist in his region: “it is like French colonialism, it does not exist anymore.”⁶³ But the situation is more complex than traditional elites are willing to admit. Abalak, not far from Tchintabaraden, is headed by Kel Eghlel powerful maraboutic group (*imazuaran* or *ineslemen*) who played a major political and religious role in the history of the Azawagh. Further south, closer to the border of Nigeria, the descendants of the chiefly families of the Kel Gress, too, occupy official traditional chieftaincy roles in the Maradi-Nobi-Galma-Arzerori-Konni area. These elites’ approach to hierarchy is conservative. They continue having a large retinue of dependents, some still living in the same conditions as pre-abolition slaves. This is a central dimension of their status. Not all canton or tribal chiefs today belong to the same families that ruled the region on the eve of colonial occupation, but most do – or are related to those who did through ties of marriage strategically arranged to ennoble one’s group. These strata of the population used to own slaves and inherited descendants of slaves from their parents and grandparents. The inheritance of enslaved persons is at the origin of what is usually referred to as “descent-based slavery”.⁶⁴

Relations between interlocking lineages of former slaves and masters remained intact in many places, and are acknowledged in the testimonies of persons who can situate with remarkable genealogical precision the moment of their lineage’s transition into slavery: “I have been enslaved through the mother of my mother...”⁶⁵ explains WB, whose grandmother became the apical slave ancestress of his “slave line” as he seems to conceptualize it. WB’s maternal grandmother had escaped a war from west of the River Niger and arrived in Azawagh. She was with a group of women accompanied

⁶² Honorable Hamzata Mohamed Elhorer, interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Tchintabaraden, 16 January 2019.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Valerie Couillard, *Difficile Passage vers la liberté. Dix années de travail contre l’esclavage par ascendance en Afrique de l’Ouest* (London: Anti-Slavery International, 2019).

⁶⁵ WB, interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Abalak, 27 February 2019.

by three men only; the men were killed and the women enslaved. By contrast, AG has living memory of her mother's capture, which led to her own enslavement:

I remember how my mother was enslaved. It was another black who kidnapped her and sold her to a white Tuareg. Shortly afterwards the same happened to me. My master's name was NA, a Tuareg of the Ijawanjawatane clan. When I was with the master I owned nothing, and I was not considered like a normal human being [...] I lived with the masters for twenty years, and it was not until three years after I left them that I was able to feel happy.⁶⁶

Slave descendants are expected to continue serving the descendants of former masters. Only some entrepreneurial individuals are able to break free from the endless cycle of skewed reciprocal prestations that supports these hierarchies. Not all slave descendants choose to sever the ties that link them to their “inherited masters,” accounting for the widespread opinion that if slavery continues in Niger today it is because of the slaves' choice: “today only slaves who want to remain enslaved are still slaves;”⁶⁷ and “slavery is still practiced in Niger, and takes the form of a relation between rich and poor: those who have nothing are obliged to work for others just to survive.”⁶⁸ The latter statement was made in connection with the observation that women and children of slave descent were particularly vulnerable because they have more limited opportunities to carry out income generating activities that enable them to meet their subsistence needs independently from the dependence on their former masters. The speaker added that although men of slave descent are more likely to break ties to former masters and find alternative ways to support themselves, the stigma remains: civil servants of slave descent are excluded from positions of responsibility irrespective of their professional skills. They are also discriminated in terms of marriage.⁶⁹ The acting Imam of an important mosque in Tchintabaraden, who self-identifies as a “black Tuareg,” revealed that the parents of his own spouse (a ‘white’ Tuareg) had been opposed to the marriage. A common acquaintance had to intervene in his support. His “blackness” – and its association with slave descent – had proven major obstacles.⁷⁰

Strategies of emancipation are hampered by poverty and the considerable stigma that weights against slave descendants. The descendants of former slave-owners have an interest in keeping them in a subordinate position. They benefit from cheap productive and reproductive labor, and from their monopoly of the means of production and positions of prestige. Slave descendants, poor and stigmatized, may choose to continue serving the masters. But their conditions of choice are hardly free. Some slave descendants obtained positions of authority by acting loyally toward the descendants of former masters. Their elite patrons facilitated their access to the position of “chief of nomad group” or – in sedentary zones – “canton chief,” or less importantly “chief of nomad tribe” or – in sedentary zones – “village chief.” Ilguilas Weila, one of the main anti-slavery activists in Niger, observed that in the Department of Tahoua the elites of the 2nd nomadic group of Abalak occupy traditional chiefly positions. They sometimes facilitate access to an administrative function to one of their former dependents who became wealthy, and therefore a useful ally. In his analysis Weila characterizes this strategy as similar to the colonial principle of

⁶⁶ AG (woman), interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Abalak, 15 January 2019.

⁶⁷ AL (man), interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Abalak, 27 February 2019. The speaker is a black Tuareg belonging to a group that is not considered as of slave descent, but faces discrimination on racial and status grounds.

⁶⁸ YW (man), interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Tchintabaraden, 17 January 2019. The speaker is an elite intellectual and retired public servant.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ AT (man), interviewed by Ilguilas Weila for the LESLAN research project, Tchintabaraden, 16 January 2019.

divide and rule: the trick consists in placing in a leadership position one of their black subjects [...] and give him the role to collect taxes from his tribe, fooling him into believing that he is the chief of the tribe. The poor fellow, delighted, will start persecuting his own relatives to collect tributes in which he is not even given his rightful share.⁷¹

Eventually, the “client chief” realizes that the required administrative formalities have not been completed and that the national regulations that govern the allocation of chiefly positions have not been observed in his case, explains Weila. His nomination has not been endorsed by the Ministry of the Interior, as required, and other formalities that would regularize his position *vis-a-vis* the state have been ignored. When he becomes aware of his circumstances the same elites who had supported him withdraw their support and allure one of his brothers into replacing him with the same strategies, causing family feuds among former dependents. I described similar dynamics for an area further south in the Region of Tahoua, where the descendant of a former Tuareg elite lineage had entrusted the role of village chief to one of his former dependents. I interviewed the two together, at the request of the elite man. The elderly ex-slave had acquired a position of administrative authority thanks to the patronage of a descendant of his former masters, to whom he consequently owed loyalty. But he had also started to question the hierarchies he belonged to.⁷²

These dynamics are changing as a consequence of legal abolition and the increasing questioning of logics that legitimize slavery by the part of a growing number of individuals and groups, mainly antislavery NGOs, with the support of the state. Concurrently, practices of discrimination and exclusion become progressively racialized. Slave descendants are increasingly marginalized on racial grounds irrespective of the traceability of actual genealogical links to an enslaved ancestor. This shift makes discrimination easier and polarizes political allegiances on the basis of racial criteria, pitching partisans of white supremacy against black resistance fighters in the same African societies.

Conclusion

In Tahoua slavery was legal until the end of the nineteenth century, legitimized by religious and political ideologies based on local interpretations of Islamic and customary norms. It was abolished under the French colonial regime, which however allowed old ideas and practices to continue unless French reputation risked exposure in the international arena. Colonial and local discourses of slavery had distinct genealogies: the former had taken shape in the grand saga of global capitalism and imperialism, where slavery had metamorphosed from engine of capitalist production to pretext for colonial occupation. In Tahoua, slavery’s genealogy was rooted in the history of Islam’s sub-Saharan expansion and local logics of inter-ethnic hierarchy.

France’s hesitant and self-serving abolitionism did not win the hearts and minds of the majority of Ader’s population. Post-independence governments silenced the problem in order to avoid interior turmoil and external interference. Un-discussed and un-problematized, slavery continued to exist. In recent decades NGOs with an

⁷¹ Ilguilas Weila, Rapport de mission de recherche pour LESLAN, Département d’Abalak, Région de Tahoua, Février 2019: analyse.

⁷² Benedetta Rossi, “Without History? Interrogating ‘Slave’ Memories in Ader (Niger),” in Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene, and Martin Klein, eds., *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 536-554, here 545-547.

emancipatory agenda received growing political support.⁷³ Since the 1990s anti-slavery NGOs, primarily Timidria, qualify the circumstances of those who in colonial times would have been called “voluntary servants” as “passive slaves,” or people held in “passive slavery.”⁷⁴ This designation implies that slave descendants who have not ransomed themselves continue being perceived and treated as “slaves” almost by default, as the normal state of affairs. Those still disposed to view slavery as legitimate can appeal to a master’s patronage or a slave’s subservience, as the case may be.

Periodizations and analyses of slavery and abolitionism in this region must go beyond the tendency to apply rationales derived from Atlantic history and historiography indiscriminately. Critical distance from the Atlantic model allows us to consider *what happened* when local concepts and institutions became intertwined with discourses that had been forged in the Atlantic system. What happened, and is still happening, is that local pro-slavery ideologies came under intense and intensifying scrutiny. When local actors chose to make theirs some of global anti-slavery’s ideas and strategies, the rise of Sahelian abolitionism became also, but not only, the most recent turn in the global abolitionist revolution. Going back to the outrage of Souleymane Naroua at the beginning of the article, we now understand how the international and Nigerien activists and lawyers blamed by Souleymane came to support Hadijatou, and how Hadijatou won a milestone trial that undermined not only the credibility of her opponents, but also slavery’s legitimacy in the Nigerien Sahel.

⁷³ Lotte Pelckmans and Christine Hardung, “La question de l’esclavage en Afrique: Politisation et mobilisations,” *Politique africaine* 4, no. 140 (2015): 5-22; Eric Hahonou, “Past and Present African Citizenships of Slave Descent: Lessons from Benin,” *Citizenship Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 75-92.

⁷⁴ Galy Kadir Abdelkader, *Slavery in Niger: historical, legal and contemporary perspectives* (London and Niamey: Anti-Slavery International and Association Timidria, 2004) 9-10.

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