

CHANGING NORMS OF ENSLAVEMENT IN THE WESTERN SOUDAN 1890-1910

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The nineteenth century western Soudan was a plethora of states, alliances, trading networks, ethnicities and religious attachments that affected the way in which individuals self-identified and were identified by others. This was combined with social stratification and differences within groups of individual status. While the political and social map of the region is complicated, in terms of rules of enslavement, the use of David Eltis' concept of insider/outsider status simplifies the situation. In the context of the Atlantic slave trade, he argues that the reason why Europeans did not enslave fellow Europeans to work in plantations in the Americas, indeed at the same time as Europeans were buying black African slave labour, they were buying the freedom of white European slaves in North Africa, is because people do not enslave individuals that belong to their group, that are 'insiders'. At the time of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the European definition of an 'insider' included the whole sub-continent whereas the African conception of an 'insider' was much narrower.¹ Further, while again, he is interested in the European willingness to use African slaves in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade era while unwilling to enslave other Europeans, Eltis poses an appealing question. He states that the truly interesting question is not why slavery existed but rather which groups were eligible for enslavement and how this changed over time.² This question can be equally applied to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century western Soudan. While in times of crisis such as drought, rules governing enslavement and the selling and buying of slaves, were often broken to help ensure the survival of the extended family, I argue here, that prior to the arrival of the

¹ David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 57-84.

² Eltis, 58.

French, that there were rules of enslavement based on conceptions of insider/outsider, but with the beginnings of French interference in enslavement and the slave trade, that these established rules of enslavement shifted in order to take advantage of a new situation and the norms of who was unenslavable narrowed. Further the French presence introduced a new power dynamic that alter the manner in which the slave trade was conducted and how slaves attempted to ameliorate their situation.

In Slavery and Social Death, Orlando Patterson has identified eight main global means of enslavement – capture in warfare, kidnapping, tribute and tax payment, debt, punishment for crimes, abandonment and sale of children, self-enslavement, and birth.³ For the nineteenth century western Sudan the most common means of enslavement of free persons was capture through warfare and through kidnapping. For most of the nineteenth century, the enslavement and selling of enslaved individuals were governed by some general rules which while occasionally broken, were considered the normal course of behaviour, such as not selling family members, not enslaving ‘insiders’ unless they were convicted of a crime, for Muslims, not enslaving people recognised as fellow Muslims, and except in extenuating circumstances, not selling slaves that grew up in the community. In The Anthropology of Slavery, Claude Meillassoux argues that in the Sahelo-Sudanese regions of West Africa, in the pre-colonial period, an individual could expect that he would not be enslaved by his kin, his affines or his allies and that if captured, an individual could reasonably expect that wherever possible, his kin, affines, and allies would make every possible attempt to ransom him back.⁴ These general guidelines of protecting ‘insiders’ fell apart with the French presence in the Western Sudan.

³ Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982 p. 105-147

⁴ Claude Meillassoux, The Anthropology of Slavery, trans Alide Dasnois, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991, p. 105-106.

In the nineteenth century, a series of jihads across West Africa upset the old political order and established new states. While there is debate on the relevant importance of religion, ethnicity and class in individual jihads, there is no question that these movements caused a period of warfare and human insecurity and changed the political and social dynamic of the region. The movements of most concern here, in a discussion of the late nineteenth century Western Soudan, are those of Umar Tal, Samori, and Tyebe Traore. All three of these leaders, and their successors, were concerned with maintaining control of their conquered territory, people and armies and increasing their jurisdictions. All three movements thereby, became more dependent on enslavement and the trade of slaves for such things as horses, weaponry and food, that razzias and wars for the sole purpose of gathering slaves, increased towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, while these states were increasingly dependent on slaves as booty payment to soldiers, for a fresh supply of soldiers, for labour, and for trade, there were norms of enslavement. Those individuals who were deemed 'insiders', individuals or groups that voluntarily joined the movements when they were first forming or who willingly submitted to the jurisdiction of the state instead of being conquered, were mostly safe from enslavement while people who fought against, or who resisted the power of these states, were, whether they were pagan or Muslim, deemed 'outsiders' and hence enslavable.⁵

In the establishment of their control and in the early years of colonial rule, the French half-hearted attempts to interdict slavery, and more specifically the slave trade, was not enough to stop the enslavement of free individuals and the profit to be made from selling formerly free

⁵ For a discussion of Umar Tal and the Tokolor Empire see David Robinson, The Holy War of Umar Tal, Oxford: 1985 for a discussion of Tyebe Traore and Sikasso see Chantal Rondeau, La Société Senufo du Sud Mali (1870-1950) de la tradition à la dépendance, unpublished thèse du 3cycle, Université de Paris-VII, for a discussion of Samori see Yves Person, Samori: une révolution dyula, IFAN: Dakar, 1968, for a general discussion of the nineteenth century jihads see Murray Last, "Reform in West Africa: the jihad movements of the 19th Century" in History of West Africa ed JFA Ajayi and Michael Crowder vol 2 London: 1971. and J Trimingham, A History of Islam in West Africa, Oxford: 1962.

individuals, but was enough to change the norms of enslavement. As a cercle commander in Sokolo observed in 1895 and a cercle commander in Siguiiri noted in his 1896 report, there were not enough patrols at the time to find slave caravans and that traders were bypassing French posts and using alternate travel routes.⁶ French policy and actions were tugged in two different directions. In one direction, there were the priorities of the metropole, of French officials and politicians in Paris, who were to some extent, justifying the take-over of African territory as a means to end slavery and the slave trade. Pulling in the other direction were on-the-spot officials in West Africa, who needed the cooperation of local elites, local slave-owning, slave-trading elites, in order to govern and expand French influence.⁷ While there had been many orders and decrees against the slave trade, it was not until William Ponty became Governor of Haut-Senegal-Niger in 1904 that there was a serious attempt from higher officials to have them enforced. While careful not to threaten the institution of slavery itself, Ponty attempted to first starve the slave trade by ordering commandants to stop slave caravans, put slaves into liberty villages and punish slave traders, and second, to deny recognition of a difference between slave and free status by ending the practice of having different tax rolls for free and enslaved. According to Martin Klein, Ponty's strategy was to deal with slavery by denying it recognition thereby allowing the regime to keep its hands clean while undercutting the institution of slavery which could not continue to exist in the long-run without the power of the state. Klein argues, that with Ponty, "non-recognition became the major theme of French policy towards slavery".⁸

In the first few years of the twentieth century, the French crackdown on slave caravans increased the risk of slave trading. In his research, Klein noticed a decline in the size of slave

⁶ ANM 1E 156 Sokolo le 10 mars 1895 and ANM 1E156 Region Sud Siguiiri le 26 decembre 1896.

⁷ See C.M Andrew and A.S Kanya-Forstner, "Centre and Periphery in the Making of the Second French Colonial Empire, 1815-1914" *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, XVI, 3 (1988)

⁸ Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 126-127.

caravans in the early 1900's. He states that while in 1902 in Sokolo, slave caravans with 39 and 70 slaves were being stopped; these were much smaller than the caravans of 400 – 500 that Samori sent to Banamba. While Klein views the smaller sized caravans as an indication that many traders were shifting their type of business⁹, an alternate and complementary explanation, is that traders were reacting to the decline of state sanction of their trade and the increased risk of their trade and were therefore utilising less visible means of moving slaves than the highly visible slave caravans of the past. As a military commander in Saraféré noted in a March 1902 report, that while the number of slave caravans had decreased, there had been an increase in the number of merchants coming from the south with a retinue of several men, women and children, who were leaving the area several months later either alone or with a reduced number of travelling companions.¹⁰ In the French colonial judicial correspondence of the first decade of the twentieth century there were numerous discussions of the movement of small groups of slaves that came to the attention of colonial officials by accident or because of disagreements between business partners. There is the example of the trader from Bafoulabé who went east to exchange merchandise for slaves and who only came to the attention of colonial officials in early 1902 because of a fall-out between him and his business partner.¹¹ Similarly there is a 1901 example of a Kayes trader who went to Sikasso to purchase six slaves. Again this case only came to the attention of colonial officials because the trader and his partner disagreed on how to split the profits.¹² Except for the fact that there were business disagreements that drew the attention of colonial officials, it is doubtful that the manner in which these traders conducted business was

⁹ Klein, p. 128.

¹⁰ Archives Nationales du Senegal 2G 2/8.

¹¹ Archives Nationales du Mali 2M-3 Bafoulabé le 15 juillet 1902

¹² ANM 2M16 Kayes, le 31 octobre 1901

out of the ordinary for the time. The traders travelled to other cities in order to purchase a small, less detectable, number of slaves to bring back to their home territories to sell for a profit. This change in the manner in which the slave trade was conducted was a direct reaction to the presence of the French.

In the first few years of the 20th century, with the presence of the French, it also appears that like its mirror in the transaction of transferring a slave, buying, the selling of new captives and of slaves took place in small numbers and in private sales. While there were cases of slave sellers selling slaves on ‘the market’, this appears to be a rarer occurrence in this time period due to its visibility.¹³ Sale of slaves appeared to have taken place either between individuals or through a middleman. For example, in 1904, and mostly likely earlier, in the village of Sa in Bandiagara Cercle, the local ‘logueur de caravanes’ was the local arranger of slave sales. Further, in Sa, while these slave sales were conducted discreetly, the village chief was fully aware of their existence.¹⁴ More common though for this time period is to find examples of private arrangements to sell slaves by either selling individual slaves to a fellow local or selling the slave to a passing trader. Very common, is the 1903 example of a chief of the Dagasi in Lobi Cercle who had bought a woman for 100 francs and sold her to a passing jula trader for 230 francs who brought her to Diébougou.¹⁵ In this case the chief had gotten the slave from a local and then resold her to a non-local.

Without internal wars, enslavement became much more opportunistic and broke more-often the taboo of non-enslavement of insiders. The French colonial judicial correspondence records provide numerous examples of incidents of free individuals being enslaved and sold by

¹³ ANM 2M-4

¹⁴ ANM 2M-5 Cercle de Bandiagara, Residence de Saraféré, le 4 octobre 1904

¹⁵ ANM 2M-21 Gaoua le 25 novembre 1903

people they should have been able to trust. In the early 1900's, there are incidents of vulnerable family members being enslaved and sold by more secure family members and of individuals selling free individuals of their own village. For example, in August 1900, in Satadougou, there is an incident of a man selling his own legitimate free wife, with whom he had several children, to a man living in the village of Bérola for six cows.¹⁶ In San in February 1905, it came to the attention of the Cercle Commander that a 10-year-old boy who had been sent by his father to be looked after by his uncles in Solofosso, was, instead of being cared for by his uncles, sold by them.¹⁷ Another manner in which the taboo of enslaving 'insiders' was broken was the enslaving and selling of free people known to the enslaver. For example there is an incident from May 1906 of a man from a village near Bamako who enslaved and sold a free woman of his own village.¹⁸ Similarly, a few years earlier in 1901, there is a case from the Cercle of Goumbou, where a man from the village of Djilla took the opportunity to enslave and sell the free wife of another Djilla man when the wife was in the Cercle of Bamako and hence more vulnerable.¹⁹

While enslavement through kidnapping and pillaging existed before the coming of the French, in the precolonial period it was overshadowed by enslavement through warfare. However, with the French enforced peace, kidnapping and low-grade pillaging became an important source of new slaves in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Whereas, reprisal pillaging of free people, slaves, and goods and the pillaging of the strong against the weak seemed to be common in the early 1890's, kidnapping of

¹⁶ ANM 2M 32 Satadougou, le 25 Septembre 1901

¹⁷ ANM 2M-37 Tombouctou, le 14 fevrier 1905

¹⁸ ANM 2M-4 Bamako le 2 mai 1906

¹⁹ ANM 2M-13 Goumbou le 29 avril 1907

a smaller number of individuals seemed to become more frequent as the French asserted their authority.²⁰

Kidnappers seemed to have preferred to prey on those the most vulnerable – women and children. While there had always been a regional preference for female slaves, the preying on the more vulnerable, which happened to be mostly women and children in the early years of colonialism, speaks to opportunity as well as to gender preference. This preying on the more vulnerable made sense for many reasons. First women and children were easier to capture and to maintain control of. Second, there was a larger market for them and they were easier to disguise from colonial eyes. Grown men were difficult to control and, due to their physical size and skills, had a greater potential to either escape or to cause trouble and therefore they were not wanted, especially, by kidnappers who were trying not to draw attention to themselves. For example, in the village of Ouagari in the Cercle of Lobi in the middle of 1904, a jula was murdered while his wife and two children were enslaved and sold. According to the judicial correspondence, the murder and kidnapping were premeditated and that the individual who physically committed the murder got the wife to sell while his two accomplices took the two children.²¹ In another case of kidnapping from June 1904 in Bandiagara, three men attacked another jula travelling with his wife and child. They dragged the man into the brush, beat him to death and enslaved and sold his wife and child.²² These cases illustrate not only the picking of vulnerable targets, travellers in small groups, but also the undesirability of holding a man. The julas, being male, were a greater physical threat than women and children. Further, being julas, they most likely had a wide social network and there was the potential that they could be recognised and given aid as their kidnappers tried to move them in order to sell them, while their

²⁰ ANM 2M-32, ANM 2M-16, ANM 2M-21.

²¹ ANM 2M 21 Cercle de Lobi (Gaoua) le 18 juillet 1904

²² ANM 2M-5 Cercle de Bandiagara le 19 juin 1904

wives and children were less likely to be recognised. Therefore the men were killed while the women and children were enslaved.

Another example of murder in order to enslave someone more vulnerable comes from the canton of Séladougou in the Cercle of Djenne from the middle of 1900. There, a man murdered a woman from outside the cercle to whom he had extended hospitality in order to enslave her son.²³ Enslaving those to whom one had purportedly extended hospitality or protection does not seem to be unusual in this time period. While trickery had been used in the past to enslave individuals, it was incredibly minor when compared to the number of captives taken through warfare.²⁴ In the early twentieth century, however, with warfare cut-off as a major source of new slaves, trickery gained in importance as a means of enslavement. In a 1902 case from the Cercle of Segou, a man tricked two women into accompanying him from the village of Bodié and then sold them. He told the first that he knew how to get back to her home village (it appears that she was a freed slave) and he hired the second woman as a porter.²⁵ These last two cases illustrate norms in flux. Obviously the female traveller and her young son would not have accepted hospitality from someone she did not think that she could trust, nor would the two women have accompanied the man if they thought that he would enslave them. While the judicial correspondence does not give any indication, there must have been something about these men that led the women to trust them. Perhaps they were of the same ethnicity, or the same village, or knew some of the same people – something that marked them as being ‘insiders’ and therefore trustworthy. However, it appears that while the women were operating with a system of norms that led them to trust the men that murdered one in order to enslave a child, and the other who

²³ ANM 2M-8 Djenne le 28 septembre 1900

²⁴ For a discussion see Humphrey J Fisher, Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa, New York: 2001, p. 57.

²⁵ ANM 2M-34 Segou, le 8 avril 1902

enslaved and sold the other two women, that these men were no longer operating within those norms.

The manner in which slaves attempted to ameliorate their living conditions and to achieve freedom also demonstrates norms in transition. Slaves used the French to achieve their personal aims within the value system under which they were individually operating. Some were satisfied with their status but did not want to be sold and used the French presence to stop potential sales. For example, in late 1902 a woman from San travelled to Koutiala to appeal to the French to stop her owner from selling her.²⁶ Before the French presence, the only legitimate means of attaining freedom was for a slave to be redeemed either through self-purchase or through ransoming by a third party. Since the state enforced the rights of slave-owners, running away was not a viable option since even if a slave escaped a particular owner, it was very likely that he or she would be re-enslaved by someone else.

The consensus of the 1894 and 1904 cercle reports on slavery in the French Soudan from Muslim cercles agree that the only legitimate avenues to freedom for non-concubines were if a master pronounced his slave free, or if the slave bought his or her freedom with permission of his or her owner. This was certainly the means of manumission that French officials encouraged. According to the 1904 Report on Slavery, in that year, in Segou, a slave had to pay his master 200 francs, the average price of a slave, to buy his freedom whereas in Say, French officials believed that a man had to pay between 100 and 200 francs, a young woman between 200 and 500 francs, and an older woman 50 to 100 francs in self-ransom.²⁷ However, under the system of self-purchase, a former slave was a manumitted slave and not an enfranchised slave. According to Meillassoux an enfranchised slave gains all of the prerogatives, and honours of the freeborn

²⁶ ANM 2M-31 Koutiala le 20 octobre 1902

²⁷ ANS K19, Cercle de Segou, Rapport sur la captivite, 1904, ANS K22 Cercle de Say, Rapport sur captivite 1904

whereas the manumitted slave was viewed as a junior member of his former master's family and was beholden to that family.²⁸ It is therefore not surprising that while some slaves were still operating under the pre-existing norms of attaining freedom, that with the arrival of the French other slaves, the majority, were looking to take advantage of the new power in the region and were exploring other options and means to escape from under the yolk of their masters. Again, this is a demonstration of norms and practices in transition. In the first few years of the twentieth century slaves were simultaneously using the old strategy of self-purchase, plus the more recently available strategies of appealing to French officials, and starting in 1905 with the Banamba exodus, leaving en masse with the intent of returning to villages of origin.²⁹

In conclusion, while the focus of the early colonial period historiography has been on the end of slavery, it is important to recognise that enslavement of free individuals continued. The continual study of this phenomenon alongside the numerically superior phenomenon of the enslaved gaining their freedom will give a more complete picture of societal changes occurring in this turbulent period. The years immediately following the French conquest of the Western Soudan was a period of transition and of changing norms in terms of enslavement, buying and selling of slaves, and of slave reaction to their enslavement. While some individuals continued to operate under a pre-conquest set of norms in terms of whom they could trust as 'insiders' and how to react to certain situations, others rapidly adapted to the new situation and power dynamic, changing their definition of an 'insider' and adapting new ways to take advantage of new circumstances. This was true for both free and unfree individuals.

²⁸ Meillassoux, p. 19

²⁹ For an in-depth discussion of liberty villages, slave exoduses and the end of slavery in the Western Soudan see Martin Klein, Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa Cambridge, 1998.