



As a visiting Heinz Heinen Fellow at the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, I proposed to work with the discursive displacements of the language of slavery in both colonial and contemporary West African settings. To that end, I investigated the use of slavery-related vocabularies in court cases. In this piece, I explain and discuss how it is possible that more than a century after the formal abolition of slavery by French colonial officers, court cases related to so-called “descent-based slavery” are to be found in 2020, with a special focus on Mali.

## BREAKING THE SILENCE? THE ONGOING LEGACIES OF INTERNAL AFRICAN SLAVERY IN MALI

Lotte Pelckmans

From 2017, social media platforms linked to *Soninke* communities in West Mali all of a sudden abounded with horrible images of people being beaten, mothers and children with bleeding eyes, heads and bellies; old and young people chased from their houses, or locked up for several days naked in their houses; people tied up with ropes and beaten over a stone, the destruction of goods and gardens. The online debates mentioned pro- and anti-slavery groups and accused each other of being part of one or the other. The victims, the large majority of which are illiterate, deposited claims with the police and some cases went to court, thanks to help of anti-slavery activists as well as family and friends in the very large diaspora.

How, after decades of public silence on slavery, can we explain this sudden outbreak of violence directly mentioning “slavery” issues from 2017 to date? Many people believe that this issue should remain hidden

and not be talked about, but others are revolting and calling for change, by trying to lift the silence and the taboos. This generates intense friction and tension, which sometimes results in violence. Our newly funded project on the protracted rural displacements of people with slave descent aims to answer this friction in more depth in the future. I present here three non-exhaustive and rather preliminary explanations:

- ▶ first, the quest for honor and the respecting of silence;
- ▶ second, interregional protests by groups with slave status and
- ▶ third, strong out-migration which affects the economy but not so much the ideas people have about social status which involves several socially acceptable forms of exclusion and inequality.

The common thread that runs through this text is the case of only one among several activists who started breaking the silence. While privileging his story and voice, I am aware of many more people affected by and active in this issue in very different ways.

### HONOR AND RESPECTING ONE'S PLACE

My first explanation for the current frictions is that, while social hierarchies inherited from the internal African slave past continue to be alive in almost every ethnic group in Mali, they are surrounded by silence and strong taboos on problematizing the inequalities and discriminations linked to them. Honorability is strongly related to restraint and avoiding all forms of public display of dissent and emotion.

**“Strong taboos on social change continue to operate in the moral economy of many Soninke communities.”**

Everyone should “*know his/her head*” and respect their place in society. A person is born into a certain social group with rights and obligations and this should not be questioned. Knowing how to keep silent on these issues is part of earning respectability, and compliance with social norms and regulations is highly valued. Denouncing injustices related to one's social status in the social hierarchy is “*like taking down the pants of one's father*”, according to a local saying; it insults the family and its ancestors. Thus

strong taboos on social change continue to operate in the moral economy of many *Soninke* communities, also in the provinces of Diema and Nioro (see map below), where the violence started in 2017.



### WEST AFRICAN ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENTS

My second explanation is linked to regional anti-slavery activism. Nioro and Diema provinces are very close to south-east Mauritania, and historically cross-border interactions are common. On local radio, Malians learn about the successes scored by the *Initiative pour la Resurgence du mouvement Abolitioniste* (Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist movement IRA) Mauritania; an anti-slavery movement headed by a charismatic leader called Biram who denounces the use of religious arguments to discriminate against people with slave status.

Despite his frequent imprisonment, Biram entered national politics as an opposition MP and ran as presidential candidate in 2019. He is popular, mainly among urban young people of slave descent in Mauritania. Ahmet Coulibaly (*infra*) says IRA-Mauritania inspired him to become an anti-slavery activist himself in Mali. Apart from IRA, there are several other anti-slavery movements and organizations in neighboring Senegal, Niger and Mali which have become more visible over the past decades. I have analyzed the emergence of several of these movements in the past.

## SPATIAL VERSUS SOCIAL MOBILITY

Thirdly, Mali's Kayes region, and especially the *Soninke* groups living there, have known a very strong out-migration since the colonial heyday, initially mainly to Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Central Africa; and from the 1970s onwards mostly to France, and more recently also to southern Africa as well as Dubai, China, and other Asian destinations. This out-migration is very marked, and in many villages this means that whole households are entirely made up of women, children and the elderly and depend on remittances sent by men living abroad.

**“ Most freeborn groups in Mali continue to have the monopoly over economic, political and religious resources. However, migration and trade have brought economic gain to other status groups as well, including those of slave descent. ”**

Although these strong diasporic tendencies and pronounced spatial mobilities did not necessarily result in social mobility within traditional hierarchies, it did mean that economic success was no longer the privilege of groups with freeborn status. While most freeborn groups in Mali continue to have the monopoly over economic, political and religious resources, migration and trade have brought economic gain to other status groups as well, including those of slave descent. I met one of them, Ahmet Coulibaly, in December 2018 in exile in the capital city of Bamako. Ahmet has three wives and invested his trading fortunes in a two-story brick house in his home village in the Diema region. Being totally illiterate himself, he wants to translate his economic success into emancipation and better chances for social climbing for his children through schooling. However, due to their slave status, and maybe also due to jealousies about their father's economic success, his children are systematically discriminated against. Bright and successful children of slave descent often face bullying or insults from freeborn children in Mali. They may be ordered to bring water or to give up their chair and sit lowly on the floor – thus being “put in their place”.

## TRANSNATIONAL SPACES OF MORALITY

Spatial movements out of the home communities have thus not necessarily meant that people have changed their ideologies about social order, inequality and hierarchy. Indeed, the moral spaces of the Soninke community have been strongly guarded and were strongly reproduced in the diaspora. Whether living

in Paris or in Mali, and whether first, second or third generation immigrant, (the families of) those who try to cross the invisible lines of the hierarchy (e.g. marrying into the “wrong” status group), are more often than not severely punished through – transnationally imposed – “embargoes”.

Such embargoes are used as an effective means of punishment: the embargoed person or even his family back home, are no longer allowed to access vital elements of the village community: they cannot visit the market, fetch water, pray in the mosque, attend village meetings, and so on. In the long term, this means it is impossible to survive and it has resulted in some people being forced to move out of their communities and settle elsewhere. It is these protracted forms of displacement over the span of more than a century after the official abolition of internal slavery, which our new project will study up close.

## THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Ahmet Coulibaly had spent most of his life outside of Mali trading goods in Asia and the Gulf countries, before he decided to return and settle at home in 2017. He was surprised by how status related inequalities in his community seemed to have become stronger rather than weaker. He witnessed how people of slave descent were not only exploited by local freeborn groups, but relates that they were also the primary victims of raids by cross-border terrorist groups, who are destabilizing large parts of the Sahel.

For the sake of his children's future and inspired by IRA-Mauritania, Ahmet decided to denounce and speak out about the discrimination against his status group: those presumably descended from slaves. In fact, he insists – as many others do – that his parents have never been “enslaved” as such, but rather, that they had been absorbed into the category of people with slave status, because in the past they had migrated from one region to another. In order to get access to marriage and land, they had to accept incorporation through absorption into the group of former slaves of the local Soninke villages they wanted to settle in.

**“ In Mali, the status as newcomers, outsiders or strangers can create an association with those who used to be slaves in the past, and which has now come to define people as part of the “descendants of slaves” of the local community. ”**

So it was their status as newcomers, outsiders or strangers that created their association with those who used to be slaves in the past, and which has now come to define them as part of the "descendants of slaves" of the local community. This means they are also anachronistically called slaves and – depending on their location – are expected to provide virtually unpaid labor on ritual occasions, as well as part of their incomes and/or remittances for the support and benefit of "freeborn" groups. Over time, these injustices have not been addressed and Malian journalist Diallo qualified this silent social conflict as a "ticking time bomb".

### **BREAKING THE SILENCE THROUGH WHATSAPP**

Ahmet, who is relatively rich but fully illiterate, started denouncing the worst forms of exploitation against his group, including the systematic abuse of married women with ascribed slave status, by people considered of "freeborn status", thereby breaking the silence and social taboos surrounding both social (slave) status and sexual interactions. His platform: WhatsApp voice messages and radio. His messages were strongly contested and considered shocking by many, but nevertheless inspired some people with ascribed slave status to address local politicians, asking them to stop worse forms of discrimination, such as calling them by the anachronistic and pejorative word *kome* ("slave" in the *Soninke* language). In some communities this was granted.

However, in several other places, for the so-called "freeborn groups", who have already seen their economic power and privileges dwindling strongly over the past decades, this was one step too many on the road of changing power relations. In some localities (e.g. Kingui) a special unit of youngsters considered of freeborn status was installed to "guard" traditions and put the so-called "terrorist anti-slavery rebels" in their place, even if this meant using violence. And violence there was.

In 2018, the *Rassemblement Malien pour la Fraternité et le Progrès* (RMFP, "Malian Association for Brotherhood and Progress"), an association based in Paris which fights against historical injustices in *Soninke* communities, wrote a memorandum in which at least 26 cases of persecution have been described, documented with videos and photos and reported to the police. Since the police often chose side with the "freeborn" political elites, some of these cases were taken to the local courts thanks to the financial help of family members in the diaspora.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA VERSUS COURT LANGUAGE**

Even though the courts are supposed to be neutral actors, they are in fact not. In a society where social hierarchies are not considered problematic and inequality is part of everyday social organization, judges also operate on the ideology that people of slave status are of lesser value and have lesser rights. On top of that, they can usually not pay (enough). This rigid status structure is so deeply entrenched in the society that even people in high positions who try to denounce such discriminations risk being judged for violating tradition. Slave status has been declared officially inexistent in the region since the abolition of slavery by external colonial forces in 1905, but it has in actual practice been maintained and confirmed in daily interactions. A long history of debates over social status in religious ideologies and Islamic legislative practice has been actively mobilized by different groups to either validate or nuance contemporary inequalities based on social status.

The court cases are now part of the struggle between pro and contra slavery or "historical freeborn" versus "slave" groups. Both groups (those with "freeborn" versus those with "slave" status) have been gathering money among their respective diaspora members in order to bribe the judges and win the court cases. Paris-based informants have told me that even communal village savings, made by all the active male members of the village (both "freeborn" and of "slave" descent), had been confiscated by the "freeborn" to bribe judges to their advantage. No court case so far has been won by those with ascribed slave status.

### **POLARIZATION AND LEXICONS OF SLAVERY**

While on social media the language of slavery is very commonly used, with self-declared pro- and anti-slavery groups, in Malian courts use of the vocabulary of slavery/servility is prohibited by law. Following the abolition of both the slave trade and the internal African slave trade in French colonies in 1905, slavery was supposed to be over and therefore mentioning the social status of a person (slave/master) has become officially impossible with time. This means that the social issues of stigma, legacies and discrimination based on the slave past are not only difficult, but officially illegal. Nevertheless, in some of the 2018 court documents, the word "*maîtres*" (masters) is openly used, while for the group of people with slave status, the description "*plaintiffs who [...] are restrained by circumstances of their attaining a lower social status*" is used.

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Secondly, people who are illiterate are usually not the principal actors in court: they need mediators, and these mediators choose sides and have their own interests. The moral taboo on discussing the legacies of slavery is a societal one, which is translated into an institutional silence of the courts. As a result, there is a “glass ceiling” of access for the victims. As long as there is no national law in the penal code legally criminalizing the ongoing discrimination based on internal legacies of slavery (such laws have been adopted in neighboring Niger and Mauritania), judging the worst excesses of asymmetrical dependencies will remain very difficult.

As long as such legal protections are not in place, Ahmet and some of his family members are in exile and dare not to put one foot outside of the compound hosting them in the capital city of Bamako, for fear of being recognized by a *Soninke* person. They can only envisage a return to their home village, where much of their possessions have been destroyed, if legal reform can back up their return from exile.



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Based at the Centre for Advanced Migration Studies at Copenhagen University (DK), she is currently associate professor and working on two research projects, one focusing on court cases, literatures and narratives of contemporary slavery in Ghana (, the other one dealing with the long history of protracted (invisible) displacements related to (legacies of) descent-based slavery in Mali ([slaveryforcedmigration.org](http://slaveryforcedmigration.org)).

**Links**

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