



Shadows of slavery

Refractions of the past, challenges of the present

Bellagamba
Gardini
Menin (eds)

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Shadows of slavery: refractions of the past, challenges of the present

Alice Bellagamba, Marco Gardini, Laura Menin

Interest for slavery, the slave trade, and abolition has grown steadily since the 1990s, when UNESCO launched the Slave Routes Project in order to turn this past of violence and suffering into a path to inter-cultural dialogue and collaboration. Historians, literary critics, feminist thinkers, political philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists have all deepened our understanding of the key role slavery played in different periods of human history, and in the making of Western modernity. Public awareness has broadened through museum exhibitions and commemorative initiatives, as well as through a rising concern for forms of human bondage and exploitation that continue to thrive today.

Emotionally and politically charged, the issue of ‘modern slavery’ has, over the past three decades, prompted a discussion on the present importance of past slave systems and the slave trade, and the historical roots of contemporary world inequalities. Everybody agrees on the need to explore these interconnections, but how to do it is a different issue entirely.

Activists, governments, and international organisations engaged in the struggle against ‘human trafficking’ and ‘modern slavery’ have their own style. To rally political and popular support, they draw heavily on the iconography of the Atlantic slave trade. They celebrate the abolitionist traditions of the North Atlantic, and downplay the deep involvement of countries such as the United Kingdom into the global history of the slave trade. Moved by powerful motivations (to end slavery, to rescue humanity, and to protect the vulnerable victims), their approach echoes a benevolent paternalism that risks, paradoxically, perpetuating oppositional representations of the ‘civilised’ West and



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the ‘savage’ Rest, while “tacitly minimizing, or otherwise legitimating, the much larger excesses of global capitalism”.

The conversations on slavery in the Global North and Global South are very different. While the Global North tends to emphasise its leading role in the nineteenth and twentieth century struggles against slavery, the regions of the Global South that experienced plantation slavery or served as slave-reservoirs for other areas of the world prefer to discuss reparation. This is a topic that always gets conveniently pushed into the corners of international politics as the world leaps from one crisis to another. Even the expression ‘modern’ slavery, which the UK Modern slavery Act sanctioned in 2015, is historically ambiguous. North Atlantic slavery is ‘modern’ compared to that of Antiquity and the Mediterranean world; and the ‘modern’ slaveries of today are new in relation to the slave systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that abolition wiped out.

Establishing long term continuities in today's reductive anti-slavery rhetoric displaces the causes of contemporary dehumanisation and exploitation into a remote and stereotyped past. At the same time, claiming discontinuity between the historical and the contemporary obscures the morphing of historical slavery into other types of unfreedoms, such as nineteenth century apprentice and indenture contracts in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean, or twentieth century social stigma, racial discrimination, and political marginality attached to slave ancestry.

Interrogating the present in light of the past

This collection is an outcome of five years of collective research and discussion aimed at bringing the legacies of nineteenth century enslavement together with examples of contemporary bondage and exploitation that may or may not fall under the rubric of 'modern slavery'. It demonstrates one way of creating a contextually balanced understanding of how the past and present connect with each other, and do not. It interrogates, in the first place, which past matters in specific situations: is it the centuries-long past of the Atlantic slave trade, or the nineteenth century histories of regional and interregional enslavement?

Between 2014 and 2018, under the auspices of the ERC grant 'Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond (SWAB): a Historical Anthropology' (Grant Agreement: 313737), a group of anthropologists directed by Alice Bellagamba investigated the shadows of slavery, and their specific ethnographic manifestations, in Africa and beyond. In particular, Marta Scaglioni, Valerio Colosio, Marco Gardini, Alessandra Brivio, Laura Menin, Antonio De Lauri, and Gloria Carlini carried out fieldwork in Southern Senegal, Tunisia, Chad, Madagascar, Ghana, Morocco, Pakistan, and Southern Italy. Other researchers have joined this conversation on the shadows of slavery with fresh case-studies from Mauritania (Ann McDougal, Giuseppe Maimone), Tanzania (Joanny Bélair), Santo-Domingo (Raul Zecca Castel), Italy (Irene Peano), Costa Rica (Layla Zaglul), Yemen (Luca Nevola), and the Emirates (Anonymous). Moreover, the contributions of Michael Dottridge,

James Esson, Nicola Phillips, Benjamin Selwyn, Susan Ferguson and David McNally have provided a conceptual frame to deconstruct the common wisdom of capitalist development as gateway to freedom.

Together, these contributions 'descend' into the everyday worlds of people who live the consequences of historical slave systems or who happen to find themselves 'trapped' in novel forms of socio-political inequality, racism, labour exploitation and sexual and moral violence. We seek to interrogate their stories in ways respectful of histories and contexts. Often, discussions on the continuities/discontinuities between 'old' and 'modern' slavery end up being constrained by terminological disputes, as if terminological clarification may clear consciences of the disquieting similarities (and differences) between yesterday's slave systems and today's examples of dehumanisation, indignity and exploitation.

We engage with lexicons of slavery to disclose the shifting meanings and practices hidden behind contemporary usages of indigenous terms that, back in the nineteenth century, identified the slave in contexts such as Southern Senegal, Mauritania and Madagascar. We consider critically the notion of 'modern' slavery, and posit the relation between past and present as an ethnographic and theoretical question. For sure, the present appropriates the past if not for declared political agendas, at least to make sense of on-going processes. But the past weighs on the present of individuals and creates collectives by shaping habits, thoughts, and life paths. With this collection, we begin to develop a comparative reflection on the multiple challenges the past of slavery and the slave trade poses to our understanding of present situations of discrimination, exploitation and unfreedom.

Lessons from the field

Our experience of interrogating the shadows of slavery in a variety of regions inside and outside Africa has taught us three lessons. The first is the importance of listening to what the people who live the consequences of past slave systems or experience conditions close to 'mod-

ern' slavery have to say about their lives and trajectories. In the last decade, African slavery studies have taken great care in uncovering the perspective of the enslaved and their descendants, and have discussed at length the potential and limits of this approach.

We have joined this effort by meeting people of alleged slave ancestry in Southern Senegal, Tunisia, Chad, Madagascar and Mauritania. It is alleged slave ancestry because, in the words of Benedetta Rossi, there is often not direct evidence that these people hail from enslaved ancestors though they endure the consequences of being grouped among the slave descendants in societies in which these origins are liability.

The past of slavery has its many presents, and the present of exploitation its many pasts.

Which historical reading do they provide of their predicament? How has their understanding of slavery and freedom changed over time? Once we start approaching the past and the present of slavery 'from below' – from the perspectives of the people directly involved in these dynamics – we quickly found that focusing on evolving ideas of, and aspirations toward, freedom might be much more theoretically inspiring than academic discussions over whether or not this or that experience fits within the boundaries of 'modern' slavery.

The second lesson is that the study of the past is illuminating only if we accept that its teachings are varied and disturbing. It does not provide clear-cut and definitive answers, but instead opens up further

questions. There is not, in other words, one reassuring answer to the key question of the legacies of centuries-old histories of slavery and the slave trade in the contemporary world, but many different answers depending on the place and the history. This is perhaps because contingent and contextual dynamics of slavery and emancipation have left a highly diversified legacy, or legacies, that articulate at different levels. One single past of slavery can be at the source of multiple and diverging presents, as much as one present of exploitation can result from multiple past processes.

The third and most important lesson is that we cannot fully understand the present manifestations of socioeconomic inequality, political marginalisation, and individual or group-based exploitation in contexts marked by past histories of slavery without historicising the ways a slave-dealing and slave-holding past refracts in post-slavery contexts. These refractions can be the result of explicit political efforts, and even misleading in terms of historical accuracy.

Furthermore, we cannot fully understand the extent to which slavery continues to cast a shadow over the present if we lose sight of the global dynamics of poverty, of how entire regions have been re-structured to suit global economies, and of how certain modes of production require very specific ideas of the human being in order to function. Living in the shadows of slavery and the slave trade also means experiencing the lived effects of broader socio-political historical and contemporary dynamics – from the processes of colonisation and nation-state building to the impact of structural adjustment plans imposed by the World Bank and the subsequent neoliberal restructuring of economies and class structures worldwide.

Themes and contexts

Four major streams of discussion have attracted our attention for their potential in problematising the past and the present of slavery.

The first, **lives and experiences (part 1)**, looks at the current predicament of people of slave ancestry and of people who dwell in, or hail from, regions that served as slave reservoirs for the African internal slave trade of the nineteenth century. Thanks to scholarly efforts, and the contribution of West African organisations such as the **Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste** in Mauritania, **Timidria** in Niger, and **Temedt** in Mali, the struggles of people of slave ancestry for social and political recognition have gained visibility over the last two decades. Other aspects, however, deserves attention. These include the effects of rural poverty on both slave and master descendants, the depreciative stereotypes attached to migrants hailing from former slave reservoirs, and the ways freedom is conceived of by people of alleged slave ancestry. Often, their emancipation has paved the way to other kinds of dependencies, which reframe freedom in terms of relatedness rather than individual autonomy.

Our second stream, **race, colour and origins in North Africa and the Middle East (part 2)**, touches on the sensitive issue of the racial legacies of slavery in North Africa and the Middle East. This specific geographical focus enables us to grasp the multifaceted ways in which descent-based and racial discrimination have developed out of the ashes of historical slavery and the slave trade to involve also the people originally from areas of sub-Saharan Africa that served as historical slave reservoirs for North Africa. The crucial point is how these legacies combine with current political and social developments to create specific racial prejudice and racisms, as well as forms of activism and political awareness.

The third stream, **labour exploitation in global agriculture (part 3)**, focuses on the working conditions and the dynamics of exploitation in the globalised agricultural sectors of Tanzania, the Dominican Republic, Italy, Costa Rica, Chad, and Madagascar. It brings together contributions that explore past and present causes of the everyday abuses experienced by migrants, women, small farmers, and sharecroppers who

find themselves trapped on the wrong side of local and global agricultural labour chains. From the impact of current large scale agricultural investments to the long legacy of plantation systems that associated slavery with agriculture, from the gendered nature of labour exploitation to the forms of social and economic subordination experienced by slave descendants, migrants, and small farmers, the cases presented here illustrate how the shadows of slavery interlace with processes of capital accumulation to create a history of never-ending sufferance and misery. At the same time, these cases offer fresh ethnographic insights into the different, often hidden tactics that people activate in order to reinforce their rights or simply to survive.

Last but not least, our fourth stream, **global capitalism and modern slavery (part 4)**, focuses on the relationships between global capitalism and labour exploitation. It does this by exposing the limits of the category of ‘modern slavery’ in understanding the extent to which contemporary examples of unfreedom and labour exploitation are the result of a global system of production and capital accumulation. The common agenda of all our contributors is to show how the past of slavery has its many presents, and the present of exploitation its many pasts. It is precisely to the complex, and often unexpected, interweaving of historical and contemporary dynamics that this collection is dedicated.

Section one

Lives and memories

Lives and memories

This first section explores the continuing power of the past in shaping the everyday lives of 'slave descendants'.

Alice Bellagamba

“I do not know the day, and I do not know the time. I only know it will end one day!” said Mohammadou, while we were talking about the legacies of slavery in one of the rural communities of the Upper Gambia in 2008. After decades of travel and work out of The Gambia, Mohammadou was ageing at home. His comment referred to the marginalities associated with his slave ancestry and to the rather conservative attitude of his community in this respect.

His father settled in the village during the early part of the twentieth century, when the British colonial administrations had already declared the end of slavery and of the slave trade. He married a freed slave woman, who continued to serve the family of the former masters throughout her life. “Slavery is in the womb”, goes a local proverb. Mohammadou and his siblings inherited their mother’s status, while her labour obligations died with her.

Being ‘slaves’ meant, for them, acknowledging and valorising her suffering and sacrifice. Socially, they remained on the corners of village leadership, because they knew that the offspring of the former masters would hardly accept to follow people that hailed from a once subordinate social stratum. Out of the village, slave ancestry was irrelevant, but within its boundaries, it shaped marriage alliances and political and religious careers as much as networks of solidarity and collaboration. For however much they disliked it, Mohammadou and his siblings accepted their legacy as a matter of respect towards their mother and because it was the very reason of their belonging to the community.

The present power of the past

In many parts of the African continent, the histories of late nineteenth century internal enslavement and the slave trade matter today. Putting an end to both, and freeing Africans from the grip of slavers and tyrants, was part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rhetoric of the 'civilising mission', which legitimised the European conquest of Africa.

The ground realities of colonialism were different however. The freedom that 'freed' slaves, achieved thanks to the colonisers, was always a colonial freedom; framed by the restrictions and abuses that affected the lives of all natives. Besides, colonial administrations supported the interests of former slave owners against those of freed slaves whenever it served political and social stability. Emancipation was real but slow, and interlaced with a variety of unfreedoms. Forced labour, for example, was considered by colonial administrations as perfectly legitimate. Today, it is classified together with 'modern' slavery.

The agency of the slaves, rather than external intervention, was key to their liberation. They entered the ranks of the low skilled colonial labour force. They migrated where nobody cared about their social origins. Those who stayed close to their former masters strove to achieve honour and recognition according not to abstract notions of freedom but in the concrete terms set up by the historical trajectories of their communities.

Reading the traces of late nineteenth and twentieth century processes of slave emancipation, and linking them to contemporary marginalities, is a difficult but important task. The first part of *Shadows of Slavery* reaches the conclusion that the legacies of slavery inform and structure current forms of social, political, and economic marginalisation and of racial discrimination in many post abolition contexts. There is no simple determinism however. Rather, these legacies intermingle with changing labour regimes and new historical opportunities of social and political emancipation to produce a variety of different outcomes.

The most difficult part is to trace the present of individuals, groups, and regions that in the past experienced enslavement, and to understand the past trajectories of those who today are locally classified as 'slave descendants'. There is evidence in the colonial archives but also silences. In addition to success stories of upward social mobility, oral history and ethnography disclose individual and collective trajectories fraught with stumbles, dead ends, and steps back into spirals of limited resources, debt, and proletarianisation.

On lives and memories

In some cases, a present of social exclusion and economic vulnerability grafts directly onto histories of late nineteenth century capture and purchase. The regions of southern Senegal studied by Alice Bellagamba are precisely this type of context: families of 'slave descendants' have kindled memories of how their ancestors turned into slaves, either by capture or purchase. But in many other cases, connections with enslavement are indirect. Mohammadou and his brothers did not know how their mother achieved that status in the first place. Was she born from slave parents? Was she an orphan from another ethnic group? She was classified as a slave, and through marriage their father entered into the same social stratum as a result of the post-abolition strategies put in place by former masters to retain their political, social and economic supremacy. The category of 'slave descendant', Alice Bellagamba concludes in her contribution, "tends to simplify and group together multiple, and often divergent, individual trajectories and histories".

The same happens in relation to vernacular terms that indicate the once freeborn section of the population. What freedom is, exactly, and how this much cherished notion changes according to historical periods and to the positionality of individuals and community deserves more attention.

The case of Mauritania is emblematic of the resistance of former masters to accept the end of the control exerted over their slaves. Ann

McDougall focuses on the individuals of slave ancestry who leave the rural areas to carve out a living niche in the interstices of the capital city of Nouakchott. Their multiple experiences show a variety of ideas of liberty at work. The crucial point, she suggests, is to understand from people themselves how the legacies of slavery can become a resource to address poverty and reduce vulnerability. Which meaning do they give to that past in their individual and communal lives?

Marta Scaglioni's contribution on Tunisia points to another important element: relations with a real or alleged slave past evolve across generations. While elderly black Tunisians have turned the association between slave ancestry and music into an economic resource for social emancipation, the youths aspire for more. They are not looking for socio-economic niches that allow them to thrive, but for the empowerment of their rights as Black Tunisians.

Valerio Colosio looks at Chadian local politics to uncover the contemporary reformulation of the Guera region's relationships with the slave trade. Was the Guera a slave reservoir? Historical evidence to support this interpretation is not enough, but local people think of their past in this terms and act consequentially in the political arena. The label '*yalnas*', which in Chadian Arabic mean 'the sons of the people', refers to this past in an ambiguous way. The term describes the slaves whom the French resettled in the region after the conquest as well as slave raiders.

For her part, the case of northern Ghanaian girls moving south in search of work offers Alessandra Brivio the chance to show how 'free' choice often exists against the backdrop of broader structural constraints. Indeed, the girls she meets in Accra's markets face biases that stem from a long history of slavery and exploitation. These biases, in turn, legitimise their further exploitation.

Marco Gardini, by contrast, uses life histories to explore what happens when the present of bondage and the past of slavery collide in the bi-

ography of two particular individuals. Fanja and Mirana both endured severe restrictions on their personal freedom while working as domestic workers abroad in order to support the emancipation struggles of their families at home. Their bondage today was a pathway to their freedom from yesterday. Marco, the external observer, agreed with Fanja and Mirana, the insiders, that the continuity between the past enslavement of their ancestors and their own present bondage was striking.

The last contribution paves the way to the exploration of the racial legacies of slavery. Laura Menin focuses on the sub-Saharan, low skilled labour force in Morocco. Originally on their way to Europe, these migrants were stopped in Morocco by European Union border policies. They integrated onto the margins of Morocco urban economies, and once there ideas of slavery became instrumental to denounce the harshness of their condition, and the brutalities they experienced in Morocco.

These individuals may be personally associated with old histories of enslavement, as they hail from countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and Nigeria where the legacies of slavery are significant. That is not the point, however. Here, slavery becomes a metaphorical condition to rally again the injustices of present times. Two things emerge very clearly from each of these pieces. First, in addition to the legacies of slavery in the North Atlantic, it is time to push the study of the afterlives of slavery to other regions of the world. Second, these afterlives of slavery are many, and they are varied.

The legacies of slavery in southern Senegal

The history of slavery and the slave trade shape contemporary patterns of vulnerability and exclusion in Southern Senegal, but continuity between past and present is not a straightforward process.

Alice Bellagamba

Anti-slavery activists should consider visiting the Upper Casamance region of southern Senegal. There they will find significant concentrations of people who identify as slave descendants, and even some elderly people who recollect the enslavement of their ancestors in the late 1800s.

This not-so-distant history looms large in the imagination of the inhabitants of Upper Casamance, as it was during this period that slave raiders on horses ravaged their villages and seized women and children. These raiders incorporated captives into their communities or sold them into slave trading routes linking the Upper Casamance to contemporary Mauritania, Mali, the Gambia, Guinea Conakry and Guinea Bissau. Those who survived these raids looked for new localities where their families and herds could prosper in peace, and sought the protection of powerful military leaders. They also tried to increase the size of their communities by acquiring slaves themselves and welcoming new settlers.

As men and women born in the first decades of the twentieth century explain, the age of subjection did not end with the arrival of French colonisers. Under French rule, forced labour, taxation and military conscription replaced slavery and the slave trade. Rural people lived trapped between French colonial authority and the despotism of its local representatives, the '*chefs de canton*'. It was only in the 1950s that things really began to change, thanks to the activism of young Senegalese politicians that followed Léopold Sédar Senghor.



*Sare Dembayel, upper Casamance region, southern Senegal in 2014.
Photo by author. All rights reserved.*

No longer slaves, but still vulnerable

Numerous villages in Upper Casamance are today populated only by slave descendants. Many of these communities suffer from a lack of health and education facilities, potable water, sanitation, transport and agricultural tools. If anti-slavery activists were to visit these villages, they would also find practices such as early marriage of girls and the inheritance of widows, and listen to people that speak proudly of *their brothers and sisters that have reached southern Italy by facing the hazards of the Mediterranean Sea*. The fact that these migrants have no future in Europe, or that they may end up as harshly exploited labourers is not a concern: a migrant detention camp is a luxurious facility in the eyes of a southern Senegalese peasant. Whatever happens to migrants is preferable to the daily challenges of the average farmer: the risks of droughts, the exorbitant cost of agricultural tools, fertilisers and seeds, illnesses and debts.

Should the history and legacies of slavery in southern Senegal be invoked in an effort to secure support from anti-slavery activists and do-

nors? Having carried out research in this part of Africa for more than twenty years, I am tempted to endorse any form of new support—even the barest humanitarian assistance—if it will help the local population. Why not appeal to the current enthusiasm for anti-slavery projects, if the spin-off can be some additional human, social and economic development? As an historian and social scientist, however, I have to raise a few questions.

Complex relationships

There is no doubt that there are continuities between past and present that mean that slavery remains a foundational issue in shaping patterns of vulnerability and exclusion in southern Senegal. Irregular migration networks heading to Europe cross today the same regions that in the late 19th century fed the traffic in slaves. The descendants of people who were highly marginal and vulnerable in the late nineteenth century remain marginal today, although some factors have changed over time. That being said, linking past and present is far from a straightforward process.

In order to make sense of the issues involved here, we need to look more closely at what goes into the category of 'slave descendant'. In theory, those classified as slave descendants are the great granddaughters or great grandsons of individuals enslaved in the warring days of the nineteenth century. The reality is more complex, however, since people sometimes voluntarily entered into relationships of dependence that ultimately placed them amongst the population of slave descendants.

The Upper Casamance is a Fulfulde-speaking region. The local term that roughly translates into the concept of 'slave descendant' is *jiyaado* (plur. *jiyaabe*), while *dimó* (plur. *rimbe*) identifies a person with a noble ancestry. People describe the traditional relationship between these two social categories in terms of subordination, patronage and even friendship. In exchange for manual labour and social devotion, the *rimbe* supported the *jiyaabe* economically, socially and morally.

Whereas a noble man could marry a woman of humble origins, the contrary was unthinkable. *Jiyaabe* and *rimbe* either cohabited in the same community or settled in separate villages linked by ties of mutuality and collaboration. “He did everything for me” is the kind of expression some of the elderly *jiyaabe* I met used to describe the person under whose ‘shadow’ they spent their lives.

Other interesting hints come from popular etymologies. One version states that *jiyaado* means ‘my property’. This interpretation casts light on the old days in which *rimbe* pastoralists bought slaves in exchange for cattle to increase the size of their entourages, and to acquire agricultural and domestic work force. A second telling suggests “the *jiyaado* is somebody who was seen”. Here, the picture gets complicated, as historical evidence support two different readings of this sentence. The first is that the category of *jiyaado* served to integrate a lonely person, a stranger that wished to build a new life but lacked resources, or even a runaway slave. This kind of person joined a community of *jiyaabe*—always ready to increase their ranks—or sought the protection of a socially and economically powerful *dimo*. We have many examples of *jiyaado-dimo* relationships along these lines in the twentieth century.

The second reading of the sentence refers instead to *rimbe* mobility. Coudora is a big *jiyaabe* community near the border with Guinea Bissau. Last January, while explaining to me their relationships with the *rimbe*, the elders of the village remarked, “we had not a *dimo* in this area for a long time”. *Rimbe* families arrived with their cattle at the time of Guinea Bissau liberation war in the mid-1960s. The *jiyaabe* helped the *rimbe* to settle, and some of the *jiyaabe* and the *rimbe* established relations of collaboration: the *jiyaabe* offered labour, especially at the time of ceremonies, while the *rimbe* repaid with heads of cattle or milk. This raises a question often overlooked by anti-slavery activists: is it so true that the *rimbe*, or nobility, are always in a dominant position?

Reductive labels, diverse histories

Social categories like those of 'slave descendant' tend to simplify and group together multiple, and often divergent, individual trajectories and histories. Much the same can be said in relation to the category of 'nobility'. In southern Senegal, the last battle that produced captives took place in 1901. In 1905, the French colonial administration banned the slave trade throughout French West Africa, prompting other forms of social stratification to emerge.

Some *rimbe* families found ways to collaborate with the colonisers as *chefs de canton*. Together, they put in place an exploitative system in which forced labour met both their labour needs as well as those of the colonial state. They also sought to control the few available opportunities of economic and social emancipation: access to credit for commercial agriculture and education. Not all the *rimbe*, however, committed themselves to colonial chieftaincy. Those who did not suffered the extortions of the *chefs de canton* as much as the *jiyaabe*. Like the *jiyaabe*, they accessed education only in recent times. Their contemporary relations with the Senegalese government, NGOs and activists are now much the same as the *jiyaabe*: they too are now subordinate peasants.

This is the last and most important lesson from history. The end of an old type of domination—in this case chattel-style slavery—has ultimately paved the way to a new one. The educated *rimbe* and *jiyaabe*, who live in the urban areas and work in administration, business and politics, look at their rural fellowmen as victims of a closed, out-dated and stubborn mentality. Unknowingly, they reproduce the same contempt typical of the *rimbe* of the past, when they looked down upon the economic, social and moral dependency of the *jiyaabe*. They forget that for the rural *rimbe* and *jiyaabe*, the collaboration that stems from hierarchical complementarity has offered comfort in the age of the slaver, of the colonist, of the government official, of the development expert, and today of the activist and the neo-liberal consultant. Is it advisable to throw it away?

‘Life in Nouakchott is not true liberty, not at all’: living the legacies of slavery in Nouakchott, Mauritania

In Nouakchott, former slaves live invisible lives in ‘niche settlements’ between the villas of the rich and powerful. Their continued intimacy with their former masters makes their experiences of ‘freedom’ unique.

E. Ann McDougall

Some years ago, the mayor of Tevragh Zeina (TZ), the largest and most prosperous neighborhood in Mauritania’s capital city [Nouakchott](#), proudly announced that “only rich people live here”. Visitors are likely to have the same first impression, given the prominence of foreign embassies, international hotels and luxury villas. Yet there is an underside to its beauty and wealth. Nched into vacant lots and partially-constructed houses are tiny settlements of wooden shacks and *hangars* – cement-based ‘tent equivalents’ with wooden frames and cloth roofs. Alongside supermarkets, upscale-restaurants and imported car dealers you see ‘hole-in-the-wall’ boutiques selling car parts, clothes, tea and anything else you might need. Often partially hidden in the back by a threadbare curtain are mattresses, cooking utensils and a spare *boubou* (man’s robe) or two.

Who actually lives here, hidden in plain sight? Most are *haratine* – [freed slaves and their descendants](#). French colonialism repeatedly and ineffectually made slavery illegal. The newly independent Islamic Republic of Mauritania signed the UN Declaration of Human Rights decrying slavery in 1961. But it was only in 1980-81 that the nation officially abolished the institution.

The struggle continues to remove its ‘vestiges’ (the government’s term). Yet *haratine* are by definition exactly that: their identity is tied by tradition to their former masters (*bidan* – literally ‘whites’ in Arabic, the



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upper-class nobility). The rhetoric of current politics [notwithstanding](#), they live in the uncomfortable ambivalence of slavery's legacy.

What does that mean for those who live the legacies of Mauritanian slavery in its capital city? While Nouakchott is a creation of independent Mauritania, various forms of interdependency between masters and slaves (or 'clients') have long and deep historical foundations in the region. Below, we meet five real people (with 'unreal' names), their families and neighbours. Each story is different, but they collectively show us how and why coming to grips with 'slavery's vestiges' is not a simple task.

Haratine histories

At TZ's central intersection and main gas station, Fatma and her daughters sell couscous every day. She is from [Brackna Region](#), where her family herded animals in the dry season and harvested grain in the wet season. She moved to Nouakchott in the 1970s to work as a domestic servant. She left her first job after three months of not being

paid. She was treated better in her second job, and in her third she had a room she shared with her new husband. Fatma was living in TZ, ‘the best neighbourhood’ for opportunities, and her children (who had been in the village) came to live with her. Then her husband died.

She moved into a ‘niche-settlement’ of the kind described above. A fellow *hartaniyya* (sing. female; *hratani* sing. male) apprenticed her in preparing couscous; she eventually set up her own business. Her memory of Mauritania’s first *coup d’état* of 1978 is framed in terms of her daily couscous routine and being stopped by soldiers. But the next day, everything was ‘normal’: “the road was open and I went to the market. I bought flour and finished preparing [couscous] at around 2 pm. Then I left to sell [it]”. Today the only difference is that her daughters do the work.

Elsewhere in TZ, Ahmed washes cars outside a medium-sized business building. He also makes tea and ‘fetches’ for its occupants: he is a *planton*. He is 29, the son of a truck driver from the Senegal River delta in [Trarza Region](#). Most people there cultivate, raise livestock and fish, but Ahmed says his father only drove trucks. Ahmed left school when young to apprentice with his father, but never acquired his license. Instead, he became a fisherman in Nouakchott’s port, where he was the only *hratani* among black African [Wolofs](#) (an ethnic group also found in Senegal and Gambia). He went home after three years, then returned to Nouakchott with his whole family, becoming a guardian in a building near his brother. It was then that he became *planton* and car-washer in TZ. The location is “good” and he now supports a wife.

Ahmedou is located on the outskirts of TZ where the rent on his *boutique* is cheap. He left his home in [Gorgol Region](#) to join his uncle, a domestic worker in Nouakchott, at the age of 10. Together, they moved to Mauritania’s second largest city, [Nouadhibou](#), where his uncle dried fish and Ahmadou worked first as a domestic and then as a launderer. He returned home after his father developed a serious illness. When his father later died, Ahmedou decided to go back to Nouakchott to

open a laundry in an ‘out-of-the-way-room’. His brother provided the 10,000UM (about \$32) to buy two tables and an iron. “I started with one, two *boubous* to wash and iron”, he explained, but over time the business grew. By 2006, he was able to rent his present location and employ his brothers. He lives with his wife and children in a curtained-off space in the back of the shop.

Said and Amina, like Ahmadou, come from Gorgol Region. But unlike the launderer, Said worked in the rural sector from 1974 to 2009 – first as a *planton* in a development project, then as ‘mayor’ of a small farming community, and finally as a local butcher. He only came to Nouakchott because Amina was pregnant and wanted to be near her sister. Her brother-in-law is official guardian of an unfinished villa; he supplements his meager wage with construction work. Both couples live in *hangars* they built in the courtyard. During his brother-in-law’s frequent absences, Said is *de facto* guardian. Amina, now mother of a toddler, hand-sews *melhafas* (women’s veils) and sells fresh fish that her husband buys at the port where Ahmadou used to work. They assume one day the villa will be finished and they will have to move. But Amina’s sister is optimistic: “there is always work here. As soon as one house is finished, another begins”.

Life in Nouakchott

Fatma, Ahmed, Ahmadou, Said and Amina: their stories are personal but collectively they are a mosaic of Mauritania’s post-colonial history. Since the disastrous Sahelian [drought](#) of the early 1970s, the southern regions of Trarza, Brackna and Gorgol – where limited cattle herding and grain cultivation is possible – have been subject to recurring food crises. Persistent poverty and hunger are strong motivations for migration. But in what ways has shared *haratine* status shaped their lives differently from others who followed similar migratory paths?

There are a number of possible answers, none definitive. It seems that guardians living in and among TZ’s villas are almost exclusively *hara-*

tine. A number of people, including Amina's sister, informed me that it was because *bidan* proprietors trusted them – a reflection of their traditional close relationships in rural households. *Haratine* predominance in businesses like couscous preparation and laundering similarly derives from a certain intimacy with the *bidan* household wherein traditionally slaves and freed-slaves performed domestic duties like wet-nursing babies, catering to masters' and mistresses' personal needs, and cooking and cleaning. To a large extent, *haratine* living in Nouakchott marks a contemporary, urban reinvention of historic nomadic, rural and village/oasis experiences.

*Being
both hratani and in
the city embodies
contradictions.*

Then there is the question of 'behaviour', interactions reflecting mutually-understood patterns of deference and patronage. Interviews revealed that many *haratine* accepted 'invisibility' in return for contemporary expressions of traditional *bidan noblesse oblige*. Some former masters view assisting their *haratine* neighbours as a religious responsibility.

Haratine who choose to live in niche settlements, in spite of the precariousness that Said and Amina's situation reflects, do so in part because they count on a sense of obligation among TZ's wealthy, from whom they often receive water and access to electricity.

Being both *hratani* and in the city embodies contradictions. Few want to understand their Nouakchott lives as expressions – let alone 'vestiges' – of 'the slave condition'. Fatma's affirmation that "even today, we are always together, *marabouts* (religious *bidan*) and *haratine*", is in this sense unusual. She spoke openly of slaves and masters, yet even she cast memories of that past in the language of equality. She

referred to her family as having “shared” grain they harvested with masters, when in all likelihood they were *obliged* to do so. Accordingly, “Our *marabouts* are generous and so are we...people who are generous with each other have no problems”.

Ahmadou and Said dealt with memory differently. Ahmadou’s clan is Berber, *bidan* but not *marabout*. He avoids speaking of masters and *haratine*, preferring socio-economic terms: “we have no relations with the chiefs and powerful people [of our clan]...we know only the poor”. Said substitutes ethnicity for status. When asked if he had been mayor of an *adabaye* – well-known as *aharatine* cultivating-community usually belonging to *marabouts* – he replied “No. We are Arabs”. His rejection was not to the idea of being *hratani* but to being associated with *marabouts* who had been dominated by Arab warriors in pre-colonial [times](#). It is worth noting that this proclaimed Arab lineage would also distance him from Ahmadou’s traditionally inferior Berber origins. Said’s perception of himself, meanwhile, reveals the significant ways in which being of ‘warrior’ origin cross-cuts – and trumps – the class-based alliance one might expect to emerge among urban *haratine*.

Haratine identity in Nouakchott remains tied to negotiations between gender, class, region and clan. This ongoing struggle is the critical factor in how individuals understand ‘freedom’. Fatma celebrates freedom *through* her *hartaniyya* status. “All of the slaves in our village were given their papers [of manumission]”, she says: “[that is] the true liberty, not like that of Nouakchott, not at all. Not like someone has left their master and disappeared [into the city]. I am speaking of the true freedom”. Another *harataniyya* we spoke with does the same by *rejecting* it: “I am not the *hratani* of anyone, no one owns me, I am free”. Life in Nouakchott is her ‘true freedom’, irrespective of its challenges and defeats.

Emancipation and music: post-slavery among black Tunisians

In the south-eastern Tunisian region of Mednine, music represented a socially marginalised way for post-emancipation blacks to advance. Now younger generations want something different.

Marta Scaglioni

Tunisia's former president, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, fled his country on 14 January 2011 to find shelter in Saudi Arabia, after the [series of uprisings](#) that overthrew his government. [Censorship was relaxed](#) after the change in leadership and debates on previously taboo issues spread in the media and the academy. Racism against black Tunisians was one of them.

Before 2011, Tunisians did not speak about ethnic or religious differences. After the achievement of independence in 1956, Habib Bourguiba's nation-building policy (1957-1987) stressed the belonging of all Tunisians to a common past as well as their religious, ethnic, and political homogeneity. Nonetheless, the painful reality of racism and social segregation continued, and many Tunisians still use the words *wassif* (servant) or *abid* (slave) to refer to blacks.

There are no statistics on the percentage of blacks in Tunisia's population, but black rights associations consider even 15% to be too low. We also lack data on the employment profiles of black Tunisians, but again their advocates say that they are predominantly in the lowest social classes. Intermarriage between black and white Tunisians remains taboo, and even today black people in rural areas refer to their former white masters as 'sidi' and 'lella' (master and mistress). In my analysis, this reflects the past of slavery in the present, and the continued socio-economic disparity between black and white.

The 'end' of slavery in Tunisia

Even though not all black Tunisians are descended from slaves, one cannot understand the history of black Tunisians without understanding slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade. The importing of slaves into what is today Tunisia from Sudan, 'the land of black people', reached its peak during the Ottoman Empire. And slaves were employed widely as servants or farmworkers. These slaves were formally freed in 1846 when, uniquely for the Maghreb and Muslim world, the then ruler, Ahmed Bey (1837-1855), [abolished slavery and the slave trade](#) before being pushed to do so by the colonial West.

Yet the trajectory of slaves in the north south of the country diverged sharply after abolition. In urban Tunis, on the northern coast, many freed slaves ended up in situations of deprivation, impoverishment, vagrancy, prostitution and peddling, since most middle-class families refused to employ them as servants. Emancipation for them was purely juridical, making little difference in socio-economic terms.

By contrast, in the rural south, former slaves often remained in the households of their erstwhile masters as '*ousfane*' – domestic servants. And as a result, slavery in the south slowly morphed into another Islamic institution, *wala*', a patronage relationship in which freed slaves adopt the name of their former masters, often adding '*abid* or *shwuashin* (the more politically correct term use to refer to freed slaves) to distinguish themselves.

The prestige of *tafya*

Despite these differences, a convergence existed for some time between northern and southern post-abolition black trajectories – and that was in their music. Freed slaves from all over the country embarked on careers in music, as music was a profession that remained open to all blacks both because it was widely required at ceremonies and because it was low status in the eyes of whites.



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Black singers and groups would often sing during weddings or pilgrimages to the saints' tombs. In the eastern region of Mednine, for example, the musical accompaniment of *tayfa* was sought out for weddings, funerals and other gatherings, including by white families. *Tayfa* players improvise songs praising the bride and groom and also tell social stories reflecting social or cultural history.

For some, and particularly for older black Tunisians, this musical legacy is a source of great pride. "The south is characterised by special things", said Ali, 80, proudly. "It is characterised by poetry. People here are poets", he continued, "and they sing at marriage ceremonies". In his village of El Gosbah, *tayfa* groups are still going strong despite the fact that the art itself is fading. Fathers pass their skills on to their sons and teach them how to drum, sing, create poetry and improvise.

Tayfa players from older generations still attach a great value and prestige to their singing. "We sometimes sang for president Bourguiba on his birthday in Monastir", recalled Dhaw, now in his 80s. "Songs about how he brought independence to Tunisia, about how hard he

worked and how he was modest and brave”. Singing for the president was regarded as a great privilege, not least because he occupied a respected place in their historical memories. Pride too came from the sense of being entrusted by God with the task of remembering and recounting past events, and for having been able to use *tafya* to provide for one’s family. As one man pointed out, “I managed to send all my six boys to school and to university because of *tafya*”. *Tafya* players earned respect in the black community, and they invested their earnings in social improvement.

Generational differences

But today *Tayfa* is perceived differently by the younger generation. Where once it was a source of pride for post-slavery blacks divided by class and by region but united by low social status, the younger generation now see it as part of the structure that perpetuates inequality and underpins the paternalistic relationship that exists between white and black.

Yassin, for example, is 29, and he refused to become a *tafya* singer even though his father was one. “White people ‘look after’ *tayfa* because they still perceive us as slaves”, he said. “They want to be praised by us...sometimes the songs say ‘look how lucky you are, to marry such a white man’”. And Yassin rejects this subservience, he rejects it as undignified. As one *tayfa* player lamented, “Younger generations just don’t want to sing *tayfa* any longer”.

Once, *tayfa* players and other black musicians created an occupational niche for themselves which was socially inferior but also economically profitable. The economic and social gains they made were reinvested in their families and communities, translating into strategies of emancipation that have empowered today’s younger generations. Yet these generations now reject that strategy. They see the shadows of past slavery in it, and they see these as continuing to disempower and marginalise black Tunisians. Now they want something better.

Memories and legacies of enslavement in Chad

Memories of slavery affect contemporary political life in many Sahelian countries, but how do stigmatised groups use those memories as a tool for integration?

Valerio Colosio

Valerio Colosio is a PhD student researching the aftermaths of slavery in Chad. He works at the University of Sussex, in co tutorship with the Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca. His research focuses on political life in the contemporary Sahel and how legacies of slaveries, as well as decentralisation policies and development interventions, are affecting this region.

Between August 2014 and June 2015 I carried out fieldwork in Guéra, Chad, a mountainous region which lies between the desert of the Sahel and more fertile savannas to the south. I tried to understand the way people handle the memory of the slave raids from the neighbouring Wadai sultanate: an important player in trans-Saharan trade from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. I was particularly interested in learning about how people talk about slave raids and the slave camps where raiders used to assemble their victims for months or years before handing them over to traders. The people of Guéra were not necessarily enslaved, but their history was shaped by the fact that they could have been. The memory of having been potentially enslaved lingers on in contemporary political dynamics. In this piece I am particularly interested in one group of people who are known locally as the descendants of slaves, although they reject this label: the Yalnas.

Who were the Yalnas?

Yalnas have two main characteristics that distinguish them from the Hadjiray, or the ‘people of the mountains’, which is a collective term for the people of Guéra. While the Hadjiray were pagans when the

French colonised Chad, the Yalnas were already Muslim. And instead of speaking the local language at home, they use Chadian Arabic as their mother tongue.

The term Yalnas means ‘the sons of the people’ in Chadian Arabic. This may initially appear to be a neutral expression, but it nonetheless has a negative connotation: they became Yalnas because it was impossible for them to establish any other ancestry or origin. I heard two versions of the story for why this was the case. The first version was offered by non-Yalnas, who reported that their origin can be traced to 1911, when the French defeated the Wadai Sultanate and freed many slaves previously held in camps. Since most slaves were said to have spent significant time in slave camps, they were not able to find their families or communities once they were freed. This made it necessary for them to be described in generic and non-specific terms. One respondent reported that “the Yalnas arrived together with the French. We don’t know very well from where do they come from, but what we know is that they have no unique family”.

The second version of the story, which Yalnas tell about their own origins, also relates to slavery. In this case, however, they self-identify as the descendants of the enslavers rather than the enslaved.

Our grandparents were members of Wadai sultan family ... Then, one day, the French arrived. The grandparents understood that French were strong and would have controlled the whole region, so they decided to negotiate with them. When they were asked who they were and who were all the people in the village, they could not say the truth, as the French were still fighting against Wadai. Hence they just told the French that they were all ‘Yalnas,’ sons of the people.

There are no written sources about pre-colonial Guéra, which can help

support either the first or the second version of the Yalnas' origins. In 1923, when the French organised the administration of the region, the Yalnas were recognised as a distinct local group and awarded two of the Guéra cantons – gaining formal control of the land and their own political representative in the guise of a *chef de canton*.

Slavery, community and political strategy

In countries like Niger, Mauritania, or Sudan, humanitarian organisations have denounced discrimination against people carrying labels that refer to a slave past. The social trajectory of the Yalnas does not neatly fit the patterns that have been documented in these better known cases. This is partly because the Guéra region is nowadays presented by its inhabitants as a former slave-reservoir, inhabited by groups scattered across the mountains to resist Wadai raids. When the French imposed their power and stopped the slave raids, they obliged all Hadjiray to settle in the plains. The colonial government arranged a local administrative system, appointing a local chief for every group based on the language they spoke.

In such a context, there was not a dominant group of former masters able to keep their former slaves under control, but an array of groups who were trying to settle previously uninhabited territory. The label 'Yalnas' emerged in this process, since it brought previously diverse groups of Muslim Arabic speakers under a single authority and into a specific area of land. Despite the negative connotation, the label Yalnas had no practical adverse effects. People who were brought together as Yalnas accepted this designation for at least partly strategic reasons. Their descendants today often report that, "Yalnas was the name of the canton, not of the people".

The attitude towards the alleged slave past of the Yalnas has changed in the last three decades, along with challenges to their status as a Guéra native group. The Hadjiray of pre-colonial Guéra were not Muslim, but used to believe in mountain spirits. Though there has never been

a clear territorial division among the different Hadjiray groups, the legitimate ownership of the land depended on an ancestral belief in mountain spirits. Yalnas are people who lost – or never had – this ancestral link with the mountains. Their rights over land were instead secured thanks to French recognition and intervention.

The land tenure system only became a major issue for the Guéra region in the 1980s, when the fragile ecology and the pressure of a growing population fostered land conflicts. In this context, the origin of Yalnas began to be used as a tool against them. Neighbours to the predominantly Yalnas village of Kuju, for example, did not accept that the local inhabitants had received compensation for the construction of a mobile network antenna. The case went to court. Another Yalnas village was threatened with eviction on the grounds that their settlement there was illegitimate. In addition to these two big cases, tensions over the control of land between the Yalnas and their neighbours have grown. Yalnas have resisted these incursions by pointing to the colonial documents that recognised their rights, with locally educated officials taking the lead in defending the canton at an official level. However, the situation remains quite fluid, with conflicts related to land issues spreading across the whole region.

Moving beyond slavery?

It has become increasingly difficult to use the label ‘Yalnas’ and in general the category of ‘slave descendants’ in Guéra. The majority of Hadjiray still use the word Yalnas to indicate the people of Jujube and Lampo, the main villages of the two cantons recognised as Yalnas. The use of this label is criticised both in Jujube and Lampo as a way to denigrate them.

Such labels are produced via the political competition between different groups in a particular historical moment, and they acquire their meaning in a broader political framework. While groups labelled as slave descendants in other countries have accepted the past of slavery

as key to the recognition of their rights, peasants of the Guéra region seek to move beyond a term that was once politically convenient.

The people of the former Yalnas cantons have recently been able to rename their cantons. In Jujube they adopted the name of the chief family, coming from Wadai, as a new canton name; in Lampo they got the name from an Arabic family with whom they claim a common genealogy. In both cases I have been told that while their groups are comprised of members of a variety of families, having the name of a Muslim aristocrat family – the Wadai ruling family claims direct descent from the founder of the Abbasid dynasty (the second Islamic caliphate, 750-1250 AD), or from an Arabic family whose ancestors come from the Arabian peninsula – seems a better strategy in the contemporary political situation.

They hope these affiliations to powerful Muslim families will help rid them of any possible reference to slavery. The majority of Hadjray is today Muslim. Links to an important Muslim family, whose members used to raid the Guéra in precolonial times, can increase the prestige of the former Yalnas group. In a region like Guéra, described by its inhabitant as a former slave reservoir for the Wadai, the past of slavery is to a large extent inescapable. But the ways people handle it change over time. Extending our focus to the whole Sahel region, we can see how manifolds these strategies are, and how the same kind of policies can lead to opposite political dynamics.

Kayaye girls in Accra and the long legacy of northern Ghanaian slavery

On the marginalisation of street girls in Accra (Ghana), and the continuities between contemporary and historical forms of exploitation and slavery.

Alessandra Brivio

Every day, young girls [generally between 14 and 16 years old](#) migrate from the rural areas of northern Ghana to the urban centres of the south: Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi. There, they work in markets or on the streets as head load carriers (*kayaye*), informal petty traders, domestic assistants to traders, and in other menial jobs. In the best of cases, they become domestic workers.

Their goals are as varied as their jobs. Many see the *kayaye* experience as [an opportunity](#) to acquire the items they need to build up their marriage dowry. Others are escaping forced marriage, while still others wish to buy second-hand clothes and start a small business once back home. Some claim they want to collect money to pay school fees for themselves or their brothers and sisters.

Yet these girls face much of the worst that urban life can offer, with local people using them for their cheap labour while at the same time stigmatising them. I would argue that these contemporary social and labour dynamics are direct legacies of Ghana's colonial and slave pasts. I want to suggest that these girls are so easily exploited in part because former slave-holding regions in the south continue to hold strong biases against the regions from which they used to draw slaves in the north and in part because of slave-legacies that continue in the form of structural inequalities between northern and southern regions.



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Three *kayayes*: Baya, Summaya and Salah

Madam Fishian introduced me to Baya, a *kayaye* whom she had recently hired to mind her shop and run errands, in August 2015. Her story is similar to that of many *kayayes*. Baya had come to Malata from northern Ghana five months previously because she knew she would find other girls there from the north and because her sister, who supported her travel by sending home money, was also there. Prior to being taken on by Madam Fishian, Baya and the other *kayaye* would form small groups, waiting outside the market with their basins for someone who needed their labour. She's now considered one of the lucky ones. She receives four Ghanaian cedis (less than €1) and two meals a day from Madam Fishian, as well as a place for her and her nine-month-old baby to sleep.

Summaya Abukari, a 20-year-old girl with a two-year-old son, and Salah, a newcomer to Malata, also work as *kayayes* around the market. Summaya was a peasant who sold part of her produce at a local market

in order to buy her bus ticket to the city. Like other *kayaye*, she dreams of a better job, maybe in a private house. But such a future is unlikely for her, as mistresses rarely want babies around the house. Together with Salah, she spends her nights close to the market's external walls. And their life on the street means exposure to many risks, including theft, rape, and the involvement in drug and prostitution rackets.

Baya told me that as soon as she had made enough money, she planned to return home. But I knew this wouldn't be easy. The bus that links the northern region to Accra is expensive, around 80 cedis, and the first weeks of Baya's salary were already been gone in repaying her sister. Baya still had to collect enough money for the return ticket and for second hand clothes, which could help her to start a small business in the north. It therefore wouldn't be a surprise to see Baya stay, like so many *kayaye*, for at least one or two years before being able to return home.

Two continuities between past and present?

Kayaye have started to attract the attention of media and human rights activists. But discussions so far haven't addressed the potential continuities between Ghana's slave past and this contemporary form of exploitation. In my view, there are at least two which deserve our attention: the structural dynamics underpinning labour mobility from north to south, and the [social bias](#) against *kayaye* and other northern migrants in the south.

Firstly then, although *kayaye* today 'choose' to migrate south, their 'free choice' must be understood against a backdrop that structurally limits their freedom: generalised poverty, the unequal economic development between the north and the south, and the impact of [structural adjustment programmes](#) (SAP) on the northern region. In the 1980s and 1990s, the conflicts that ravaged the north and the removal of agricultural subsidies prompted a wave of youth migrations to the south. Northern families started to see girls, and especially unmarried girls with small children, as an economic burden, and so

to get rid of them, they allowed or even pushed for their migration towards southern urban centres, recreating patterns of inequality centuries in the making.

Second, and related to these structural economic inequalities, there exist important social and cultural prejudices among southerners with regards to northerners, characterising them as unreliable, criminal, [primitive and ultimately exploitable](#). These biases played a big part in legitimating the south's use of northern slave labour in the Nineteenth Century and they have played a big part in the southern use of northern migrant labour in plantations, mines and public works projects ever since. Still today, I argue, they continue to legitimate the exploitation of *kayaye* girls.

Stereotypes and their afterlives

In the 1920s, colonial officer [John de Graft Johnson](#) spoke with contempt about emancipated slave women who lack all 'respectability'. Their 'licentiousness', he said, was manifest in the fact that they "preferred to follow soldiers or policemen or some other aliens at large instead of living with their masters". The same discourses are overheard with regards to *kayaye*. The gender and sexual dimension is also crucial in the understanding of marginality. In the past, women's respectability depended on a full marriage arranged by the woman's parents but slaves had no form of family protection and were forced to pass from one man to another. Today, *kayaye* are pushed away from the family, rejected by the father of their children, and suspected of 'going with' men for money. These moral stereotypes reinforce their social and economical marginality and push them to accept extreme forms of exploitation.

Malagasy domestic workers: from slavery to exploitation and further emancipation?

The life histories of slave descendants in Madagascar help us understand how legacies of slavery contribute to contemporary patterns of exploitation. They illuminate ongoing and everyday struggles against socio-economic subordination.

Marco Gardini

The social and political stigmas associated with slavery did not end with legal abolition. In the highlands of Madagascar, as in many other places, the history of slavery continues to cast a long shadow, with the legacies of historical slave systems creating a fertile environment for contemporary forms of labour exploitation and continuing discrimination.

While the legal abolition of slavery in Madagascar in 1896 opened up important opportunities for some former slaves, the burdens of enslavement have often proved hard to escape. In many regions of the island, statutory distinctions [divide the population](#) into nobles, common people, and slave descendants. Marriage between people belonging to different statutory groups [is forbidden](#), and slave descendants are considered inferior and have [had difficulties being recognised as landowners](#). In some cases, they work as sharecroppers for former masters and their economic conditions are more fragile than those of high rank lineages. The local word for 'slave' (*andevo*) [is considered an insult](#), and it is still used in private conversations by people of free origin to refer to slave descendants, who in turn often try to hide their servile origin.

This does not mean, however, that we should presume that there is a seamless and unbroken continuity between past and present. Some slave descendants have enriched themselves thanks to political and economic opportunities in both the colonial and post colonial peri-

ods. Some families of noble origin now struggle to make ends meet. However, when we look at broader social patterns we find that there are large numbers of slave descendants who fill the ranks of labourers ready to accept, at home and abroad, the most degrading and precarious working conditions.

These conditions are sometimes described in terms of ‘modern’ slavery, but this type of language can sometimes end up obscuring more than it reveals. Campaigners who talk about ‘modern’ slavery generally have little time for the history of slavery, so specific connections and vulnerabilities tend to get lost in a political language and cause which seeks to group together many different issues, problems, and practices. In order to better understand the issues involved here, we need to look more closely at specific histories and experiences. To this end, I will tell the life and family histories of two young Malagasy women of slave origin who tried to escape their legacies of slavery through migration for work.

Working as a domestic abroad: a path towards emancipation...?

Domestic work carries with it a high risk of severe exploitation. Since the end of the 1990s, Madagascar has become [a major reserve of young domestic workers](#) for Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Mauritius. Hundreds of young women, normally between 18 and 25 years old and from a number of different backgrounds, have been enrolled by formal and informal recruitment agencies. Once employed, however, some of them have had their passports confiscated, experienced sexual abuse and violence, or been denied free time and confined to the house.

However, the interest of the government and the media in the working conditions of Malagasy women abroad has been regarded by many domestic workers as a mixed blessing. Since it tends to divert attention away from the conditions experienced by young domestics *in* Madagascar, where pay is much lower and the forms of violence and exploitation not so different. Furthermore, many domestics have

been suspicious that the efforts of campaigners to highlight the risks they face serve only to limit their freedom of movement.

Fanja, for example, was a young Malagasy woman from a little village who was recruited by an informal agency in 2010 to work as a domestic in Lebanon for a monthly salary of \$150. She accepted this offer because her family urgently needed money for a court case over the ownership of a piece of land. For several years she stayed in Lebanon with a family that treated her well. “They treated me as their own daughter”, she said. “I was very lucky, considering what I discovered about other Malagasy girls in Lebanon”. Then she came back to Madagascar and left once again for Saudi Arabia, where she found herself in a very different situation: “I was obliged to work every day from 5 a.m. to midnight. The master tried on different occasions to have sex with me and he only stopped when I told his wife. I was paid half of what they promised me at the beginning, was not allowed to go outside the house, and his wife beat me with a cane every time I tried to protest”.

*Campaigners who
talk about ‘modern’
slavery generally
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slavery.*

She left the job after six months. But despite what she experienced in Saudi Arabia, Fanja never used the word ‘slave’ to describe her condition, since she found the term highly stigmatising. On the contrary, she said that the experience had solidified her sense of independence and added that what she suffered was in some ways worth it, since the money she earned allowed her family to win their court case.

I later discovered the symbolic and economic importance of the family land and, consequently, of Fanja's individual efforts. Fanja's great-grandfather was a freed slave who received it from his former master as a form of 'compensation' after the abolition of slavery in 1896. Fanja's family has lived off its yield ever since. In 2007, one of the master's descendants tried to regain possession of Fanja's family land. He claimed that what was transferred was not the full-ownership of the land, but only the right to use it. Thanks to Fanja's money, her family was able to pay a lawyer and gain recognition as the legitimate owners. Fanja's experiences abroad were the consequence of the vulnerability that slave descendants still experience in their everyday lives; they were also a means to consolidate the path of emancipation from slavery that her great-grandfather had opened up more than a century ago.

...or a trap that reproduces exploitation?

The ambiguous links between the past of slavery and the present of labour exploitation are evident in the life history of another young woman of slave origin I met. Mirana, as I shall call her, was born in 1982 and she has helped her mother wash clothes since she was a child. Contrary to Fanja, Mirana's family could not claim any land rights since her grandparents were sharecroppers. Mirana got pregnant at 15, but the father, a young man from a family of noble origin, refused to recognise the child and was forbidden by his family from continuing the relationship. The stigma attached to her slave origin combined with her precarious economic condition to create an insurmountable barrier for her to climb.

Mirana went looking for a job in Madagascar's capital city in 2010. Employment as a domestic promised much better working conditions and pay than she and her mother had received as washerwomen. A recruitment agency soon offered her a job in Mauritius, which she accepted, leaving her son with her mother. Upon arrival, she and a group of other Malagasy girls were brought to work in a hotel, their

passports were confiscated, and they were forced into prostitution by the hotel owner: “The hotel director put our photos on the wall, so that the customers, who were mainly old French men, could choose which girl to spend the night with”. Mirana and the other girls were raped and beaten by the owner, were forbidden to go outside alone, and their first salaries were stolen. When one of the girls tried to escape, she was beaten up and immediately sent back to Madagascar, where she died a month later.

In one way or another, I have always been considered exploitable and inferior by those who gave me money to wash their clothes.

Despite the abuse she faced, Mirana was paid \$150 a month and was able to save up approximately \$2000 in two years. At this point, her ‘contract’ expired and she was obliged to leave Mauritius. Once home, she reported all that had happened to the authorities, but it was too late to find the directors of the ‘recruitment’ agency. When I met her, she had bought a piece of land using the money she made and was working as a petty trader of chickens between the city and the countryside. “I felt like a slave in Mauritius”, she explained.

But this condition, far from being out of step with her life, represented instead a continuation of the exploitation that started before her travel to Mauritius. “This is what can happen if you are a woman from a family without land in Madagascar”, she said. “In one way or another, I have always been considered exploitable and inferior by those who gave me

money to wash their clothes. That is why I don't want to work for someone else anymore. I don't want pity. I want justice. I want respect”.

History casts a long shadow in Madagascar

The life histories of slave descendants in Madagascar are crucial sources for understanding the overlap between contemporary dynamics of exploitation and the legacies of historical slave systems. These histories not only shed light on how the past continues to structure present forms of social and economical marginality. They also demonstrate how people are trying to pursue their own emancipatory projects despite the prejudices and the economic vulnerabilities that they have experienced in their everyday life from birth. Furthermore, they remind us that the fight for economic and political emancipation, social justice, and human dignity is something more than a struggle over definitions of what is (or is not) slavery today.

Fanja and Mirana had no interest in that kind of terminological debate. They were not interested in having an exact definition of their past working conditions. Instead, they wanted a way to free themselves from systems of economic exploitation and social marginalisation, which deprived them and a growing number of others not only of their means of production, but also their labour rights and their dignity. These systems are the result of the painful intermingling of the legacies of slavery, the neoliberal deregulation of labour relations, and the state's inability to protect and advance social justice.

The racialisation of marginality: sub-Saharan migrants stuck in Morocco

The everyday lives of sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco are deeply affected by violent policies of border control. While existing laws create problems, the further burdens of history make things even worse.

Laura Menin

Migration in Morocco has been a topical international issue since an infamous case in 2005, which saw Moroccan police murder sub-Saharan migrants along the fences of Ceuta and Melilla. Here, as in other parts of north Africa, the further securitisation of border control has rendered clandestine crossing to Europe extremely hazardous. Finding it increasingly difficult to head north, migrants trapped in Morocco are facing a toxic combination of state control, media demonisation, and enduring social stigma. While many of the burdens migrants face are common to migrants all over the globe, the Moroccan case is further complicated by ongoing legacies of slavery and racism.

Yet while racism has been recently recognised by some as an issue, the legacies of slavery are rarely public acknowledged. International NGOs, Moroccan human rights organisations and sub-Saharan migrants' associations have come together to [denounce](#) both institutional violence and 'anti-black racism' against migrants. In 2014, in the wake of a dramatic rise in civil violence and widespread anti-black attitudes, the Moroccan king Mohammed VI announced an [exceptional regularisation](#) of undocumented migrants. However, these moves towards social inclusion have been paralleled by the continued abuse of migrants and [forced relocation](#) from Moroccan borders to Rabat and Casablanca, where the presence of sub-Saharan migrants has become increasingly visible and their future prospects even more uncertain.

Life in Limbo

I met a group of young migrants originally from Mali, Mauritania, and Guinea under the disused water tank of Takadoum, one of the most infamous neighbourhoods of Rabat. They all aspired to reach Europe to change their lives, but remained trapped in economic and social marginality. Like many sub-Saharan migrants ‘in transit’ to Europe, they sheltered in the crowded rented rooms of Takadoum’s decaying, three-storey houses. Rather than being ‘in transit’, though, their stay in Morocco was becoming increasingly permanent under the combined effects of restrictive immigration policies and [the violent transnational control](#) of ‘Fortress Europe’.

Worse still, they complained that they were exploited and mistreated because they were ‘black’ and ‘African’. Although Morocco officially defines itself as a ‘colour-blind’ nation, the issue of ‘race’, with its intricate relationship to local ideas of ‘origin’ and ‘colour’, contributes to shaping the ways in which individuals and groups are socially ranked.

Sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco are commonly called *‘azzi*, (‘negro’), and variously termed *‘abd* (literally ‘slave’, but also used to indicate a black person) or *‘hartani* (generally translated as ‘freed blacks’ or ‘free blacks’). Shouted in derisory fashion by children in the street, these terms are rooted in a social imaginary intimately connected with the historical enslavement of black people in Morocco.

The story of Sadibou

One of the youths I met in Takadoum was Sadibou (a pseudonym), aged 22. Originally from Conakry, Guinea, he entered Morocco lawfully to reach Europe. However, he has now been trapped in a country which he described as ‘hell’ for years. Like other migrants, he had lived in the forest surrounding Nador and in other northern cities waiting for the right time to cross into Europe. But he was forcibly relocated to Rabat just a few months before our meeting.

Following him 'home', we walked down narrow lanes and steep steps into the heart of Takadoum. When we reached the bottom of the neighbourhood, close to a landfill, Sadibou entered the front door of a dilapidated house and led me to the apartment he shared with other migrants. It consisted of three poorly furnished rooms and toilet facilities, and the walls were decorated with the scribblings of its previous occupants. Sadibou and two other boys paid 650 dirhams (about €60) per month for a room, a considerable amount of money given the bad condition of the house.

Sadibou told me that the social relationships with Moroccans in Takadoum are strained and violent conflicts often break out. "There is racism", he said. "Moroccans do not want the blacks!" Beyond being insulted and mistreated by the local population, Sadibou explained that blacks were at risk of police raids and deportation, and attacks and violence, resulting in a constant sense of insecurity and fear. "You do not feel safe in this neighbourhood", he said. There are often fights between migrants and Moroccan gangs, but also among the migrant gangs that control the territory.

Like his companions, Sadibou struggled to make ends meet by working on construction sites and doing other underpaid and exhausting jobs available to Morocco's black 'transit' population. Every morning, between 6 and 7 am, migrants gathered in the neighbourhood to be recruited by Moroccan '*patrons*' for jobs that Sadibou defined as "hard work", "dirty work", "slaves' jobs" and "forced labour".

For Sadibou, these terms meant labour that he could not refuse, despite being aware that it was highly exploitative and detrimental to his health. "If you don't accept such jobs, you are forced to go and live in the street, where you are likely to be killed", he explained. "You have no choice. We are here today like slaves in Morocco". In his view, it was precisely in the lack of choice and possibility to do otherwise that his lack of freedom lay.

In Takadoum, Caritas, an international Catholic organisation operating worldwide, supplies basic goods such as food, clothing, and medications. Sadibou appreciated these services and he made use of them himself, but he believed that they are insufficient to solve the problems migrants face. For Sadibou, only having a job, a *decent* job, would provide the means to both emancipate himself from humanitarian aid and to get out of his marginal condition. “We are forced to live on the margins of society”, he said. “If I have to die, I want to die in Europe”.

Racial legacies

Sadibou’s story helps illuminate the overlapping forms of institutional and everyday violence that shape the lives of many sub-Saharan youths in the notorious neighbourhoods of Rabat. On the one hand, as ‘unauthorised’ presences in Morocco, these migrants are subjected to [the constant threat](#) of being arbitrarily arrested, illegitimately beaten, and deported by Moroccan police. On the other hand, poverty, racial discrimination, and the impossibility of finding a decent job produce and reiterate conditions of extreme vulnerability and social marginalisation, pushing these migrants further into the margins of society.

Far from being ‘colour-blind’, these dynamics illustrate the complex ways in which marginality is racialised in Morocco. From an historical standpoint, Sadibou’s story helps us to grasp the complex ways in which past and present intersect to create racial stereotypes and forms of social exclusion. Sub-Saharan migrants are the new ‘Others’ in Morocco, produced at the meeting point of transnational migration policies and local political and media agendas. At the same time, the specific forms of violence, exploitation and social marginalisation that deeply affect Sadibou’s life are imbued with racial constructs that historically accord social inferiority to ‘blackness’ (for a larger picture, see [‘Race, ethnicity and belonging’](#)).

Sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco are consistently ranked at the bottom of society precisely because they inherit the status of social and

moral inferiority historically accorded to black slaves. However, anti-black racial attitudes in Morocco are not simply 'remnants' of the local history of slavery. On the contrary, they are also deeply entangled with current transnational geopolitics that delegate border control to north African states, and with the way in which Morocco positions itself in the international political arena. In other words, contemporary politics creates the context in which the legacies of the past combine with present circumstances to increase the vulnerability and marginality of sub-Saharan migrants like Sadibou.

...

In all my conversations with him, there is one sad and painful thing that I always kept to myself: that in southern Italy, as in the other parts of the Europe that he so hopes to one day see, African migrants working in the agricultural sector are routinely subjected to the abuses and slave-like conditions that he faces in Rabat. Fortress Europe may have been able to keep him out so far, but one thing is certain: if he does make it across the Mediterranean, his racialised marginality will unfortunately come along for the ride.

Section two

Race, colour and origins in North-
West Africa and the Middle East

Race, colour and origins in northwest Africa and the Middle East

This second section explores how race, colour and origins shape social dynamics and political imaginations across northwest Africa and the Middle East.

Laura Menin

Over the past decade, growing public and media attention to the racial and colour-based discrimination faced by black Africans in the Maghreb and in the Middle East – be they sub-Saharan African migrants, slave descendants, black Maghrebians or haratin (a term generally translated as ‘freed blacks’ or ‘free blacks’) – has opened up new spaces to debate the relationship between ‘racism’ and legacies of slavery in the two regions.

Whereas societal debates on slavery and its contemporary legacies are far from new in a context like Mauritania, where former slaves and slave descendants have struggled for decades against enduring slavery and descent-based discrimination, in many other North African and Middle Eastern countries they have emerged only relatively recently or remain unspoken. This is perhaps because, as the Moroccan historian Chouki El Hamel [notes](#), a “culture of silence” has long prevented these countries from engaging with, and discussing overtly, questions of race, slavery, and colour.

Contributors featured in this second section of *Shadows of slavery: refractions of the past, challenges of the present* seek to unpack the questions of race, colour, and origin in different post-slavery contexts in West Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East by interrogating their connections with local histories of slavery and their contemporary legacies. Drawing on fresh case studies from Mauritania, Yemen, Morocco, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Senegal, the con-

tributors reflect on the complex intersections of historical and contemporary dynamics that shape present imaginations of 'blackness', black identities, and belonging. They also look at new forms of racial discrimination and activism based on specific constructions of race. The ambition is to offer a comparative reflection on the multiple ethnographic manifestations, and performative powers, of the racial legacies of slavery in contemporary northwest Africa and the Middle East.

Only a few authors have looked at the racial legacies of slavery in these contexts to date, in contrast to the relatively large amounts of scholarly attention shown to the memory of the transatlantic slave trade and race in the post-slavery Americas. That has thankfully started to change, especially after Bernard Lewis' (1990) Race and Slavery in the Middle East: A historical inquiry opened up new lines of inquiry and research on the topic.

Since then, a growing body of historical works (think Ronald Segal, Bouazza Benachir, Ehud Toledano, John Hunwick, Eve Troutt Powell, Paul Lovejoy, Terence Walz, Kenneth Cuno, Bruce Hall, Chouki El Hamel, Ismael Montana and Behnaz Mirzai) has significantly enriched our knowledge of the history of slavery and race in West Africa and the Mediterranean Muslim world. Along with historians, a number of anthropologists have furthermore explored the shadows of slavery in the lived experiences of slave descendants and haratin, especially in Mauritania and in the Maghreb area.

Alongside growing scholarly attention to questions of race, colour and (post-)slavery, since the early 2000s magazines such as *Jeune Afrique* have published personal testimonies of both Black Maghrebians and sub-Saharan Africans, opening societal discussions on the previously taboo topics of racism and racial discrimination. The questions posed regarding identity and discrimination in these early narratives became more urgent following the protests and revolutions that took place in many North African and Middle Eastern countries in 2011.

In post-revolution Tunisia, for example, we have seen unprecedented forms of black rights activism that question the very idea that black emancipation can exist without a continued struggle against racism. In 2014, in Morocco, the national campaign “My name is not a negro” (*ma smitish ‘azzi*) gave public visibility to the issue of racism in Moroccan society. In March 2016, a network of associations launched the international anti-racist campaign “Neither serfs nor negro: stop that’s enough” (*ni oussif, ni azzi: baraka et yezzi*) in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania. From Mauritania to Yemen, local anti-racist movements and societal debates have enabled novel political practices, languages and subjectivities to emerge.

To what extent, we ask, are current anti-racist movements and debates on race able to capture the complexity and multiplicity of the experience of ‘blackness’? What histories and vocabularies are mobilised to raise public awareness and attain political goals?

The politics of ‘Blackness’ in northwest Africa and the Middle East

Tracing the local meanings of race, with its complex relations to ideas of colour, origin, and descent, some of the pieces in this section discuss the varied ways in which the racial legacies of slavery are evoked and mobilised in the different forms of activism, political subjectivities, and societal debates.

In Mauritania, where slavery was abolished in 1981, the anti-slavery organisation El Hor has denounced the persistence of slavery and its consequences on the lives of the haratin in terms of the socio-political stigmatisation and chromatic demonisation. However, as Giuseppe Maimone shows, with IRA Mauritanie, a local organisation founded by Biram Dah Abeid in 2008, ideas of colour and racial discrimination have started to replace the classic focus on slavery and descent-based forms of discrimination of previous antislavery movements.

Ann McDougall's piece expands this discussion by comparing Dah Abeid's political language and action to the political thought of the Messaoud, the founder of the NGO SOS Esclaves established in 1995. Differently from Dah Abeid, Messaoud does not conceive the historical enslavements of the haratin in Mauritania and their current marginality to mere chromatic opposition between socially 'blacks' and 'whites', as it was in the United States, but rather regards slavery as the key social institution to understand present unequal relations. Central to Maimone's and McDougall's pieces is the idea that the history of slavery plays a critical role in present-day racism and descent-based discrimination, and to the different forms of activism and political vocabularies that struggle to end them.

Colour is a powerful tool for political mobilisation, as Luca Nevola's piece on Yemen shows. There a political discourse based on colour has been mobilised by the akhdam, a dark-skinned marginalised group, to gain a public voice and denounce their socioeconomic and political discrimination. As Nevola argues, in a society in which individuals and groups are ranked according to their genealogical origin, an emphasis on colour entails a crucial shift in the common-sense representations of this group. This is not only because questions of race and colour have long been surrounded by silence. It is also because, despite the presence of longstanding colour prejudices in these regions, local constructions of race conventionally centre on questions of genealogical origin (asl) and social status more than mere skin colour. In this sense, an idea of anti-black racism, or racism based on skin colour, emerges as the product of both recent local developments and global encounters. Crucially, indeed, Nu'man al-Hudheyfi, the political leader of the akhdam, reference prominent figures like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela to give international visibility to their political struggle.

While in Mauritania societal debates and anti-racist activism centre mainly on the situation of the haratin and in Yemen on the situation of the akhdam, in Morocco sub-Saharan African migrants remain the

focus of attention. The growing public attention to violence and discrimination against sub-Saharan Africans has recently opened a debate on the issue of anti-black racism and its connections to the history of slavery. Against the backdrop of these debates, [Laura Menin shows](#) how Senegalese students and young professionals experience, interpret, and reckon with racism in their everyday lives. Their stories suggest that while the legacies of slavery continue to affect local constructions of 'blackness', current racism against black Africans also speaks to contemporary Moroccan dynamics where media stigmatisation, unemployment, widespread poverty and social insecurity work together to nourish social tensions and resentment vis-à-vis the new comers.

In other contexts, colour attribution reveals more about local dynamics of power, status and origin than colour itself. This emerges clearly in [Marta Scaglioni's piece](#) on the meanings and practices associated to 'blackness' among the 'Abid Ghbonton, a community of slave descendants in southern Tunisia. She shows how visions of 'blackness' rooted in the history of slavery in Tunisia re-emerge, in different guises, in her interlocutors' everyday lives and aesthetics. This makes both 'blackness' and colour central concerns, especially for women in relation to marriage, beauty, and social prestige.

Not all countries have, like post-revolution Tunisia, begun to centre questions of race and colour in public debates, however. In other contexts, like the Emirates, these remain taboo topics. Former slaves became Emirati citizens in 1971, several years after abolition in 1963, and since then the process of modern state-building has sought to include them within a single 'Arab' national identity. As a consequence, the roots of many Emiratis in the Indian Ocean and East Africa have become lost. They have not been forgotten however. As an [anonymous contributor demonstrates](#), even though the slave past is officially silenced the daily dynamics of colour, origin, and race expose the limits of Emirati citizenship in absorbing difference.

It is often when marriage is at stake that questions of colour and origin matter, making a slavery past vividly present in people's lives. Alice Bellagamba's contribution focuses precisely on marriage in the Kolda region of Senegal as one important site where the shadows of slavery become palpable. In this context, a marriage between a slave descendant and a person of free or noble ancestry is not only met with social opprobrium on the side of the latter, but also considered unideal by the person 'marrying up'. Even though an increasing number of young people aspire to a marriage based on love rather than on local norms, questions of origin and race continue to have an impact in a context where marriage remains a key factor of social reproduction.

Taken together, the pieces in this section reveal that the processes of abolition and emancipation followed different paths and took place at different times in North Africa and the Middle East, and that the consequences have also varied greatly depending on the context. Yet while not all black-skinned people are descendants of slavery, nor are all slave descendants black, one important legacy that this history has left behind across the board is the close connection between blackness and slavery in the popular imagination. This had led socially 'white' people to position socially 'black' people in lower or subordinate positions.

Perhaps most importantly, what the pieces in this section demonstrate is that there is not one single answer to the question of the (racial) legacies left by centuries of African slavery and the slave trade in these regions, but many different situations that require careful examination and contextualisation. The multiple ways in which ideas of race, colour and origin are embodied, contested, and mobilised by different social actors reveal precisely this irreducible diversity and complexity.

Are Haratines black Moors or just black?

The racialisation of the anti-slavery struggle in Mauritania has created a patchwork of identities and alliances.

Giuseppe Maimone

Fish market in Nouakchott. Evgeni Zotov/flickr. [\(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

In mid-September 2017 a US delegation of anti-slavery activists, including Jonathan Jackson, the son of Reverend Jesse Jackson and the spokesman of the US civil rights organisation Rainbow PUSH Coalition, was denied access to Mauritania. A few months before, the French journalist Tiphaine Gosse and the French human rights lawyer Marie Foray were expelled from the country under the accusation of working with the unauthorised local organisation *Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste en Mauritanie* (IRA Mauritanie).

These events show the extent to which the Mauritanian authorities are sensitive to international inquiry into slavery in the country. The access denied to the human rights activists also reveals the ambiguity marking anti-slavery policies in Mauritania. On the one hand, the question of slavery has been high on the political agenda of various post-colonial governments for the past few decades. A number of laws and measures have been enacted to end slavery, including a law against human trafficking in 2003, a law punishing the practice of slavery in 2007, and a new one in 2015 that further increased penalties for slavers.

On the other hand, the governments have hindered, if not overtly repressed, anti-slavery activists. For example, state repression of the El-Hor movement, which has existed since 1978, reached its peak in 1980 with the prosecution of several El-Hor leaders in the ‘Trial of Rosso’. In the last decade, several Mauritanian abolitionists and HR activists have been imprisoned for their anti-slavery activities. In particular,

IRA Mauritanie, founded in 2008 by Biram Dah Abeid, has become the main target of the repression carried out under the presidency of Abdel Aziz.

Slavery in Mauritania

Mauritania has become sadly popular for the issue of slavery over the past decade. The Walk Free Foundation ranked it the first country for the existence of [modern slavery](#) in the Global Slavery Indices 2013 and 2014. Because of its historical roots, however, slavery in Mauritania differs from what is often meant by ‘modern slavery’ in other contexts. Slavery within West African black communities ended during French colonisation, even if it often transmogrified into relations of dependence and new forms of exploitation like forced labour, taxation and military conscription – as [Alice Bellagamba](#) reported – as well as social stigma.

In contrast, slavery within the Arab-Berber society continued undisturbed in Mauritania during the colonial period and a decree of abolition of slavery came only in 1981, 20 years after Mauritania signed onto the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights condemning slavery in 1961. After abolition, slaves (*‘ābid* in Arabic) were formally freed and became Haratines (*harātīn*, Arabic), a social group of former slaves and their descendants of black origin.

Haratines are sometimes referred to by scholars as ‘black Moors’ to distinguish them from the ‘white Moors’, the Beydanes (*bidan*, Arabic). At first sight, this is just a chromatic division of an apparent organic unity, a superficial re-proposing of a previous distinction between *bidan* (‘whites’) and *sudan* (‘blacks’). In fact *sudan* was the term used to refer to slaves and freed slaves within the Moorish society, thus revealing not only racial but also social connotations. If a slave (*‘abd*, singular of *‘abid*) could be freed to become a *hartani* (singular of *harātīn*), descent-based stigmatisation persisted, preventing him from becoming *bidan*. Crucially, the ‘chromatic demonisation’ of the



A family at the Fisherman's Beach in Nouakchott, Mauritania. Mark Fischer/Flickr Creative Commons 2.0 BY-SA.

Haratines accorded them stigmas and subhuman connotations, as this rhyme goes:

Haratine baratine

Haratines are grandchildren
of devils

Oulad a'm cheyatines

they received the colour
of cockroaches

Jabou lek hal mene le khnaviss

and the smell of goats.

Jabou le khneuz meun le'tariss

La kalou yeu balgou

If hungry, they steal.

La ja'ou yeu sargou

If they eat, they bloat.

Nowadays about 7-10% of Haratines are estimated to be in slavery. A larger number live under different conditions of dependence on their former masters, and they also experience widespread marginalisation. In 2013, 25 Haratine leaders with different political orientations pre-

sented the '[Manifest for political, economic, and social rights of the Haratines](#)', which contains a thorough analysis of the condition of the Haratines in Mauritania and programmatic guidelines of what should be done to reach equality among all citizens. The document describes the Beydanes and Haratines as “two entities more and more distinguished” and claims that Haratines form a “socio-ethnic category”.

It was El-Hor in 1978 that first identified the ‘cultural specificity’ of the Haratines, with their double belonging to both the black-African world of their ancestry and the Arab world in which they grew up. IRA Mauritanie goes a step further in emphasising racial dimension of slavery. For its founder Dah Abeid, the Haratines have their own black identity that distinguishes them from the Arabs: “Black Moors do not exist! There are Haratines and Moors. It is Moors that describe themselves as ‘White Moors’. It is not our problem...”

While Dah Abeid describes blackness as a key component of the Haratine identity, he also argues they form a community that is distinct from ‘black-Mauritians’ (comprised of the groups: Wolof, Soninké, Halpulaar, Bambara). In Dah Abeid’s view, historical reasons for the exploitation of Haratines by Beydanes rest on ethnic elements: the ‘white’ leading class exploits the poorest, which is that of the Haratines. However Haratines, Dah Abeid says, are “black autochthones” (black indigenous) and thus their claims of equality and full citizenship is legitimate. Due to enslavement, they have been forcefully assimilated into the Arab society, thus causing their identity to be “African, Arab, and Berber, forged with pain by oppression”.

According to IRA, after having exploited them as slaves, the Arabs turned their affinities with Haratines against black-Mauritians. This is a key point. Haratines are estimated to be 40-45% of the total population. They tip the balance as the biggest social group in the country, with the rest almost equally composed of Arabs (25-30%) and black-Mauritians (around 30%). Biram Dah Abeid affirmed: “They [Arabs, ed.]

claim the identity of the Haratines without asking to the Haratines. They claim the Haratines to be Arabs to grow in number to the detriment of Blacks, to lower the number of Blacks, to exclude Blacks”.

The ways Dah Abeid associates or distinguishes Haratines from other black-Mauritians, depending on the issue at stake, may convey a sense of ambiguity regarding the alleged ‘blackness’ of both groups. However, Dah Abeid considers Haratines as ‘just black’, “black-African for their origin and *direct* cousins of black-Africans”.

From stigmatisation to activism

IRA Mauritanie converts the stigmatisation of the black origin of Haratines into a keystone of community identification. In the last years, Dah Abeid has strengthened the cooperation with black-Mauritanian organisations, especially by promoting demonstrations that show the common marginalisation and violence suffered by these stigmatised social groups. Most notably, he has organised pilgrimages to the sites where black-Mauritians were massacred during ethnic cleansing in 1990-91.

In so doing, Biram Dah Abeid hopes to spread his popularity and to become the spokesman of all the marginalised Mauritians, who are mostly black. He claims that the fight against slavery is an economic fight, thus the end of slavery implicates the end of the exploitation of all the oppressed Mauritians. This is part of the new strategy carried out by IRA Mauritanie both with the internationalisation of the fight against slavery and the construction of a national network of members and affiliations throughout Mauritania.

With IRA Mauritanie, Dah Abeid has created a deeply politicised organisation. Its novel structure and ideology pieces together experiences and ideologies of previous organisations and renews the fight against slavery. In 2014 Dah Abeid made a first attempt to evaluate his political weight in 2014, when he competed for presidential elections. Although he got only 8.67% of the vote against 81.89% obtained by

Abdel Aziz, Dah Abeid legitimated himself as potential competitor.

Dah Abeid was arrested during a demonstration that same year, only to be released in April 2016 after several international campaigns proved the unprecedented popularity of IRA and its president. One of the most renowned anti-slavery activists worldwide, Dah Abeid has collected several international awards for his non-violent fight against slavery, among them the [UN Human Rights Prize](#) in 2013. This has made of Biram Dah Abeid the '[Mauritanian Mandela](#)' – Nelson Mandela won the same prize 25 years earlier – and the term 'apartheid' has begun to appear in Western media to describe Mauritanian society.

We must be careful though, as the description of a country divided in two racial blocks – one exploiting the other – is a dangerous simplification. First of all, it favours allegations of racism against IRA Mauritanie by its opponents, who accuse Dah Abeid of being divisive and damaging to the unity of the country. As a consequence, this makes IRA Mauritanie unpopular amongst Beydanes with all but a few exceptions.

Moreover, the representation of Mauritanian society as divided in two racial blocks, Arab and black, obscures the process of community building among the Haratines, who would see their ethnic specificity dissolved within an indistinct big black community. Indeed, the racialisation of Haratines as black could be seen as just one of the elements that characterise their identity, a useful tool to highlight their marginalisation and exploitation within Mauritanian society. To make racial legacies the main trait of the Haratine identity could seriously damage the cohesion among the Haratine community that is still in progress.

The politics of slavery, racism and democracy in Mauritania

The history of slavery is central to racism, activism and democracy in Mauritania. Much of what happens next will reflect the decisions of former slaves.

E. Ann McDougall

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania officially abolished slavery in 1980-81. In 2007 the practise was criminalised, and in 2015 actual punishment for enslavement was legislated. While the Mauritanian government continues to speak of ‘vestiges’ of slavery, local anti-slavery activists such as [Boubacar Messaoud](#) and [Biram Dah Abeid](#) continue to insist that slavery remains alive and well. As Messaoud recently observed, why would new legislation against slavery be repeatedly necessary if there was no longer a slavery problem ?

Racism, slavery and political activism

While Messaoud and Abeid share a common cause against slavery, they approach the issues of slavery and race in different ways. Messaoud grew up during the last years of French colonial rule (1940-50s), and much of his adult activism took place in the context of political dictatorship (1984-2005). He founded the NGO *SOS Esclaves* in 1995 in order to agitate for reform and bring international attention to slavery and discrimination against the descendants of slaves (known in Mauritania as [haratine](#)).

Messaoud insists that slavery in Mauritania is not a matter of whites-enslaving-blacks, as it was in the United States; masters are both ethnically black (Fulani, Soninke) and white (*beidan*), ‘white’ being a relative term given generations of miscegenation. Thus he maintains that it is [slavery as a social institution](#) that is the key problem.

Abeid's approach places broader patterns of racism within Mauritanian society at centre stage. Having grown up in the then newly independent nation of Mauritania (1960-70s), he rejects the moderation of Messaoud's generation. While he initially worked with SOS *Esclaves* between 2002 and 2008, he subsequently left to found the *Initiative pour la Résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste* (IRA-Mauritania), a self-declared 'abolitionist' NGO. IRA articulates a racially-based message: "Black Mauritians have either been exploited as slaves or discriminated against—the most dramatic example being the [expulsion](#) of 70-80,000 (mostly Fulani) between 1989 and 1991". According to the IRA, being black should constitute a political identity.

Abeid's [most infamous act to date](#) took place in 2012, when, following Friday prayer, he burned medieval Islamic texts addressing slavery. Given that these texts are foundational to the state, the government declared this to be an 'act of treason'. He was subsequently tried but not convicted. Other acts of defiance have led to further arrests. He [currently languishes in a provincial jail](#) for leading a local protest, well-exiled from the political action in the capital of Nouakchott.

Both Messaoud and Abeid are of slave parentage, making them first-generation *haratine*. Estimates suggest that 40 percent of the population are of this status. Each has a post-secondary education, is an articulate speaker and has an international reputation that defies enduring stereotypes regarding the limited capacities of slaves and their descendants. After all, [Abeid even ran for president in 2014!](#) However, the political fortunes of their cause are tied to the actions and outlooks of the *haratine* more broadly considered.

The *haratine*: slaves and their descendants

Those who have 'succeeded' represent about 20 percent of Mauritania's *haratine*. The other 80 percent constitutes Mauritania's poorest, most exploited citizens. Mostly descendants of former slaves (some claim 'client-ship' ancestry), they have traditionally seen themselves as

extensions of former masters' *beidan* families (*wala* in Islam). Through this affiliation they have assurances of economic security—especially land—and access to political networks. They reciprocate in numerous ways including 'gifts' of agricultural produce and contributions to family festivities. Religious and familial ties are strong in some instances, attenuated in others.

It is this group of slave descendants which is critical to Mauritanian democracy. At the moment it largely continues to identify with the current regime, and its votes frequently go toward candidates identified with the *beidan* culture and power structure. Haratine share their former masters' language, music, poetry and religion, as well as actual family relations through forms of marriage.

While many are attempting to use this support as leverage for their own needs, the practice does simultaneously help maintain the status quo, including *beidan* racism where it exists. However, there are dissenters, looking not for a mediated identity but some form of autonomy. This is already visible among the rural and landless, as well as the urban and jobless. Could a different form of solidarity be emerging around class, even in this post-Marxist age? Or, as Abeid advocates, will 'being black' trump all?

The many faces of the *haratine*

The research I carried out with Mauritanian colleagues between 2008 and 2012 found that *haratine* saw themselves differently depending on their region of origin and their experience with colonialism. The extent to which they wanted to remain members of a particular *beidan* family varied, as did their desire to be associated with a given tribal status (traditionally, 'warrior' or 'cleric'). Many simply wanted to be seen as 'Mauritanian citizens.' The urban-rural divide also emerged as significant. *Haratine* in Nouakchott were more politically aware than those in the countryside; they were also more radical than those in smaller towns and even in the working-class port city, Nouadhibou.

In November/December 2009, we asked people who they voted for in the previous summer's presidential elections. One of the candidates, [Messaud Boulkheir](#), was a well-known *hratani* (sing. of *haratine*) and activist. Among *haratine* who supported him, no one identified with his social status. If they voted for him, it was because he had promised them something they needed—a school, medical clinic, road.

Non-supporters commented that he had 'not bothered' to visit them. These reasons help explain the success of his *beidan*opponent, Mohamed Abdel Aziz, who ran as the 'president for the poor'. Additional *haratine* support came from those who still voted traditionally, in other words in accordance with their local *beidan*. By the time we were finishing up our interviews in 2011, Abeid's IRA activism and international [CNN journalism](#) had government administrators extremely sensitive to anything *haratine* or 'slave' related. Political questions were no longer permitted in our interviews.

Aziz was re-elected in the same [2014 election](#) Abeid fought unsuccessfully, with the former purportedly garnering more than 80 percent of the vote. Controversy over the legitimacy of this statistic and low voter-turnout notwithstanding, these results suggest that a majority of *haratine* still saw their interests as being best served through traditional relations with the *beidan*.

A new form of politics?

The strongest indication that this might change is rooted neither in NGOs nor opposition political parties *per se*. The 'Manifest for the Political, Economic and Social Rights of the Haratine', published in April 2013, outlines the ways in which *haratine* constitute a second-class citizenry (the 20 percent or so who have achieved 'privilege' notwithstanding) and details the steps needed to rectify the situation. Messaoud, one of its signatories and spokespersons, described it [in an interview](#) as a plan for moving forward that ensures a "peaceful future" for the country as a whole. It puts *haratine* rights front and centre;

'slavery' itself is but one of several crucial issues. Its signatories cross all segments of Mauritanian civil society, including human rights, anti-poverty, gender inequality, ethnic integration and anti-slavery groups. Thousands, including *beidan*, ethnic black Mauritians, and *haratine* from all over the country [marched](#) through the streets of Nouakchott in 2014 and 2015 to support its goals.

We are seeing a new stage in the evolution of a country emerging from slavery. There is growing recognition that real growth—be it economic, cultural, social—cannot happen when almost half the population is considered to be 'second class'. While many *haratine* continue to hope that the status quo can be 'adjusted' to this reality, a newer generation, united with the more politicised of its predecessors, does not. Whether or not the momentum of the 2013 manifesto—or some new 'Arab Spring'—will bring about a change in government by 2019, the next scheduled presidential election, remains to be seen.

On colour and origin: the case of the *akhdam* in Yemen

The shift towards a collective identity based on race has had major implications for Yemen's most marginalised people.

Luca Nevola

In 2013, Nu'man al-Hudheyfi – a man of *akhdam* origin – participated at the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) held in Sanaa as part of the crisis reconciliation efforts following the 2011 Yemeni Arab Spring. At the time, Hudheyfi was the President of the National Union for the Marginalised and a member of the General People's Congress, the majority party in the country.

In the past, [he has defined](#) the 'marginalised' as all "those people excluded from property and instruction, forced to live at the margins of society". But during the conference, his focus was mainly his fellow people, the *akhdam*, as he condemned the NDC's racism ('*unsuriyya*') by pointing out that Yemen's three million 'black people' had only one representative at the NDC.

Crucially, Hudheyfi brought attention to how the *akhdam*'s social, economic and political *marginalisation* intersects with discrimination based on their *skin colour*. By bringing into focus 'blackness' as a defining characteristic of the *akhdam*, Hudheyfi qualified his people as a discrete 'ethnic group' resting on a particular racial identity – a move that significantly expanded the meaning of the term 'racism', which was traditionally used to refer to descent-based discrimination in Highland Yemen.

In Yemen, the *akhdam* are a minority group of black slum dwellers that are often relegated to 'impure' or 'impious' tasks, such as serving, musical performances, and magic, among others. Traditionally, most



Pomegranate seller, Yemen. Rod Waddington/Flickr. Creative Commons by-sa.

of them dwelled in rural areas of western and southern Yemen. However, after the 1962 revolution establishing the Yemen Arab Republic, many *akhdam* were compelled to work as salaried street-sweepers in major cities.

During the oil boom in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, many Yemenis – including a large number of *akhdam* – left their country in the hopes of improving their economic situation. However, after the first Gulf war, these migrants were forced to return back to Yemen. And since the *akhdam* had no property or land to come back to, many of them found refuge in isolated, temporary, makeshift camps called *mahwa* – a term that is typically used to describe a dog shelter – where they lacked access to water and electricity.

Today, the *akhdam* continue to suffer from socio-economic discrimination: they experience difficulties enrolling their children in school and accessing employment. They are perceived by the Arab

majority in Yemen as the lowest-ranking group of the hierarchical system of the Yemeni Highlands, similarly to the low-caste Pariah group in India. Due to this social stigma, they are condemned to endogamy and to socio-political marginality.

Hudheyfi's emphasis on 'blackness' as the defining characteristic of his people was a crucial shift from folk representations of the *akhdam*, which focus on their genealogical origin rather than their skin colour. In Highland Yemen, it is common to believe that people descending from the same ancestor share the same physical and moral qualities (e.g. values, linguistic and technical skills, taste, dress code, posture, etc.).

The most recognised lines of descent are Northern Arabs and Southern Arabs. People belonging to these two genealogical stocks are believed to embody superior moral qualities, such as generosity and bravery, and are deemed pious Muslims. The residual minority of the population is described as 'lacking in origin' (*nuqqas al-asl*) and believed to be morally deficient, a category that encompasses white-skinned people – usually working as servants, bards and butchers – and dark-skinned people alike. While it is not rare to find black Arabs (especially in the area of the Red Sea Tihama coast), those who belong to the *akhdam* minority are perceived as a genealogically defined subset of the wider category of people 'lacking in origin', and are therefore more discriminated against than their white counterparts.

Genealogical essentialism relies on a peculiar form of historical consciousness, what Andrew Shryock would define 'genealogical imagination'. This form of historical imagination refers moral selves to their past origin, and vice versa: the glorious deeds or the infamous acts of the ancestors concur to define moral selves in the present. The *akhdam*, for instance, are often associated with a subset of Ethiopian invaders who raided Yemen in the 6th century a.d. led by the Christian commander Abraha al-Ashram, and are consequently labelled as betrayers or cowards.

This focus on descent is mirrored by the way the notion of racism first emerged in the Yemeni public discourse. In 1962, a revolution erupted overthrowing the Imam and establishing the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). During the imamate, political power was reserved to people of Hashemite origin (i.e. Northern Arabs and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad), so the notion of racism (*'unsuriyyah*) was first adapted to the Yemeni context in order to condemn the use of genealogy as a means to rule and claim distinctive privileges.

Indeed, Mohammed al-Zubayri – one of the ideologues of the revolution – even accused the Hashemites of ‘partisanship of the origin’, a form of positive racism. It is therefore unsurprising that the 1962 provisional constitution fostered an egalitarian ideology, abolishing distinctions grounded on lineage, and that the 1991 constitution reaffirmed the principle by stating that the Yemeni State “shall guarantee equal opportunities for all citizens in the fields of political, economic, social and cultural activities” (Art. 24 of the Constitution).

However, in spite of this egalitarian ideology, lineage remains a central concern in contemporary Yemen. Ideological state apparatuses depict ‘national character’ on two grounds: Yemeni citizens are defined as Muslims and ‘Sons of Qahtan’ (i.e. Southern Arabs). The *akhdam* – like other marginalised minority groups – do not qualify as either: first, they cannot trace back their lineage to the ancestor of Southern Arabs and second, their moral character is deemed impious, as shown by the proverb “Don’t look at the beauty of the *akhdam*, sins are in their bones”. Whereas, in other historical contexts, the symbolical and social exclusion of human subjects acquires meaning through notions of race grounded in skin-colour and phenotypical traits, in Yemen individuals are essentialised and excluded due to their genealogical origin. It is against this backdrop that we can understand how marginalised people resort to the notion of racism in order to criticise the discriminatory practices enacted by the vast majority of the Arab population.

White-skinned butchers, servants, and bards, as other professional castes, are harshly discriminated against by the Arabs, especially on the basis of marriage. Drawing on the historical tradition that considers lineage-privileges as a form of discrimination, this group of white-skinned people 'lacking in origin' overtly accuses the Arabs of 'racism' (*'unsuriyya*), a local usage that differs significantly from our understanding of race and racism as being grounded in skin-colour and phenotypical traits.

But while recognising a mutual stigmatised status, these white-skinned people are unable (and unwilling) to identify with the *akhdam* on political grounds. This situation is determined by multiple factors, among which two are decisive: firstly, each professional caste takes pride in its own lineage, in contrast to the hegemonic narratives that describe people 'lacking in origin' as one homogenous group of morally deficient individuals; secondly, unlike many *akhdam*, these professional castes rarely suffer economic marginality and spatial segregation, since they have access to education and property.

The dark-skinned *akhdam*, on the contrary, seem to emphasise a colour-based form of racial discrimination, using skin-colour as a medium to construct an encompassing group identity and to claim social and political inclusion. Running against the evidence that dark-skinned Arabs exist (and that they are not labelled *akhdam*), many *akhdam* – including Hudheyfi – would suggest that “this is the Yemeni culture: every black is an *akhdam*”. This assumption brings colour to the foreground, extending the potential number of marginalised people to “ten million Yemeni citizens”, and rearticulating the *arab/akhdam* binary as being one of “white” vs. “black”.

In July 2013, Hudheyfi founded a political party named *Akhdam Allah*. During the presentation, [he affirmed](#), “It is a long struggle. We walk on the path of our predecessors (*aslaf*): Mandela in South Africa and Martin Luther King in the United States.” By evoking international key figures of

the black movements in South Africa and the US, he resorted to racism as a powerful, internationally recognised, tool for political struggle.

This last point brings us to a decisive matter. Unlike other marginalised caste-groups in Yemen, who are almost invisible, the *akhdam* have been tremendously successful in mobilising international institutions and media in their support. In many occasions, international and local broadcasters have dedicated thorough reports to their condition. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (2011) has described their situation in terms of a “caste-based discrimination”.

The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (2011) has emphasised the “social and economic marginalization” of the *akhdam* referring to the General Recommendation no. 29 of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which crucially extends the meaning of ‘race’ by including descent-based discrimination. These international reports, while recognising that genealogical origin is still a major drive in shaping people’s economic and social conditions in contemporary Yemen, exclusively focus on the marginalisation of the *akhdam*. This focus, I argue, depends on the fact that by turning descent into race, the *akhdam* have succeeded in redefining their community as an identifiable “discriminated ethnic group” of black people.

“In the skin of a black”: Senegalese students and young professionals in Rabat

Even student and young professional Senegalese migrants have to navigate the legacies of slavery in Morocco as ‘Africans’.

Laura Menin

In a 2012 interview titled “*Dans la peau d’un noir au Maroc*”, Bas-sirou Ba, a Senegalese professional, narrated his experience of being black-skinned person in Morocco. Like many Senegalese students, Ba arrived in Morocco on a scholarship to complete his studies and also found employment there. In 2007, he gained a master’s degree in journalism and communication in Rabat and worked as journalist for a number of francophone magazines. However, his experience was also marked by multiple everyday forms of racism that reveal, in his view, the sense of superiority that some Moroccans feel vis-à-vis sub-Saharan Africans, and their views of black people as ‘slaves’, ‘servants’, and ‘moral inferiors’.

Ba’s testimony is part of a debate underway in Morocco about the issue of ‘anti-black racism’ and its relationship with the racial legacies of slavery. The magazine *Jeune Afrique* helped begin this debate in the early 2000s by publishing personal testimonies of both black individuals from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africans on their own experiences with racism. The attention given to this question has substantially increased since 2013, however, following a spate of violent incidents between Moroccans and sub-Saharan migrants that included the murders of the Congolese Alexis Toussaint and the young Senegalese Ismail Faye.

In the aftermath of growing civil violence, the King Mohammed VI launched a new immigration policy, which included the regularisation of undocumented migrants in 2014. International NGOs, Moroccan

human rights organisations, and sub-Saharan migrants' associations came together to denounce institutional violence as well as widespread anti-black attitudes against sub-Saharan African migrants. The national campaign *Je ne m'appelle pas 'azziwas* launched in 2014 to raise public awareness on racism in Moroccan society.

Many Moroccan human rights and anti-racist activists connected racism against sub-Saharan migrants to the stigmatising visions conveyed in media and political discourses, which were, in turn, the consequence of violent transnational migration policies. Another line of argument, popularised in independent press, interpreted the persistence of colour prejudices against black Africans as a fundamental racial legacy of slavery, drawing on the work of prominent scholars such as Chouki El Hamel, author of *Black Morocco: A history of Slavery, Race and Islam*. While both discourses captured important aspects surrounding 'racism' in Morocco, they risked reducing its complexity to either historical or political factors.

The narratives of the Senegalese students and young professionals I met in Rabat in 2014 pointed to something much more complicated. Unlike the stigmatised transit population, the people with whom I spoke occupied privileged positions as university students and professionals. Moreover, due to the historical commercial, religious, and cultural connections between Senegal and Morocco, most of them arrived in Morocco full of expectations for a country they imagined to be "the natural prolongation of his homeland" – as one person put it – and a very religious country. Upon arrival, however, they were confronted with racial prejudices, if not overt racism (from being insulted in the street, to having stones thrown at them, to being spat upon) and discovered that linguistic, social cultural and chromatic barriers made their integration difficult.

Let us start with Mohammed.

Mohammed's story

When I met Mohammed in 2014 he was a 25-year-old masters student in Rabat and also worked in a Moroccan company. Recalling his arrival in 2009, he said, "before I left, my mother said: you have the opportunity to become more religious". However, the reality he encountered in the cosmopolitan Rabat generated a sense of estrangement.

When he first ventured outside the university residence with a friend, he was confronted with racist insults. The son of the greengrocer called him *'azzi*, a derogatory term he had never heard before and which contextually means negro, black, slave. "The problem is the adults", he said. "If the child is allowed to say this and his father does not react, he is the one who authorises him to insult the blacks". Mohammed also recalled an incident that deeply marked him:

"When you see an elderly person, you respect him because he might be your uncle. One day I went out to go to the *fac*. I was awaiting a taxi in the street. I called the taxi, and when it stopped, an old man got up, and when I tried to get up, the elder man said in French: «I don't take a taxi with a negro»."

When I asked him if he thought such racial prejudices were linked to his skin colour, Mohammed highlighted the extent to which the connection between slavery and blackness is rooted in Moroccans' imagination. "Since there was slavery and there were Arabs who owned black slaves, Moroccans think that all blacks are slaves", he said. "Also the King owned black slaves. When they see a black they think he is a slave".

For Mohammed, the history of racialised slavery in Morocco affects not only slave descendants, but also people who come from regions of sub-Saharan Africa regardless of their ancestry. Apart from Moroccans who have travelled or migrated abroad, who are more empathetic because they have experienced racism and discrimination in Europe, Mohammed thinks that in general racial prejudices pervade all sectors

of society, including the university. While Mohammed's reflections point to his deep sense of exclusion, Paul's narrative further complicates this vision.

Paul's story

Originally from Dakar, the capital of Senegal, Paul arrived in Morocco in 2005 to start his university studies in medicine. When he started his specialisation at the hospital, he became part of a small group of predominantly Moroccan students and, for the first time, he was confronted with the local population at the ER. This enabled him to develop a deeper understanding of society and in his conversations with me he emphasised the widespread frustration felt by many Moroccans: "I am a foreigner and I have a college scholarship when there are Moroccans who cannot afford to study at university and don't have a job. One must understand the attitude of these people, who are marginalised and who think 'these foreigners study or work in the place of my son'".

While emphasising the plight of the local population, he disclosed that he had been confronted with racist insults and violent attacks in popular neighbourhoods or outside the university residence. While he described these people as marginal, ignorant, poor, and seeking ways to survive, he said that racism is often a motivation to attack, verbally or physically, black Africans. "When you walk in a street and they throw stones at you, or spit on you, they aren't seeking money. This is racism."

Subtle forms of discrimination and racial prejudice are also present in the university. For Paul, some Moroccan students' limited knowledge of Africa and its history and culture, along with the stereotypical representations conveyed by television programmes, contribute to racial prejudices. "In schools they don't study the history of Africa, they only associate it war, famine, poverty", he said. "Every time they see a black, they identify it with it. A student asked me, did you have schools? Do you have roads? Do people live on the trees? This shows that much is to be done on the educational and cultural level".

Paul highlighted how racial prejudices against black Africans affect their intimate lives. When he was in the first years of university, he had love relationships with Moroccan female students, but these ended because of the social pressures. “People gossiped about me with her and said that she was an easy girl because they don’t conceive, or accept, that a Moroccan girl can be together with a young black man”. For Paul, the fact that some Moroccans consider black individuals as inferior does not affect only sub-Saharan Africans, but also black Moroccans. “Some families would not marry their daughter to a black Moroccan man because of his skin colour. It is changing, but this still exists”, he said.

The firm, anti-racist stance of a large part of Moroccan civil society clearly demonstrates that racism is not only enacted, but also locally debated, contested and struggled against. Along with the racial prejudices described by my interlocutors, the everyday exchanges between Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans reveal different dynamics, including cooperation, dialogue, mutual curiosity, friendship and love. However, the ways Mohammed and Paul experience and interpret ‘racism’ reveal how intertwined historical and contemporary socio-political dynamics shape specific racial prejudices and forms of social exclusion against black Africans.

Their perspectives suggest that the racial legacies of slavery invest not only marginalised undocumented migrants, but also the more privileged students and professionals with elements of the social inferior status historically accorded to black slaves. At the same time, Morocco’s ambivalent positioning in international political arenas, media stigmatisation, poor knowledge of Africa and Africans, rising unemployment, and widespread poverty and social insecurity work together to nourish frustrations, social tensions and resentments vis-à-vis the ‘newcomers’. Mohammed’s and Paul’s reflections invite us to reflect on, instead of taking it for granted, the relations between the historical and the contemporary in post-slavery contexts.

“She is not a ‘Abid’”: blackness among slave descendants in southern Tunisia

Connected first by a slave-master relationship and now by geographical proximity, the ‘white’ and ‘black’ populations of Ghbonton, Tunisia have a complex relationship with each other.

Marta Scaglioni

“She is the friend of Marwa. She is a Ghbonton, but not an ‘*abid* one”, Zeira said to me. She’s a colourfully dressed, middle-aged woman, and we’re sitting on the patio of her one-storey, cement block house in Gosbah, a village in the arid environment of southern Tunisia. While ‘*abid* (singular: ‘*abd*’) means literally ‘slaves’ in Arabic, Zeira was not referring to Marwa’s legal status. Slavery in Tunisia was abolished in 1846. ‘*Abid* is now a historical category in southern Tunisia, marking certain individuals as the descendants of former slaves and positioning them at the bottom of local social hierarchies. The ‘Abid Ghbonton – a Southern Tunisian tribe of slave descendants – live side by side in Gosbah with the Ghbonton, their former masters, dwelling on the less fertile and less watered part of the land.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘Abid Ghbonton officially parted from the Ghbonton lineage, whom they had been allegedly serving as slaves since ancient times. After their manumission they remained bonded to them by a pre-Islamic institution known as *wala*’. This obliged them to keep their former master’s family name as their own, with the addition of the ‘slave’ prefix, and to carry out sporadic domestic chores for the ‘whites’. In Zeira’s imagination, ‘*abd*’ was synonymous with ‘black’.

Even though “black and white are not ... real colours [but social ones]”, as one shopkeeper in Gosbah explained, blackness is an everyday concern for the ‘Abid Ghbonton. It positions them, through a



Photo by author. All rights reserved.

triangulation of blackness, slavery descent and socio-economic marginalisation, as inferiors within the highly hierarchical social universe of Southern Tunisia.

Slavery and blackness in Tunisia

Even though Tunisia imported both 'white' (or elite) slaves and 'black' slaves, only the latter were defined as *'abd* and employed in the most physically demanding jobs. Historically, blackness in Muslim societies stems from a long-standing hierarchical ordering of humanity which goes back to well before the colonial conquest. Since Tunisia, like all Muslim countries, is patrilineal, 'social blackness' stems from the absence of an Arab lineage rather than bodily features or skin colour.

Being a black slave entailed a high degree of interracial mixing and with it came chances at upward social mobility. For example, black slave women were also traded and sold as concubines, and the strict patrilineal and patrilocal system prevalent in Arab societies contributed greatly to the racial absorption of their children. Indeed, children

of concubines were legally free and belonged to the 'white' lineage of their fathers, even though their skin was brown or black. Generations later both black and white Tunisians now carry a wide range of skin colours, and differences in their physical appearance are less distinct.

After abolition in 1846, the triangulation between slavery, blackness, and a socially inferior echelon condensed and acquired further negative connotations, because many freed black slaves ended up in situations of deprivation, impoverishment, vagrancy, prostitution and peddling. Therefore, non-whiteness began to be structurally linked to poverty, and to other stereotypes such as disreputability, sexual availability (nowadays, around 10% of prostitutes in Tunis are of slave descent), inclination to crime – especially stealing – and ugliness.

Children of concubines were legally free and belonged to the 'white' lineage of their fathers, even though their skin was brown or black.

Today, the 'Abid Ghbonton are no longer professionally exploited as they used to be, but, they still experience the enduring legacies of slavery in the form of severe racism, geographical marginalisation, and social and political discrimination. Furthermore, strict endogamic practices prevent marital bonds and alliances forming between the two lineages: 'Abid Ghbonton and Ghbonton.

As a consequence of their being racialised as 'blacks', the 'Abid Ghbon-

ton suffer from a number of negative stereotypes: they are considered to originate from Sudanic Africa, and are often referred to, as many other black Tunisians, as *ifriqyin* (Africans). ‘White’ Tunisians – those claiming Arab descent – would not define themselves as such. As one activist who started questioning racism and discrimination after the 2011 overthrow of the former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, told me: “The connection to slavery is still present ... here. Now they (the blacks) are called ‘oh wassif’ (servant) and they tell you ‘oh, you come from Africa’! As if Tunisia was in another continent”.

While ‘blackness’ is accorded negative meaning, ‘whiteness’ is connected with social prestige and high status. I will try to unpack the categories of whiteness and blackness, as they are evoked and mobilised on the level of aesthetics and marital alliances in the everyday life of the ‘Abid Ghbonton.

Aesthetics of blackness

For the Ghbonton, ‘whiteness’ is conceptually connected to ideas of beauty and purity. “In Tunisian you even say, ‘what is Barca (the Spanish football team) doing? White or black’ (is it winning or is it losing)?” the blacksmith of Gosbah explained. In the intimacy of their households or when they gather together in cafés, the Ghbonton can use *wassif* or *‘abid* to refer to the ‘Abid Ghbonton and *ahrar* (literally, ‘freemen’) to refer to themselves.

The term *‘abd*, for the Ghbonton, has a double connotation: it can be used either neutrally as a lineage denomination or as a pejorative. For example, in 2016, a young man from Gosbah, was – most probably wrongfully – accused of having stolen some cash from the driver of a minibus. The driver, a man from the white Ghbonton tribe, rushed to Gosbah screaming “the *‘abd* had stolen my money!”. As this incident shows, every single day ‘Abid Ghbonton have to reckon with, and struggle against, prejudices of dishonesty and aggressiveness, which are linked to the enduring stigma of slavery and blackness.

Nonetheless, today, the comparison between historical forms of racialisation and racial constellations on the 'Abid Ghbonton reveals important discontinuities. Although many people told me a person is socially black because he/she "comes from the blacks", Tunisians' racial thinking is fluid and has changed over time and context. Physical markers, for example, have become increasingly important since the lineages parted even though the separation is justified on the grounds of descent. Nowadays, the 'Abid Ghbonton are very concerned with their appearance and with their 'blackness', and especially women envy others' 'whiteness' and try to whiten and conceal their skin colour with beauty products.

The ideal that "the whites do not get married to the blacks" was called into question 20 years ago, when men from the 'Abid Ghbonton started marrying to white, non-Ghbonton women. Some of these women come from Mednine, from the neighbouring Djerba, and sometimes from abroad. In speaking with the women, it seems that while their families at times protested against the marriage it wasn't because of the slave descent of the intended grooms. For example, Selma, who comes from a village next to Mednine, is white and her husband is from Gosbah. She recalled: "my brother was worried [about my marriage] because Gosbah is not a nice place to live in".

Hilel, whose mother is Algerian (and racialised as 'white') and whose father is a 'Abid Ghbonton, is herself commonly considered to be 'white'. She has now married an 'Abid Ghbonton herself and is very concerned about the appearance of her one-year-old daughter. The fear is that she might turn out *samara*(brown).

The patrilineal system of racialisation has also become less powerful over time. Women in Tunisia still get married into a patrilineal system, but their heritage now also plays a role in determining how their children will be categorised. Hilel is racialised as white because her mother is white, and *in spite of* her father's blackness. Her daughter

thus has some chance of not growing *samara* even though her father is black. It is worth noting that 'Abid Ghbonton are more concerned by the blackness of their daughters than that of their boys. When I asked another white woman what the problem was in growing into a black woman, she told me that it is not "desirable". A black woman could have less chances to get married, she said, drawing an implicit connection between blackness and ugliness.

Conclusion

Some racial conceptions about blackness in Tunisia have survived covertly up to present days, crystallising in the triangulation between blackness, slavery, and inferior social position. The 'Abid Ghbonton are racialised by their servile past, which is epitomised by their lineage name and by their skin colour. The emphasis put on skin colour throws into question the classical theory of race in the Middle East, according to which colour appears as relatively marginal.

However, race in southern Tunisia is also a fluid concept. 'Abid Ghbonton have found strategies of racial upward social mobility through mixed marriages, and created a specific niche for mixed children. Depending on the context, women's power in determining their children's social position has furthermore grown as of late, in sharp contrast to the strict patrilineal ruling patterns of racial transmission in the past.

The multiple roots of Emiratiness: the cosmopolitan history of Emirati society

The UAE, like many other Arabian Gulf States, claims to be home to a homogenous Arab population. In doing so it assimilates rather than acknowledges the region's slave past.

Anonymous

A quick glance at the faces of Emirati citizens as I walked down in a busy shopping mall made me think I could easily be back in London. The only major outward difference was that all the locals were wearing the national dress, or rather what has become the national uniform: [abaya and dishdasha](#). A more important but less obvious difference, however, was that despite Dubai's creole past and the ethnic, linguistic and racial diversities within the Dubaian Emiratis, Emirati national identity has been officially and popularly racialised as 'Arab' since the founding of the United Arab Emirates in 1971.

With the aim of cultivating this presumed collective identity, the region's and its inhabitants' links to, and origins from, various parts of the Indian Ocean, Yemen, Baluchistan, Southern Persia, the Arabian Gulf, Zanzibar and other parts of Africa has been elided. Yet for Emirati citizens, there are many 'clues' to determine an Emirati's ethnic, sectarian, cultural, linguistic, and geographical origins. These range from surname, accent, and dexterity in spoken Arabic to physical characteristics, such as skin colour and even "shape of eyebrows", as I was told. For example, Emiratis associate white skin with Persian origin, and darker skin with those with [Baloch](#) or Zanzibari origin, even though there are great phenotypical differences within these groups (i.e. '[Afro-Iranians](#)').

However, one particular group, the Dubaians with slave ancestry, is surrounded by silence. Awareness of the region's involvement in [Indian](#)

Ocean slave trade is made conspicuous by the absence of acknowledging any links that Emirati citizens may have to Africa and a slave past. Slavery was abolished in 1963 and in 1971 former slaves became Emirati citizens. While the official and popular discourses equate Emirati citizenship to national identity – i.e. all who hold Emirati citizenship are Arab – the limited power of citizenship to absorb ‘race’ and naturalise phenotypical differences becomes salient in informal everyday interactions within citizenry and intimate decisions such as marriage.

Considering the sensitivity of this topic, I often started the discussions of race and national identity in reference to Western societies. Interestingly, Emiratis claimed that a straightforward equation of citizenship with national identity was based on a faulty premise, as they inherently signified different types of inclusion. For example, they argued, citizenship alone could not turn a black African into a French person or convert someone from India into a Brit. This is because Emiratis typically imagined *Frenchness/Britishness* as being premised on whiteness. A double standard applied, however, when they reflected on these discussions, in the context of the UAE.

Mohammad, who is from a prominent Bedouin family says:

“We do have darker skin here but we don’t perceive them as anything other than Emirati, they have been here for many years. Originally they are from Central Africa maybe or they don’t even know where, you know we had some ... I don’t want to say ‘abid (slave), but khadim (servant). There is no racism in our society like the West, because we have this concept – you can’t be Emirati without being Arab. I have a friend from African descent, he is 100% local. Talks with Bedouin accent. I can relate to him more than an *Ajami* (Emirati with origins in Southern Persia). Maybe we will call him khal (black) to joke, but they don’t find it offensive. It is not like ‘n*gga’ in America. We also

call Zinjibaris (Zanzibaris) like that”.

Echoing the official discourse, claims to national identity among the people I interviewed were predominantly articulated as having full citizenship rights, having long-standing roots in the region, and being culturally assimilated. These parameters formed the content of ‘Arabness’ as a collective national identity and enabled inclusion of racial differences. Yet, the shortcomings of such ‘inclusion’ became evident when individuals were occasionally identified as ‘real Arabs’ or ‘original Emiratis’ – signifiers of certain types of Arab and Bedouin pedigrees. Moreover, blackness still persists to identify ‘racial others’. Indeed, despite Mohammad suggesting otherwise, black Emiratis I spoke to – regardless of their origins, whether ethnic Arab returnees from Zanzibar or of slave origins – found *khal* (black) a derogatory term.

Having said that, in comparison to other communities, [‘Afro-Emiratis’ is argued to have not developed as a racial minority](#). This aligns in some ways with Mohammad’s suggestion that he has a closer alliance with ‘Afro-Emiratis’ than Ajams. The former group’s centuries-old dislocation from their ancestral homeland and their cultural assimilation into the families they served means that today they do not carry many residual expressions of a separate cultural identity (two exceptions would be [Nubian dance and Zar](#)). This is different from Ajami Emiratis, whose Persian roots can at times prove ‘problematic’, especially when tensions rise with Iran. Thus, ‘being Ajam’ is potentially more of a salient social boundary within the citizenry than being black, even though the former’s phenotypical difference is, as many Emiratis have implied, not as visible as that of the latter.

Indigenous by association

Emiratis with slave ancestry typically saw themselves not only as Arabs, but some also suggested that they were the ‘original’ inhabitants of the Emirates. This self-perception is in part due to the way slavery

was practiced, and abolished, in this region of the world. Slaves were considered as members of the tribes and the families to which they were enslaved. After the abolishment of slavery, freed slaves were given the option to adopt the surname of the tribes they served. Many did, and this 'opportunity' to culturally and historically affiliate themselves with the Emirates and Bedouin identity has inevitably shaped their collective sense of selfhood and belonging. The way Moza, a black Emirati, identifies herself as a Bedouin illustrates this point.

“My friends cannot understand me because I speak Bedouin, the original dialect of Emiratis. When you are original, you are different from others, more special. The fact that we have been here for ages. But Ajam, Baloch come from different places and then became Emirati. We were born as Emiratis; we grow up as such.”

It is important to mention that, like Moza, none of my interlocutors identified themselves as 'Afro-Emirati', or black. They instead occasionally used *samra/sammariyya* (dark skinned/tanned) to refer to themselves. Even though the question of 'roots' is a sensitive subject to be discussed obliquely, a few informants openly shared their experiences of discrimination based on their physical appearance. Jamila, for example, carries a surname of one of the most prominent tribes in the UAE. Yet, growing up, she was, she said, often told by peers that “she was too dark to be Emirati” or asked why she carried this surname. She often sought the answers within her family, who were reluctant to talk about the matter.

“I was called Sudanese [a colloquial term to refer to dark skinned people] for being dark. One of my friends once told me: ‘You are so cool but why are you too dark?’ She was a white Emirati. So that made me think that Emirati look was not what I had, but obviously at this age I no longer think so. My family identifies themselves as Arab

Emirati. They are secretive about where we come from, but finally I was told that we have a mixture of Arab and Baloch origins. Ah and some ambiguous ethnicities that they won't disclose to me for some reason (laughs). They told me not to tell anyone”.

Seen from Jamila's experiences, colour, even though often claimed to be immaterial, can affect claims to national identity, whilst also informing citizens of 'what an Emirati should look like'. Racial differences – like other forms of ethnic, cultural or linguistic diversity – *within* Emiratis blur and are downplayed, especially when contrasted with 'greater' diversities such as the migrant population that outnumbers Emiratis. Phenotype is used as a marker and can be used to suggest cultural incompatibilities or even to reject claims to citizenship. Being a black Emirati herself, Moza's choice to use 'Sudanese' to illustrate 'otherness', is particularly interesting:

“Let's say even if a Sudanese gets an Emirati passport and says he is Emirati; his face will still tell he is Sudanese. Even if they were born in this place, everyone has a tradition from their own region that their face will show. It's complicated to explain but we can see this”.

Taken as a whole, it is safe to say that citizenship, historical links to and presence in the UAE, and cultural assimilation form the boundaries of the nation and naturalise phenotypical differences amongst the citizenry – but only to a certain extent. The limits of 'Arabness' as the collective identity of Emiratis become apparent in many contexts, such as when intimate decisions are made concerning marriage. The reluctance, if not objection, to intermarry is not only evident across different 'racial' lines, but also between ethnic, tribal, sectarian and cultural groups. Intermarriages are on the rise in the UAE but the issue of colour persists, perhaps due to the (erroneous) conflation of blackness with slavery, even though not all black Emiratis are of slave origins.

Whom should I marry? Genealogical purity and the shadows of slavery in southern Senegal

Hard choices are made when arranged marriages collide with a slave past.

Alice Bellagamba

It is early morning. Demba is driving Mamadou, Ndilla and me towards the Senegalese town of Velingara, on the eastern side of the Kolda region. All of a sudden, Ndilla cries “the *jiyaabe!*” and points to a troop of Guinean baboons that has appeared in the fields beside the road. A small joke, as Fulfulde, the majority language for this part of Senegal, uses the expression ‘black monkeys’ (*baadi mbaaleji*) to talk of that part of the population consisting of *jiyaabe* (sing. *jiyaado*): people of alleged slave ancestry. Baboons are black, big and sturdy: these three qualities are stereotypically associated with slaves in Fulbe communities throughout West Africa. In contrast ‘red monkeys’ (*baadi mboodeji*) attaches to the *rimbe* (sing. *dimo*), people like Demba, Mamadou and Ndilla who are of free (or noble) ancestry. In addition to be smaller and leaner than baboons, ‘red monkeys’, which are actually green monkeys, sport a clear and red-flashed fur.

Ndilla called my attention to the baboons beside our car because the oral history we have been collecting in the Kolda region uses the metaphor of the ‘black’ and the ‘red’ monkeys to describe regional political conflicts, as well as [collaborations between the *jiyaabe* and the *rimbe*](#) that have taken place since the second half of the nineteenth century. In popular wisdom, the physical signs of *rimbe* ancestry include long limbs, light-coloured skin, and curly, soft hair, which men and women of past generations styled in braids.

The marker of the *jiyaabe* is blackness, although there are dark *rimbe* and light skinned *jiyaabe*. Stereotypes address also intellectual and moral qualities. “People look at the intelligence” remarked Ismailou, another



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of my *rimbe* friends. “The *rimbe* tend to consider their own children brighter than the *jiyaabe*’s ones.”

Racism in Senegal?

Is the metaphor of the black and red monkeys a clue to undergoing racial arguments? Government, media and public opinion confine racism to the lives and experiences of Senegalese abroad (either in the colonial homeland of France, or in the many destinations of the [Senegalese diaspora](#)), while Muslim piety and republicanism underplay internal discriminations. All men are equal before God, and the [constitution](#) assures “equality before the law of all citizens, regardless of origin, race, sex, religion” (Article 1). “There is in Senegal no constraint or privilege arising from birth, from person or from family” (Article 7). For historian Ibrahima Thioub, however, nineteenth century internal slavery and the slave trade bequeathed an [ideology of genealogical purity](#) to contemporary Senegalese society.

When the *jiyaabe* are not around, the *rimbe* of the Kolda region are happy to detail their old stereotypes about the slave. Purportedly, the *jiyaabe* lack shame and moral control, and have limited capacities of social and economic organisation. “During the rainy season”, Ndilla tutored me, “the *jiyaabe* easily run out of food. You see them going to the *rimbe*’s villages in search of rice and millet to feed their families.” It is a winning game: although economically distressed as well, the *rimbe* would prefer to starve than to admit they have no rice, millet or milk to share.

The *jiyaabe*, in turn, depict the *rimbe* as arrogant, cunning and malicious, and unfit for harsh agricultural labour. They also make little secret of their contempt for *rimbe* pretensions to social superiority. The day we visited Ibrahima, a returnee from Spain whose grandfather served as *jiyaado*, he looked Ndilla and Mamadou straight in the eye before joking that “a *pullo* without cows is a *jahanka*”.

It's a complicated joke to translate and requires some explanation. *Pullo* is equivalent to *dimo*, while *jahanka* are a regional minority ethnic group. Rearing cattle is quintessential to the *rimbe* tradition, but not all *rimbe* have cattle today. Ndilla's father lost his herd, and Mamadou has but few heads. Ibrahima, in contrast, is the descendant of slaves yet built his own herd thanks to migration. His reference to Ndilla's and Mamadou's social debasement was evident. Are you a *pullo* because of your ancestors, he challenged them to answer, or because of your personal qualities and economic capital?

Demba's marriage story

In terms of social reproduction, *rimbe* families have always been very selective. The reckless behaviour of the father constrains the marriage opportunities of his children, their purity of origins notwithstanding. If a woman has a child out of marriage, potential in-laws will be sceptical of her brothers' suitability as bridegrooms. When parents agree to the marriage of their children, the moral posture of the entire family is as important as wealth. Qualms extend to slave ancestry.

In 2013, Demba felt in love with Bintou, a young girl from his same village. Bintou belonged to a *jiyaabe* family originally owned by Demba's grandfather, the founder of the village. Demba was determined to follow his feelings, but his mother even more: the marriage was not to take place. Demba lacked an independent income and lived in his father's large family entourage. The possibility of winning over his parents were naught, as nobody could force his mother to accept someone she deemed unsuitable. The two women, after all, would have to cohabit.

Eventually Bintou married a man of her same social background, and moved to a nearby settlement. Demba's father selected the daughter of one of his best friends as a more appropriate wife for his son. He paid the proper bride-wealth in cattle, and Demba abided by his parents' desires. It was a good match in terms of similar physical appearance and social origins – both the bride and the groom displayed the features

and the fair colour of the *rimbe*. Unfortunately, the couple did not fit in terms of character and expectations. After one year, and a baby boy, everyone in the village knew that the couple quarrelled every other day. Rumours arose, especially among village youths, and in their eyes Demba's arranged marriage demonstrated that elders needed to stop interfering in marital choices.

Demba's mother felt compelled to defend her course of action. She called Ndilla, one of the few educated bachelors of the village and most assuredly on the side of free choice in marriage. In a confidential manner, she recounted Bintou's *jiyaabe* background and explained how Bintou's grandfather had overstepped the boundaries of his servile position. He had also chosen to marry girls from other villages without the consent of their parents – a sure-fire way to bequeath an unhappy marital life to his offspring. Furthermore, the family's economic situation was poor, as the wealth that Bintou's grandfather had accumulated rapidly dissipated after his death. To her, these were reasons enough to justify preventing Demba from marrying his choice.

Conclusion

Rimbe families of the Kolda region have tended to their genealogical 'purity' by favouring intra-lineage marriage or marriage with other *rimbe* lineages. The *jiyaabe*, as well, have developed their own marriage strategies. Dembayel, for example, is an elderly man of slave ancestry that helped Ndilla and me in the course of our research. He overtly declared the enslavement of his ancestors, and denounced the haughty attitude of the *rimbe*. When asked why the *jiyaabe* were so numerous in some parts of the Kolda region, he replied promptly: "because, we do not make marriage discriminations".

In order to increase their ranks, *jiyaabe* families have kept building alliances with people of their own background and members of ethnic groups historically subordinated to the Fulbe. They dislike their girls marrying *rimbe* men, knowing that their future in-laws will neither

fully respect their wives nor her kin. When we asked Dembayel to comment upon the possibility of a marriage between a man of slave ancestry and a girl of high birth, he wondered about our sanity. How could the husband rule over his wife? Would she ever obey? For sure, the children of such a marriage would face the prospective of never been fully accepted by their *rimbe* grandparents, maternal uncles and cousins. Which man would bestow this future on his own offspring?

Since the beginning of the 2000s, Senegalese social media have [started to debate](#) individual rights to free marriage choice. They have also discussed the [stigma of slave ancestry](#). In both urban and rural areas of the Kolda region, it is easy to bump into groups of youths that argue against arranged marriage, and old social boundaries. In practice, however, they tend to respect their family orientation, even if parents refrain from behaving like Demba's mother. Filial piety is, after all, a major value.

Although he knows that it already happened in his family, Ndilla cannot imagine marrying a girl of slave ancestry. It would be a daily struggle to defend his choice, at least among his rural relatives. So far, he is a bachelor because he longs for an educated wife, but none of his choices met his parents' idea of a good wife. On the other hand, although of high lineage, all the girls they proposed were either illiterate or too young. "I cannot marry this kind of woman. Education will always be a boundary between us, and she will feel that the husband does not truly understand and love her".

Section three

Labour exploitation in global
agriculture

Struggling on the wrong side of the chain: labour exploitation in global agriculture

Marco Gardini

In a famous passage of John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, a tenant farmer and a man on a tractor debate the bank's demand that the latter demolish the former's house and drive him from the land his family had cultivated for generations:

“Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours – being born on it, working it, dying on it. That's what makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.

We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man.

Yes, but the bank is only made of men.

No, you're wrong there – quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it.”

The “monster” that men created, but could not control, did not die with the Great Depression. It continued to resurface, assuming different names and forms across time and changing economic and political contexts. According to current neoliberal beliefs, for example, there is a growing need for refined theoretical methodologies, technical procedures, and privatisation policies to develop what are increasingly



Cimarron County, Oklahoma, USA, 1936. Public Domain.

known as effective ‘agriculture value chains’: i.e. the integrated range of value adding activities that theoretically should link farmers to new global or regional markets, improve and ‘rationalise’ agricultural production, and keep prices low for a growing global population.

As often happens, however, the naming of a concept like ‘agriculture value chain’ carries with it unintended meanings and a certain degree of bitter irony. For those who have dedicated themselves to the study of old and new slaveries and forms of labour exploitation in the agrarian sector, for example, the word ‘chain’ acquires obviously a very different connotation. Of course, there are strong differences between the iron chains that trapped men and women during the Middle Passage and the ‘immaterial’ economic chains that oblige present-day, formally ‘free’ small farmers to sell their products, their labour, and often their land at miserable prices. The labour conditions of slaves in the American plantation system of the past and those of (migrant) agricultural labourers ‘freely’ choosing to work for landowners today

are also different. Yet, because slavery in the past was so often linked to agricultural work, the current expression ‘agricultural value chain’ evokes a number of questions about who today possesses the power to forge, enlarge, and hold these chains, to make huge profits out of them, and to trap others within them. Slavery has been formally abolished everywhere, but capitalism has found new ways to ensure a supply of cheap labour at its disposal.

Who controls the chains?

Part three of *Shadows of slavery: refractions of the past, challenges of the present* seeks to provide answers for these questions as they relate to global agriculture – from Tanzania to the Dominican Republic, from Italy to Costa Rica, from Chad to Madagascar. They discuss the working conditions, the dynamics of exploitation, and the degree of unfreedom for all those trapped on the wrong side of local and global agriculture value chains. All contributions draw on extensive fieldwork, and explore individual and collective histories to shed light on the changes and continuities of labour exploitation in agrarian sectors around the world.

The cases of migrants, small farmers, women, and sharecroppers allow us to compare how past and present interlace across a variety of contexts to produce labour exploitation and social marginalisation. The causes have to do with neoliberal reforms and large-scale investments; the political and legal frameworks transforming migrants into easily exploitable manpower; the gendered nature of labour exploitation; the multifaceted forms of debt linking small farmers to local and global markets; and the legacies of past forms of slavery that continue to exclude individuals and groups from landownership.

Only by considering the articulation of these different causes can we understand how old chains broke and new ones appeared, how forms of labour exploitation and bondage reformed after the formal abolition of slavery, and how current processes of capital accumulation chain

people to lives very different from the positive images found in neo-liberal rhetoric.

By considering the case of a privatised estate in Tanzania, for example, Joanny Belair explores the collateral socio-economic impacts that neo-liberal reforms have had on local peasants. Going beyond the self-promoting images of a big private company working in the sugar industry – which emphasises the company’s attention to employee needs as well as its overall importance as a regional employment generator – Belair demonstrates how workers must face exploitative labour conditions, social insecurity, and chains of indebtedness, while villagers are exposed to increasing land dispossession. Belair questions whether those at the bottom of the local social hierarchy truly benefit from large-scale agricultural investments. Answering her own question, she demonstrates how locale elites seize new opportunities while the most vulnerable Tanzanian citizens bear the social costs of these investments.

The pains associated with neo liberal reforms of the agricultural sector are also described by Raúl Zecca Castel in his account of the working conditions of Haitian labourers who migrated to the Dominican Republic. Zecca Castel provides a vivid picture of how the recently privatised Dominican sugarcane plantations profit from the increased socio-economic vulnerability of migrants, who constitute a cheap and unorganised workforce. The Dominican government, which from the 1950s to the 1990s promoted the migration of unskilled labour from Haiti, is now denying citizenship to thousands of those initial migrants’ descendants, effectively pushing them into the ranks of irregular migrants who make up the plantation workforce.

The exploitation of migrant labour is at the centre of Irene Peano’s contribution. By analysing industrial tomato production in Foggia, Italy, Peano explores the formal and informal methods of controlling migrants that structure local dynamics of exploitation. In this context, asylum-seeker reception centres, migrant detention centres, shanty-

towns, labour camps, and prisons contribute to form a 'special economic zone' that disciplines, governs, and extracts profit from migrant labour. At the same time, Peano points out that containment and control are never total, and draws attention to the forms of resistance and self-organisation typical of these spaces.

Despite the increasing importance of migrants, and their exploitation, for global agriculture, the citizenship divide is not the only axis worth considering. Drawing on her analysis of sexual harassment in the Costa Rican banana industry, [Layla Zaglul Ruiz](#) shows how gender influences the exploitation and vulnerability of labourers. She describes how forms of male domination are translated onto the shop floor of the banana farm, and how gendered forms of exploitation interlace with hierarchy in the workplace.

Dynamics of exploitation are furthermore not limited to employer/employee relations. They also extend to small farmers who control their own land but lose control of production. [Valerio Colosio](#) explores the debt trap in which farmers of the Guéra region of Chad find themselves when obliged to sell their products in disadvantageous conditions. This makes them vulnerable to traders who loan them cereals during the hungry season with high interest rates, and then claim back a much larger part of the harvest later on. However, this scenario is still considered by farmers as preferable to "working for someone else", a condition perceived as unworthy for the household head and perilous to the following harvest. As Colosio points out, the unequal relation between farmers and traders is part of a longer history that, after the colonial abolition of slavery, transformed precolonial, slave raiding elites into a powerful class of traders able to exert a substantial degree of control over agricultural production.

The [last contribution from Marco Gardini](#) explores the post-slavery context of the Malagasy highlands that sees landless slave descendants continuing to work for former masters – a situation frequently seen

by both sides as ‘win-win’. Sharecropping agreements, however, also reinforce power structures, economic inequalities, and the re-production of statutory distinctions. When that system breaks down, and former masters start to slip from their dominant position, what was once a ‘win-win’ situation has a tendency to quickly turn against the sharecroppers. The ‘win-win game’ rhetoric hides the fact that sharecropping agreements contribute to reinforce the social prestige of landowners at the expense of the tenants, often expanding the stigma of slave origin even to people who are not slave descendants.

Taken together, these contributions provide fresh ethnographic material for an analysis from below of contemporary human bondage in the agricultural sector, and of the different, often hidden tactics that subordinated people use to renegotiate their marginalised positions, reinforce their rights, or simply struggle to survive. These stories demonstrate how similar dynamics affect very different, albeit increasingly interconnected, places, and remind us that an exploitative relation is never a private or circumstantiated problem, but always a collective history. This is as crucial today as it was in 1939, when John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*:

“One man, one family driven from the land; this rusty car creaking along the highway to the west. I lost my land, a single tractor took my land. I am alone and bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here ‘I lost my land’ is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate – ‘We lost our land.’ The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from this first ‘we’ there

grows a still more dangerous thing: 'I have a little food' plus 'I have none.' If from this problem the sum is 'We have a little food'; the thing is on its way, the movement has direction. Only a little multiplication now, and this land, this tractor are ours. The two men squatting in a ditch, the little fire, the side-meat stewing in a single pot, the silent, stone-eyed women; behind, the children listening with their souls to words their minds do not understand. The night draws down. The baby has a cold. 'Here, take this blanket. It's wool. It was my mother's blanket - take it for the baby'. This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning from 'I' to 'we.'

If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I', and cuts you off forever from the 'we'."

Agricultural investments in Tanzania: economic opportunities or new forms of exploitation?

Many are celebrating the fact that Tanzania is welcoming private investors in the agricultural sector, but who is really benefitting from these investments and at what cost?

Joanny Bélair

Since its turn towards privatisation in the 90s, Tanzania has been adhering to the dominant narrative of international institutions and its main donors by actively seeking to attract foreign direct investments (FDI). Indeed, the Tanzanian state has bought into the presiding neo-liberal rationale, which contends that welcoming investors will help modernise and increase productivity in the agricultural sector, and will thereby foster socio-economic development at the local and national levels. Yet, the extent to which such agricultural investments effectively contribute to local socio-economic development remains open for debate.

The truth is that standard and depoliticised economic development indicators – such as the creation of employment, small-scale farmers' access to credit and technology, and the overall amount of capital invested in the sector – do not offer an adequate, or comprehensive picture of the effects of these investments at the local level. Instead, these measurement tools tend to obscure the social costs of these large-scale agricultural investments, mostly borne by the most poor and vulnerable Tanzanians.

To uncover the impacts of these investments, it is crucial to more thoroughly investigate newly created employment opportunities and working conditions, and to consider their collateral impacts on locals' access and rights to land and the political configurations of power. Based on my fieldwork in the north of Tanzania's Kagera region from

2016 to 2017, I aim to provide a more nuanced picture of the different ways investments affect locals, who are struggling to survive in an era of economic liberalisation and elite capture.

In 2004, as a part of Tanzania's drive towards privatisation, the Kagera Sugar estate was sold to the Tanzanian-owned Superdoll. Superdoll made substantial infrastructural investments, and managed to position Kagera Sugar as a key player in the national Tanzanian sugar industry. Kagera Sugar obtained a good reputation locally for providing employment opportunities, health services, clear water, primary school education, and infrastructural development, among other services facilitating social development. And while the company was involved in some boundary conflicts with surrounding villages, these conflicts were peacefully resolved.

In 2016, the company gave me a guided visit of its factory, plantation sites, and main buildings. My guide was eager to show me the nice houses in which qualified and managerial staff resided in and emphasised how much Kagera Sugar prioritised the well-being of its employees. After being offered a five-star meal at the company's restaurant, I also visited the company's hospital, primary school, and new mosque. Overall, the tour gave the impression that, beyond the aim to become competitive by improving its technology and efficiency, the company was also concerned with developing fruitful relations with the surrounding local communities by offering them good employment opportunities.

But a closer examination of the working conditions at Kagera Sugar told a very different story from the Alice-in-Wonderland picture painted by the company tour. The reality is that managerial or professional positions are very few, and most local people only have access to low-paid jobs, like cane-cutting or seeding. It also became very clear to me that, in order to access higher-paid positions – and therefore better working conditions – a diploma was not the only prerequisite: a certain degree of political connections with the company were needed as well.

Low-paid workers don't live in the nice houses I encountered during my tour; they live in labour camps, which look like little slums, isolated in the middle of the plantation. Their houses are built with whatever material is available. On top of working on the sugar plantations, most employees must also cultivate their own small plot in order to eat, since the company provides its workers with lunch, but not dinner. Working conditions are harsh, and salaries are very low. I was told that local people can tell when someone starts working for the company because newly hired lower-rung workers "tend to slim up very quickly".

During their workday, the company transports workers from one part of the plantation to another using big open trucks, similarly to how overcrowded trucks transport cattle. Not only is transport uncomfortable, but it is also a daring venture. Fights and knife attacks occur frequently during these commutes. Women are the most vulnerable: in addition to being subjected to sexual harassment, they are verbally abused and sometimes even threatened of rape. These dangerous and risky work conditions don't add up with the rosy picture painted by the company tour.

To make matters worse, workers don't have employment security or insurance, which means that being sick for a couple of days could cost a worker their job. One mother succinctly summed up her daughter's experience as a cane cutter with the words "she is suffering". Her daughter earns TSh48,000 (US\$21.42) – less than US\$2 per day – every two weeks for very hard and physical work. She has no contract, no social benefits, and no employment security. And all this in addition to the perilous truck journey she must undertake every day.

But Kagera's factory and plantation employees are not the only ones facing exploitative work conditions. In 2007–2008, Kagera Sugar put in place a contract farming program, otherwise termed as an outgrowers' scheme. Outgrowers must be registered with Kaziba, the only outgrowers' association that contracts with Kagera Sugar in the region. In



Truck transporting sugar cane. Erin Collins/Flickr. Creative Commons by-nd.

theory, Kaziba is responsible for providing outgrowers with training, improved seeds, fertiliser, and services to transport and harvest sugar-cane. The association is also in charge of annual negotiations with the company on the price for sugarcane.

Unfortunately, while Kaziba was initially created by farmers themselves to increase their bargaining power with the company, it seems that the association's leaders are increasingly working for themselves, using their position with the company for personal gains. This has of course resulted in a number of problems, including a lack of transparency in negotiation processes, unfulfilled commitments to provide training and access to inputs such as improved seeds and fertiliser, and increasing membership and operations fees. Even though the outgrowers I interviewed feel that their association is letting them down, they remain powerless, and every past attempt to challenge Kaziba's monopoly has been unsuccessful.

There are also collusion dynamics between Kaziba and SACCOS, the monopolistic microfinance institution that provides small loans to outgrowers in the region. SACCOS provides loans at very high interest rates, and does little to promote sound financial management. For instance, outgrowers are strongly encouraged by their association to contract loans for their start-up, but are almost forbidden to pay back their loan in one payment, SACCOS preferring that they pay in multiple instalments over a longer period. This institutional push towards indebtedness has put several outgrowers in a difficult financial position. Once the fees to Kaziba and the repayment of the SACCOS loan are deducted from their sales to the company, most of them are left with almost nothing. One of my informants told me that many outgrowers can't even afford to send their children to school. The story here doesn't match the institutional narrative that praises microcredit initiatives and contract farming schemes for empowering farmers economically.

Finally, the company and outgrowers' increasing demand for land has fostered land scarcity in the region. In fact, this rising demand has caused prices to soar, which has in turn created adverse consequences for villagers. First, most farmers don't have land titles and are therefore very vulnerable to land dispossession. Examples of local leaders or district authorities using their authority and positions of power to dispossess villagers from their land rights are all too common in the surrounding villages, especially since leasing village land to outgrowers is a very lucrative venture. Furthermore, the process of land titling itself has become very difficult and highly political. People who want their land surveyed and titled must pay district officials. The legality of this process, and of the costs associated to it remain intentionally ambiguous. But the fact of the matter is that most local villagers don't have the financial resources to afford titling, which is the only available option for protecting their land rights.

In addition to increasing land pressure and diminishing land access for the local population, the arrival of Kagera Sugar in the region has

led district officials to capture the land rights formalisation process for their own material interests. Not only do they benefit financially from charging augmented fees, but they also use their power to dispossess the local population in favour of political friends and allies that may be interested in acquiring increasingly valuable land.

In sum, the arrival of this investor has induced important socio-economic changes in the region that are not fully captured by standard economic indicators. Although it is true that the company provides new direct and indirect employment opportunities – as well as infrastructure, social development, and access to capital to a certain extent – its impacts at the local level are much more complex and worth problematizing. They are deeply embedded in pre-existing differentiation dynamics, and newly created opportunities are often captured by local elites. Empirical evidence shows that promises of local empowerment and socio-economic development often become new political opportunities of exploitation and accumulation for local elites and government officials. The assumption that such investments necessarily benefit local populations should therefore be more systematically questioned.

Extorted and exploited: Haitian labourers on Dominican sugar plantations

Haiti, a former sugar colony, was formed through the rebellion of slaves, yet now many Haitians find themselves completely subordinated to the private sugar companies of the Dominican Republic.

Raúl Zecca Castel

“We are like slaves in freedom, we work and we do not earn any money, we work for nothing ... we cannot even buy shoes, a shirt, a pair of pants ... we are like slaves in freedom because we are free to leave the job, we know that there are other places to go and work. We can leave, so we are free. But when one does this job he is like a slave, a prisoner, because without money he can't go wherever he wants. He has to stay and pay debts at the shop ... and then the job has to be finished.”

With these words, Junior, a 22-year-old Haitian labourer, described to me his condition and that of many of his fellow migrants. They had left Haiti – the [poorest country in the Americas](#) – in search of better life opportunities, and now find themselves working under conditions of severe exploitation in the sugarcane fields of the Dominican Republic.

They live in small, invisible migrant communities not far the heavenly beaches that attract thousands of tourists to the Dominican Republic every year. Known as *bateyes*, they are non-existent places on most of the country's geographic maps. Designed and built to accommodate sugarcane workers only during the harvest season (December to June), the *bateyes* have become real social communities inhabited by whole families of men, women and children. Some [data](#) suggest there are approximately 425 *bateyes* in the Dominican Republic, with a combined population of over 200,000 individuals. These, however, are

rough estimates, as there is no official census and most residents are in the country irregularly.

In the *bateyes*, labourers and their families are housed in dozens in crumbling cabins without the most elementary services – running water, electricity, a toilet – and they spend up to 12 hours a day in the fields. Without protective equipment, and without health insurance and social security, cane clippers remain at the mercy of a reckless logic that decisively binds daily work with the ability to feed oneself, day after day.

Cane clippers remain at the mercy of a reckless logic that decisively binds daily work with the ability to feed oneself.

Wages are paid per ton of cut cane, but workers do not have access to the weights and the amount received is quite arbitrary, often determined by clientelism and corrupt practices. Moreover, a minority of plantations still require workers to purchase primary goods from company-owned stores, where products are sold at increased prices. Wages paid in vouchers instead of cash to keep the system running, a system which creates vicious circles of debt that are very difficult to break.

The creation, and manning, of a sugar economy

Like all his fellow labourers, Junior comes from the first country to abolish slavery in the Americas; a slave revolt in 1804 gave birth to history's first black republic. Prior to independence, Haiti – then Saint-Domingue – had been the richest colony in the world, the source of three quarters of all the sugar consumed globally. The abolition of slav-

ery and independence from the French motherland began a process of still-unchecked ruinous economic decline in Haiti, mainly due to the diplomatic isolation imposed by the international community on the new sovereign state.

The Dominican Republic saw an opportunity to fill the gap in the world sugar supply, and as industrial production came online it looked primary to its fledging neighbour state for cheap labour. A century later, starting in the 1950s when Haiti's François Duvalier and the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo were in power, this necessity turned into a genuine official trade of workers between the two states. For almost 35 years, first Trujillo and then the [Consejo Estatal of Azucar](#) (CEA) recruited around 10,000-15,000 Haitian labourers each season directly from the government.

Haitian migratory flows in the Dominican Republic continued to be promoted, stimulated and institutionally facilitated by both states until at least the mid-1990s, when a crisis in the international sugar market put a brake on the demand for agricultural labour. In 1999, following the approval of a [public enterprise reform law](#), most Dominican sugar plantations were sold to private investors through 30-year lease contracts. As [several studies](#) have highlighted, as well as the numerous testimonies I collected directly from workers who experienced this transition to private management, the privatisation process has led to a serious deterioration of life and work conditions on the plantations as well as a rise in new forms of exploitation.

The high availability of unskilled labour and the low level of demand combine to create a highly recyclable labour market. The large concerns running the plantations exacerbate labourers' already disadvantageous position by using pre-existing factors like irregular migratory status alongside certain management policies to further bind labourers and their families to the plantations. Prohibitions on gardening and the raising of livestock on company property are two such policies, as

is preventing cutters from monitoring how their output is weighed. To ward off protests and strikes, private management organises work shifts into brigades of constantly changing labourers so that no two workers spend too much time together. It is no coincidence that there are no free trade unions, especially when – as many workers reported to me – all signs of dissent are silenced with the threat of dismissal.

Pursuing new lives, despite the obstacles

As a result of declining employment opportunities and the progressive deterioration of working conditions on the plantations, many labourers have begun to look for jobs outside the rural and agricultural context of the *bateyes*. One path has been to return to the main urban and seaside resorts of the country to engage in various activities in the informal economy. For some this has proven a good way forward, and especially second and third generation Haitians in the Dominican Republic have sometimes found ways to fit fully into Dominican civilian life.

Until recently that transition was helped along by the acquisition of citizenship by *ius soli* (birth right citizenship). Not all appreciated this shift, though, and the government instrumentalised the increasing urban presence of Haitians to aggravate racial prejudice against the entire Haitian population. This turned into a controversial [constitutional reform](#) that retroactively eliminated the right of *ius soli* all the way back to 1929, effectively revoking the nationality of more than 200,000 people, many of whom have already been [deported](#).

Paradoxically, this has indirectly transformed the *bateyes* – which have always been seen as isolated socio-economic ghettos, almost geo-political enclaves – into relatively safe places for Haitian migrants. They serve as shelters for those threatened by the spectre of forced repatriation. Yet, even more than before, the Haitian migrant population of *bateyes* remains an extremely exploitable labour reserve, willing to accept any condition imposed on it. Even more than before, to use the words of Junior, the labourers are «like slaves in freedom.»

Containment, resistance, flight: Migrant labour in the agro-industrial district of Foggia, Italy

A 'special economic zone' exists in southeastern Italy where the rules and standards of work do not apply.

Irene Peano

The province of Foggia, the southeastern region of Italy known as Tavoliere or Capitanata, ranks as the country's second largest industrial-tomato producing district, its second largest expanse of fertile flatland in the country, as well as its second largest employer of migrant farm labourers. Or at least that is what official statistics imply for what is a notoriously opaque sector of the Italian economy. Indeed, the agro-industrial district of Foggia, as many others like it, arguably functions as a sort of informal, murky 'special economic zone'. In this ordinarily exceptional space, extra-legal arrangements operate side by side with a series of legal mechanisms to fragment, control and discipline labourers, their mobility and most aspects of their existence.

The zone relies on an institutionally backed, selective suspension of laws and rights through the production of spaces where the labour force can be contained. Such arrangements are well suited to 'just-in-time' and 'to-the-point' modes of production, which in the case of Foggia concern a vast array of raw and processed food products sold on national and, increasingly, international markets, through extensive, retail-driven commodity chains. Thus, against the common view which relates the problem with these spaces to southern Italian agriculture's supposed 'backwardness', the latter arguably keeps well up with the times. Agro-industrial production constitutes a driving force of the economy: it is the only sector in Italy which not only avoided the economic crisis but has experienced constant growth since 2008, especially thanks to the growth of its exports.

In the zone, farm workers earn on average less than half the minimum wage established by collective agreements. Many work for a piece rate rather than an hourly wage, and in most cases do so entirely outside the social security system. Working hours greatly exceed those prescribed, and illegal gangmasters, frequently employed to recruit and discipline the labour force, charge workers for transport to the fields as well as accommodation, whilst these costs should be borne by farmers. For the most part, workers are lodged in shacks, run-down abandoned buildings lacking basic utilities, or institutionally sponsored labour camps. When not left to their own devices, or poorly managed, official lodgings generally enforce strict regulations to limit workers' freedom of movement and association.

Since most farm labourers are migrants from sub-Saharan Africa or Eastern Europe, the costs of their reproduction (i.e. essentially for their upbringing, care and retirement) are further externalised outside Italian borders. This trend has further intensified since the enlargement of the European Union to countries such as Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, which has allowed seasonal migration on a much greater scale. In the periods of the agricultural cycle when they are not needed, these workers can easily return to their country of origin, where the cost of life is lower. This has also meant the further deterioration of working conditions as salaries have been allowed to drop. The Italian state can further dispense with welfare provisions for workers and their dependents (pensions, unemployment benefits, maternity and sick leave, housing and child benefits, and so on) through administrative tools of (partial) exclusion. These range from a totally undocumented status for some non-EU migrants – amounting to virtual rightlessness – to forms of second-class citizenship for EU workers that bar them from the fruition of basic services and rights.

The functioning of the zone thus depends on an array of infrastructures which shape and pace flows of people and commodities, labour and care relations. Among them, those which govern internal and

international mobility play a major role: immigration laws, bilateral agreements, residency regulations, the suspension of Schengen treaties and immigrant labour quotas, the militarisation of borders, the enlargement of the EU, as well as the arbitrary and expedient disrespect of existing regulations all combine to make a large number of potential day labourers available at cheap rates on the market.

Producing space, governing movement

Related to the migration regime and more broadly to the government of labour mobility, different spatial technologies of containment – also founded on a logic of legal exception or on the selective application of the law – are in place to discipline and govern the labour force and its reproduction. From asylum-seeker reception centres to shantytowns, from migrant detention centres and prisons to labour camps, a continuum of unfreedom unfolds to pace movement and foster docility, as well as to extract profit. In this sense, in the agro-industrial zone one can find echoes of the dynamics of command and control which characterised the early-modern plantation as a total institution.

The province of Foggia hosts one of the largest asylum-seeker reception centres in Italy, which accommodates around 1,500 male migrants in dire conditions (repeatedly exposed both by the media, and by judicial and parliamentary inquiries). This provides a constant stream of cheap labour to the farms, and is a major source of profit for the companies managing it in utter disregard of their official mandate. Additionally, the authorities in charge of assessing asylum seekers' applications pressure them to show their 'willingness to integrate' by working in exchange for humanitarian protection. This undercuts wages even further, also on account of the fact that board and accommodation are provided for the 'guests' of these centres, who are thus willing to receive lower salaries, and, as newcomers, are unaware of the regulations and rights concerning farm labour. The 'official' camp is complemented by a large and ever-expanding informal settlement skirting its perimeter, located along a former military airstrip where

the government had initially installed containers and pre-fabricated houses to host the very first waves of refugees in the 1990s, then abandoned to their own destiny.

Here the blurry boundary between – indeed the mutual constitution of – the institutional and the informal, and between government and abandonment, comes into stark relief. Nor is this the only slum in the area. The “ghettoes”, as these settlements are known by their inhabitants, form a sequence of makeshift living clusters which litter the migration route from Niger all the way to Calais, through northern Africa, Italy or Spain. The authorities periodically attempt – and sometimes succeed, as it was the case in 2017 for a large settlement known as Grand Ghetto, as well as of a smaller, Bulgarian Roma slum – to raze them to the ground, more for the benefit of the media and the electorate than as a way to effectively get rid of the problem. Ghettoes have existed in the region at least since the early 1990s, shifting location when evictions and destructions occur, but resilient as hubs for transit migration; as refuges for the undocumented, the poor and the criminalised; as recruitment centres for the farm-labour force; and as platforms supplying a modicum of reproductive services for their inhabitants, from commercial sex to drinking water and cooked meals, hot water, laundry services, phone-charging spots, entertainment and sociality, markets for all kinds of commodities.

Disciplined, but not subdued

Whilst serving to pool labourers and facilitate the task of their recruitment, ghettoes and camps – like prisons and administrative detention centres, of which so many among their inhabitants have had some experience – have also acted as hotbeds of protest and revolt. Dwellers of these spaces, in Foggia and elsewhere in Italy, have not only engaged in acts of spontaneous rebellion but also, especially since 2015, started to self-organise in more structured fashion. They have gained some victories concerning their legal status, residency rights, and police abuse, but much remains to be done, especially on the housing and la-

bour fronts. Indeed, it is evident that ghettos do not operate merely as housing and recruitment centres organic to the workings of the zone. This, of course, is one more reason for the governmental apparatus to further control, divide, and discipline the living places of precarious farm labourers and those servicing their needs.

What is at stake in governmental attempts to wrest these spaces from informal management is precisely a will to control labour and its mobility, indeed to dictate its conditions, to formalise the informal or to exploit it as political and economic capital. The numerous evictions or threats thereof; the spectacular police operations against gangmasters; the public events and conferences that narrowly focus on the issue of illegal intermediation – these not only serve to scapegoat and criminalise, but to avoid addressing the structural forces shaping these dynamics. In fact, they promote a politics in which (legally and socially) exceptional circumstances are normalised.

It is no coincidence, perhaps, that earlier this year a government decree simultaneously allowed for the establishment of special economic zones in southern Italy and allocated resources for the management of different ‘problem-spaces’ in those very areas that should host the zones, including the informal shantytowns in the district of Foggia and in other similar spaces. Whether the formalisation of the zone will materialise, or whether this is merely another exercise in propaganda and the politics of patronage which constantly reproduces emergencies, remains to be seen, and depends in no small part on the capacity for organisation of ghetto-dwellers and their allies.

Navigating unsafe workplaces in Costa Rica's banana industry

Deeply rooted gender and class hierarchies mean that gender-based violence does not end at home - women are also vulnerable to workplace abuse.

Layla Zaglul

In 2015, I worked as a regular employee on two banana farms in Costa Rica for a year to collect ethnographic data on the work conditions in the banana sector. As a woman, I was tasked to work alongside other women, as per the rules of the farms. This type of involvement allowed me to form close bonds with the other women workers, with whom I shared experiences, work, meals and other aspects of my daily routine. The close proximity I shared with these women helped me understand the gender-specific dynamics of the Costa Rican banana industry and their broader implications.

Women working on Costa Rican banana farms are exposed to and suffer from different forms of exploitation, including sexual violence. Gender is an important factor shaping power relations on the shop floor, and this was particularly evident during my time at Caché Farm. My research also showed that, even when women are able to escape different forms of violence in their homes, they often end up encountering the same patterns of gender-based abuse in the workplace; hierarchies enabling the domination of men over women at home are thus reproduced at work. Gender often intersects with other forms of power, such as established hierarchies in the workplace. For instance, while female workers expressed being threatened by their male superiors, they did not experience abuse or harassment from their male co-workers, who occupied relatively similar positions of power.

For context, violence against women is [highly prevalent](#) in Costa

Rica. Between 2010 and 2017, 337 729 requests for various protection measures were made to the police – an average of 132 requests every day, the majority of which involved women seeking protection from men. In addition, the Inter-institutional Commission for the Registry of Femicides [reported](#) there were 26 femicides in Costa Rica in 2016 – the equivalent of a little more than two femicides per month. While these figures mostly relate to incidents of domestic abuse, violence against women is not restricted to women's homes.

Gender dynamics on the shop floor at Caché Farm

Workers in Costa Rica's banana industry are divided into field and packing plant workers, the latter group being mostly (but not exclusively) composed of women. In Caché Farm, the packing plant staff is managed by two men, the foremen, and all other administrative positions, like the role of general manager, are also held by men. Karla, Patricia and Samantha are packing plant workers at Caché Farm. Besides being subjected from various forms of labour exploitation – including being required to work more hours than the legal maximum, being underpaid and not being granted sick leave – all three have experienced different forms of sexual harassment by their superiors at work. It's important to note that Caché Farm does not have a workers' union. In fact, banana unions are [notoriously weak](#) in Costa Rica – largely as a result of efforts by multinational banana companies, the Costa Rican Government, the US embassy and the Catholic Church to replace trade unions with *solidarismo* in the 1980s. Whereas almost all agricultural workers belonged to unions before the *solidarismo* movement, today, [less than five of the 180 plantations](#) are unionised, leaving most workers, and especially women workers, in vulnerable positions.

Karla has been working at Caché for more than three years. She is 36-years-old and lives with her current partner and son. She has two other children from her former relationship who live with her parents; her eldest two children decided to move in with their grandparents when they saw her partner being violent towards her. She told me:

“He once tried to strangle me and my daughter saw that, after that she asked my mother if she could live with her. That is very hard for me, to live away from my kids. But Robin [her husband] has gotten better, he has worked on his anger. He hasn’t been violent ever since”.

Unfortunately for Karla, her experience of gender-based violence does not end at home. She revealed to me that she also feels uncomfortable around the foreman at Caché, Jaime, who has made inappropriate comments to her on various occasions. I remember him once approaching her and whispering something in her ear when we were working together. When he left, she told me:

“You know what he just said to me? He said ‘they call me cassava, because I grow down, not up’. That is because he is short, and he’s telling me that even though he is short, he has a big penis”.

Like Karla, 31-year-old Patricia has experienced verbal and physical violence from her husband. She started working at Caché when her husband lost his job, leaving the family of four without a source of income.

Patricia expressed to me that she feared Jaime and other administrative staff, but not her male co-workers. At the time, Patricia’s division in the packing plant was isolated from most of the other workers. She only worked with Greivin, a male co-worker who happened to be her neighbour and childhood friend. When Jaime started harassing Patricia she felt threatened by him, especially when there was no one else around, so she asked Greivin to make sure she was never left alone with Jaime.

Patricia was also harassed by Juan, a supervisor at the farm, who once presented himself to Patricia naked while she was walking around the plantation. When she saw him, she got scared and ran away, as he pro-

ceeded to shout at her, inviting her to join him. He was masturbating whilst calling her, an act that Patricia interpreted as a threat of rape.

Despite these abuses, the farm's administration, foremen and managers alike, made little to no effort to make Patricia feel safe. After the incident with Juan, Patricia asked her brother-in-law – another male co-worker she was able to trust – to accompany her to the a meeting with her general manager for support. The general manager responded by proposing to prohibit Juan from having any contact with Patricia. After the meeting, Patricia's brother-in-law was fired for unclear and unstated reasons, an event they both saw as consequence for speaking out.

Dismissals of the sort are not uncommon on the farm. Eighteen-year-old Samantha worked at Caché for two months before being fired with no justification. She doesn't have children but she needs to work to help support her family. She lives with her sister and her two nieces. During an interview a few weeks after being fired, Samantha said to me:

“I was fired because I did not sleep with Jaime. He was harassing me via text messages, sending me dirty messages and asking me to send him naked pictures of me”.

At first, Samantha ignored the messages and deleted them because she felt ashamed. But when Jaime started making verbal sexual propositions at work, she confronted him and told him that she would never sleep with him. She was fired a few days later.

The deep roots of gender-based violence

These testimonies from the women at Caché Farm show how broader social hierarchies rooted in patriarchal notions of male domination are reproduced in the daily operations of the banana industry in Costa Rica.

As argued by Kevin Yelvington in *Producing power: Ethnicity, gender, and class in a Caribbean workplace*, the exertion of power through

sexual language is an important tool for control. Indeed, comments like the ones Jaime made towards Karla, Patricia and Samantha are frequently used as a method to discipline the female workforce. Jaime made sexual remarks to instil fear, and to reinforce his position not only as man, but also as their superior – and thus used this combination of privileges to produce labour conditions where women are perpetually disempowered.

And we saw that verbal and other forms of sexual harassment are not limited to the workplace. Women like Patricia and Karla also experience gender-based abuse in their families. In *Spirits of resistance and capitalist discipline: Factory women in Malaysia*, Aihwa Ong argues that, while female workers that were previously subordinated in their homes may have found some economic independence in factories, their dependency on men in the industrial hierarchy intensified. This was the case for Patricia, who told me that she took on the job to break from her dependency on her husband, but encountered the same patterns of gender-based violence in the workplace, where she was once again dependent on a man and consequently vulnerable to and a victim of his abuse.

In many cases, the violence experienced in the workplace can result in termination without justification, as was shown by the experiences of Samantha and Patricia's brother-in-law. And in the absence of unions or other types of workers' organisations, women have no option but to turn to the abusers themselves or to their superiors, who are apparently indifferent to the violence propagated by their peers. Despite potential differences in the nature of gender-based violence, power relationships on the shop floor are reinforced by and reproduce deeply rooted patterns and structures of gender inequality.

The problem of “working for someone”: debt, dependence and labour exploitation in Chad

Precolonial elites used to enslave the farmers of rural Chad, now they hold them in debt bondage. How much has changed, how much has not?

Valerio Colosio

Exploitation in the agricultural sector usually results from the subordinate position of workers engaged as farmhands or sharecroppers. Their weak bargaining position vis-à-vis land owners prevents them from fighting back against low salaries or unequally shared harvest revenues. This does not mean, however, that a farmer is secure when he owns the land he farms. He is not. Small farmers' dependence on agricultural cycles force them to borrow money to buy inputs at the beginning of the seeding season and, consequently, to quickly sell the crops after the harvest – when the prices are lower – to repay the debt. This dynamic has been described in various African contexts where small farmers are engaged, with urging from the state, in farming cash crops like cocoa or coffee.

In this article I want to tackle a case where the weakness of farmers towards traders puts them in positions of extreme exploitation, namely the debt contracted by farmers producing cereals in the Guéra region of central Chad. Here farmers are pressed to take loans from the traders of their main crop, often at such high interest rates that they become locked into debt and obliged to give most if not all the harvest away to service that debt. In this situation, the farmer maintains ownership over the land he farms but loses control of its products.

Cereal harvest and debt in central Chad

The Guéra region is a mountainous area in central Chad that has been inhabited by scattered groups of non-Muslim farmers for centuries. [The target of slavers' raids in former times](#), the people of the

Guéra region were brought under the ‘protection’ of the colonial government in the first decade of the twentieth century, only to then be forced to farm the land to pay for a new head tax. This crafted a new economic system where precolonial elites took control of trade, extracting surplus from agricultural production by putting local small holder farmers in debt to them.

This dynamic is reported across the Sahel in locations where the climate and agriculture cycle lend themselves to millet and sorghum farming. Traders buy huge amounts of cereals after the harvest, when the price is low. They keep the cereals in their stores and then sell them in the hungry season. By that point the farmers are running out of cereals themselves, and the traders offer to replenish their stocks in exchange for (much greater amounts of) cereal from the next harvest. In this way the farmer loses a big part of his harvest, making it likely that he will be more vulnerable the following year and keeping him trapped in a relationship of dependence with the traders.

Working for someone: local perception of freedom and labour in Guéra

I heard about the issues related to the cereal loans before going to Guéra, while talking with leaders of local associations in N’Djamena, Chad’s capital. Humanitarian organisations are creating, in many Sahelian countries, a network of ‘communitarian cereal banks’ in a bid to break the debt trap and to guarantee food security for small-hold farmers. These organisations are set up to lend cereals at a low interest rate in the hungry season.

The workers in these associations liken the situation facing farmers to some forms of slave labour that took place across Chad prior to the twentieth century. There are, however, some peculiarities in contemporary Guéra region. For example, the religious divide of the slave times – where non-Muslim communities were prey for neighbouring Muslim sultanates – no longer holds. Both the traders and the farmers

are now Muslim. Moreover, farmers are not stigmatised as a low social class, as happens elsewhere in the Sahel to groups labelled as slave-descendants or to blacksmiths in the Guéra.

Interestingly, while NGO workers in N'Djamena chose to emphasise the ruthlessness of the traders and the powerlessness farmers, the farmers themselves seemed more concerned about the need to “work for someone else” to secure their own subsistence, than about the morality of the traders. In the farmers’ stories, falling in the debt trap is described as a sort of accident, the main drawback of which is to concentrate household manpower on activities “for someone else”. One farmer told me that he had a bad harvest that year and was aware that he would not have enough sorghum in his granary for the hungry season.

For sure, at a certain point I will need to leave the village and work for someone else, but this makes everything difficult. I will have less time to prepare my field for the next harvest and I risk having another bad harvest. Therefore, many people ask loan to the traders, despite the bad rates they offer. They try to avoid working for someone else, hence they ask them (for) enough cereals to remain in the village and prepare their field. But then when they must give back the harvest to the traders, they realise they also worked for someone else.

Cereals are the only wealth of farmers: they are stored to guarantee the survival of the household and used in the local economy as cash. Once the granary is filled, the farmer can sell the exceeding cereals and other crops (sesame, peanuts, tomatoes, okra). If the harvest is not enough, some household members need to move from the village and look for a temporary job. Usually this task is entrusted to youths and women, whose subordinate position in the domestic sphere is considered fitter for some seasonal occupations (i.e. brick production, migration to the city, petty trades). Furthermore, if the head of the household becomes

involved in such activities the family will likely face problems in preparing the fields the following year. Where that might be necessary, local farmers may prefer to ask for a loan and remain in the village, rather than “work for someone else” and start the farming late. As undesirable as that is, it still seems to happen frequently.

The presence of history

In the Guéra the traders are locally associated with ‘Arabs’ – a word used to indicate a vast array of nomadic groups of Arab descent who seasonally migrate across central Chad with their cattle. Although the majority of ‘Arabs’ base their livelihood on herding, many also serve as traders. The vast social networks they have created through their transhumance facilitates their careers as traders, to the point that Arab and trader are almost synonymous.

The relationship between Arab and local farmer have been ambiguous over the time. Most Guéra villages have “their own Arabs”, regularly bringing their cattle to graze and fertilise the fields, as well as to exchange dairy products with agricultural products. However, in many other cases, before the colonial government asserted control over the territory herders periodically attacked farmers’ villages to capture captives and steal cereals.

The traders controlling the cereal trade are often former herders, or members of herders’ families who sell some cattle to start their activities. Despite frequent cases of peaceful coexistence, I perceived among farmers a feeling of weakness toward them. The Arabs decide the prices at the market, and at times allow their cattle to trample and eat some of the farmers’ crops. If a fine is levied its impact for the herder is much lower than the loss of the harvest is for the farmer. These traders’ livelihoods do not depend on fragile capital – cereal – that needs to be reproduced each year and that can be quickly destroyed. They are also the only local actors with easy access to credit, thanks to the value of their cattle.

Another farmer, who is actively involved in the cereal bank project, explained the situation to me using both past and present to form his narrative:

Local people were totally subjugated by the Arabs, who built more than 60 cereal storages in the forest, collecting all the cereals farmed by the people. The nomadic used to do this to stock their cereal, but in this case, they (are) doing it just to act as usurers with the local people.

The system is slowly changing. Farmers told me the exploitation related to cereal debt has reduced over the past ten years, as humanitarian organisations and the state are offering some alternative routes to survival in the hungry season. The same cannot be said for the relationship between farmers and traders, which remain relatively static: borrowing cereal from a trader is considered a bad but rational option in a context where the state is not able to impose rules on traders and farmers are too weak to challenge contemporary power relations. A bad harvest is a likely event and could easily lead them into a debt trap. Repaying debt to traders is a terrible option, but sometimes loans are the only alternative to migration, and the impact of migration on small-hold farmers is also very harsh.

Working for former masters in Madagascar: a 'win-win' game for former slaves?

Workers and landowners in the Malagasy highlands see sharecropping as an arrangement where both benefit, but that only holds as long as the former masters benefit most.

Marco Gardini

Despite being formally illegal since the 1970s, sharecropping is one of the more common working agreements between landowners and their labourers in the highlands of Madagascar. Sharecropping agreements are often represented as a sort of win-win game by both landowners and tenants, particularly for rice cultivation, the main agricultural sector of the island. They have allowed otherwise landless families to install themselves in fertile regions for anywhere from a few years to several generations while keeping two-thirds of the production for themselves. At the same time, landowners, without moving a finger, obtain rice to satisfy domestic consumption or to resell, prevent others from illegally occupying their land, and maintain a strong emotional and economic link to the land of their ancestors (*tanindrazana*) and their family tombs, a crucial benefit if they have moved to urban areas.

Tenants must maintain the fields and provide their own fertiliser. They may occupy the local house of the landowners at no cost, and in the intercropping period plant crops other than rice. These help the land to regain its fertility and can provide sustenance or additional income for the family. In regions where labour is scarce and the landowners have other, more important sources of revenue – such as a position in the government or a flourishing trade activity – tenants furthermore can be relatively confident that they will not be evicted in the long run and that the landowners will look the other way if they keep slightly more than their share of the harvest.

Despite their benefits, sharecropping arrangements conceal a number of practices and representations that reinforce power structures and economic inequalities. This is particularly important in a post-slavery context such as that found in the Malagasy highlands, where slave ancestry is strongly stigmatised and the descendants of slaves continue to face persistent economic subordination.

It is therefore crucial to consider contemporary sharecropping agreements through the lens of the historical legacies of slavery, as these still inform and partially structure local forms of agricultural exploitation. Two family histories that I recorded in the rural regions near the town of Ambositra, in the highlands of Madagascar, demonstrate not only the relevance of the past for the present, but also the ever-changing and fragile balance of power between landowners and tenants.

Two families bound by trust, but not forever

Solo (a pseudonym) is 60 years old, widowed, and lives with his two sons, their wives, and their five children in a small house near a terraced slope a couple of hours walk west of Ambositra. After the French colonial authorities formally abolished slavery in 1896, Solo's great grandfather, like many newly freed slaves, continued to work for his former master under new terms. He was granted a small portion of land to build a house and cultivate for his own needs, and in exchange he continued to cultivate the rest of his former master's land for free.

The land grant Solo's great grandfather received did not, however, make it 'his' – it came with restrictions attached. Most importantly from a personal standpoint, his former master refused to allow him to build his own family tomb on it, which represented for former slaves and their descendants the most important symbol of their regained 'freedom.' After a few years, Solo's great grandfather decided to build his own family tomb on terrain obtained by burning down part of a nearby, and unclaimed, forest.

The terms of the agreement changed in the 1960s, when the former master's descendants decided to move in Antananarivo, where the family head now worked in the administration. They offered Solo's father the possibility of continuing to live on the land as a sharecropper, guarding the family home and tomb in exchange for two-thirds of the harvest. Like the agreement between the former master and Solo's great grandfather, this new one was not written down but rooted in the trust shared between the two families. After every crop, the landowner's family came to take their part of rice – which they used for self-consumption – without spending too much time checking if the rice division was correct.

For the landowner's family – which had other sources of revenue – the most important thing was to reaffirm their control over their possessions. Solo's father was always at their disposal to prepare their rural house and the terrain surrounding their family tombs whenever the landowners decided to organise a *famadihana* – an exhumation ceremony that people on the highlands perform every few years in order to honour their dead and reaffirm their links with their *tanindrazana* ('land of the ancestors').

This relationship broke down five years ago, when one of the former master's descendants lost his job in Antananarivo and decided to regain full possession of his family's land, evict Solo's family, and hire day labourers in their place. Solo asked the help of the local '*fokontany* chief', an elected office who represents the last gear of the state administration and often is called upon to resolve conflicts between families. The *fokontany* chief (who was a good friend of Solo since their childhood) tried to find a possible mediation between the parties. In a first moment, the former master's descendant accepted to allow Solo's family to stay in exchange for a bigger part of the harvest (half instead of one-third), but then shifted stance and threatened to formally accuse Solo of illegal appropriation.

Solo was not scared. He saw this as an empty threat and he knew the Malagasy justice system was quite poor in dealing with these kinds of matters. Two years later, someone set fire to the bushes near his home. His house burned down, forcing him and his offspring to move to Antananarivo, where his daughter hosted them. When the *fokontany* chief told me the story of Solo and his family, he seemed sincerely sorry about how things ended up for Solo. But, he also stated: “At the end of the day, it was not their land. They were *andevo* [“slaves/slave descendants”]. They did not belong here”.

The power relations and the struggle for social prestige behind the ‘win-win’ game

Solo’s story illustrates not only the social and economic subordination of many slave descendants, but also of how the status of sharecroppers can easily change when crises in other working sectors affect the ascending economic trajectory of landowners who had tried to emancipate themselves from agricultural activities. When the dominant figure in the relationship loses his privileged condition, the breakdown in the so-called ‘win-win game’ of sharecropping that follows immediately reveals the power inequalities between the two parties.

Moreover, the economic logic implied in the ‘win-win game’ rhetoric hides the fact that sharecropping agreements reinforce the prestige of landowners at the expense of tenants. In a post-slavery context as the highlands of Madagascar, where many people of free and noble origin consider slave descendants impure, inferior and refuse to marry them, how prestige is acquired and how subordination is reinforced are crucial. Owning land and controlling labourers is one way to achieve the former. While many people of free or noble descent are now part of the proletariat, and not all sharecroppers are the descendants of slaves, many landowners who employ their own workforce can now dress in the clothes of the “master”. Sometimes this aspect is even more important of the direct economic gain.

Stéphan (a pseudonym), for example, is a teacher in a private school in Antananarivo. He is the son of a man of free origin from Ambositra who migrated to the capital in 1970s, leaving his 'ancestral' lands in the hands of sharecroppers on the two-thirds plan. Stéphan, who inherited his father's land together with his two brothers, is well aware that "his" sharecroppers hide part of the harvest every year. This does not bother him. The important thing is that they address him with respect when he returns, since "there" he can feel as a "master". This helps makes up for his everyday life, where he is just another migrant living in the poor and stigmatised peripheries of Antananarivo, together with – and, to his shame, often confused with – the many slave descendants who inhabit his neighbourhood.

Stéphan is firmly convinced that his sharecroppers are slave descendants, although he has no proof of that. For him, the simple fact of being obliged to work as a sharecropper is sufficient evidence of their subordinate status, and even if he treats them with courtesy he views them with disdain and superiority.

What these stories teach us is that sharecropping agreements do not only concern local dynamics of labour exploitation or the extraction of surplus. They also affect attempts to renegotiate individual and collective identities. Indeed, to use another game metaphor, that of the zero-sum game, legacies of slavery in Madagascar have structured landowner-tenant relations in terms that seemingly make the social prestige of the landowners grow only as much as a sharecropper's prestige is reduced or kept at bay. For tenants, it is a struggle not only to maintain access to land and a fair share of the production, but also to avoid being trapped in a stigmatised social category.

Section four

Global capitalism and modern
slavery

Global capitalism and modern slavery

The fourth section takes a step back from empirical case studies to explore neoliberal capitalism's reliance on an irregular, migratory workforce as a whole.

Alice Bellagamba, Marco Gardini, Laura Menin

'Modern slavery' has become a catch-all and media attractive category that conflates together human trafficking, debt bondage, sex trafficking, and forced marriage, as well as various types of bounded labour that are perceived as comparable to slave systems of the past. This concept has become the core of a 'new abolitionist' agenda that is informing the activities and policies of governments, international agencies, and NGOs all over the world.

For its critics, the modern slavery framework falls far short of addressing the structural causes that produce labour exploitation and unfreedom under global neoliberal capitalism. Activists and international organisations fighting against so-called 'modern slavery' generally limit their focus to 'bad' exploiters and exploited 'victims'. These are considered exceptions in an allegedly 'free' capitalistic labour market, and it is to this market that 'rescued victims' should be returned in order to be 'freed'. They tend to frame labour exploitation as a simple lack of law enforcement or as a juridical matter, ignoring its wider economic and political roots.

The 'new abolitionist' agenda pays very little attention to the fact that current forms of labour exploitation represent a constitutive part of a neoliberal capitalistic order. It is an order characterised by increasingly precarious labour conditions; reduced welfare, public services, and labour rights; the privatisation of public resources; spiraling debt; shrinking and tamed labour unions; and the legal and political marginalisation of large sectors of the (migrant and non-migrant) workforce.

All these aspects are crucial to understanding how labour exploitation is structured in the neoliberal order that connects – and divides – the Global North and South.

This final part of *Shadows of slavery: refractions of the past, challenges of the present* brings together selection of pieces from *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* that help problematise the concept of ‘modern slavery’ and the relationship between global capitalism and current forms of exploitation and unfreedom. Michael Dottridge focuses on the many shortcomings of the concept of ‘modern slavery’, both when it is used as a heuristic tool as well as for the political and social effects it triggers in the current international debate.

Moving along this line and with a bottom up approach, the following three articles present case studies that point out the ambiguities of framing current forms of harsh exploitation under the label of ‘modern slavery’. Antonio De Lauri analyses debt traps among kiln workers in Pakistani Punjab, showing how “we need to go beyond this simplistic ‘victim paradigm’ in order to understand the *social nature* of bondage as well as to situate that bondage within both local and global systems of domination and dependence”.

James Esson explores the case of football academies in Ghana recently accused of promoting child trafficking. He invites us to move away from the modern slavery paradigm, focusing instead on the “broader structural conditions that funnel youth into the football industry” as a venue of upward social mobility and successful migration. Gloria Carlini, meanwhile, discusses how the voices of Ghanaian migrants working in the tomato fields of South Italy should be considered more seriously before subsuming them under the category of ‘new slaves’, since many of them distance themselves from this definition. The bottom up/ethnographic approach of these contributions lights up ambiguities and contradictions that are generally obscured by the generalist, salvific, and often paternalistic framework of the ‘new abolitionist’ agenda.

The last three articles consider labour exploitation in the neoliberal world from a wider perspective, able to link particular cases to structural forces of a global scale. **Nicola Phillips argues** that those who are the most exploited are not always the poorest ones. While income certainly play a crucial role in these dynamics, other factors – e.g. education, migrants and gender rights, and the precarious and erratic nature of work – are relevant as well. **Benjamin Selwyn explores** how global supply chains are becoming tools of labour exploitation for international firms and global capital, and argues that several forms of activism and campaigns “understand harsh labour as a consequence of corporate malpractice, rather than as a structural feature of the global economy”.

Susan Ferguson and David McNally’s article closes this fourth section, reminding us how the global migrant workforce is vital to capitalist expansion and that capitalism has always been perpetuated through legal and illegal regimes of migrancy and forced labour. As they argue:

“[...] the current era makes it clear that unfree labour is not a relic of the past. Indeed, capital is not only increasingly reliant on migration, but specifically on the transnational flow of people who are deprived of full citizenship, people who to varying degrees comprise an unfree global workforce”.

In this perspective, the modern slavery framework – maybe unconsciously, maybe not – has often the ambiguous consequence of obscuring, rather than illuminating, processes of labour exploitation in the current era. Their causes are in the capital’s constant need of cheap workforce and the inability – or unwillingness – of governments to translate the abstractness of labour rights into an effective system of social justice and redistribution. The same old history – we could say – with some new developments.

Eight reasons why we shouldn't use the term 'modern slavery'

The imperialist and racist undertones of 'modern slavery' should be troubling for anybody seeking to advance human rights.

Michael Dottridge

This speech was originally given at the 'Regional implementation initiative 2017 on preventing & combating human trafficking – 're-branding human trafficking: the interface of migration, human trafficking and slavery', held in Vienna on 29 September 2017, under the original title of 'Modern day slavery versus human trafficking: understanding the effects and consequences of policies and agendas behind different concepts'.

It is less than two decades since diplomats sat down here in Vienna to draft what became the UN protocol on trafficking in persons, sparking off all sorts of changes discussed at previous round tables.

So it might appear premature to be overthrowing the anti-trafficking system and replacing references to trafficking in human beings with the less legalistic concept of 'modern slavery'. However, this is what numerous organisations and states are now pushing for. As the new term gets media attention mainly in English, and relatively little in Europe, I want to brief you on what is going on. Although I was director of an NGO called 'Anti-Slavery International' until 2002, I want to explain why I consider the term 'modern slavery' inappropriate and divisive.

The creation and growth of 'modern slavery'

'Modern slavery' was first proposed back in the 1970s, when it was considered and rejected for a minor UN working group that ended up with the more lugubrious title of 'Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery'. The term was put to use elsewhere, as in the title of the NGO Committee for the Eradication of Modern Slavery (CEM),

which was set up in France in the mid-1990s to work for the release of migrant domestic workers held in virtual captivity in Paris.

However, after the UN Trafficking Protocol was adopted in 2000, an academic whom I'd worked with, Kevin Bales, went on telling everyone who would listen that patterns of extreme exploitation around the world should be called 'slavery'. He was one of the trustees of the NGO where I was director. He subsequently set up an NGO in the USA, Free the Slaves.

Bales' break-through came when he met an Australian mining billionaire, Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest, who was inspired to invest millions in eradicating 'modern slavery'. He established the Walk Free Foundation in Perth (Australia) in about 2011. Bill Gates [reportedly advised him](#) it was important to measure whatever you try to eradicate. So, despite much advice to the contrary, in 2013 Walk Free published the first edition of its Global Slavery Index to say how many people were in 'modern slavery'.

The same year Mr. Forrest announced that he would contribute US\$10 million towards what was planned to be a \$100 million 'freedom fund to combat modern-day slavery', matched by \$10 million each from Humanity United, a charity set up by the founder of E-Bay, and Legatum, set up by a New Zealand financier. The Freedom Fund was given the job of supporting NGO initiatives against modern slavery. It established its headquarters in London, and has succeeded in persuading other business philanthropists to donate further vast amounts.

In 2014 Mr. Forrest proposed setting up a public-private Global Fund to End Slavery and offered US\$200 million to start this, if governments would match his funding. Initially governments were wary, but the International Labour Organisation (ILO) took the proposal seriously. Finally, in September 2017, the money started flowing in. The US government allocated US\$25 million and the United Kingdom £20 million to set up this fund, totalling €43 million. It is intended to finance national plans

to eradicate modern slavery in 50 countries with the worst patterns of slavery, starting, it was suggested, with Ghana and Nepal.

In announcing the grant, the US secretary of state referred to ‘modern slavery’ instead of the term in previous use in US government circles, “TIP”. The ILO’s support comes in the form of Alliance 8.7 and last week 37 states at the UN General Assembly backed a UK ‘[call for action to end forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking](#)’ (only the UK and five others were EU states – Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Malta and Spain).

*The rich philanthropists who finance
anti-slavery organisations do not
appear keen on human rights.*

You probably know that Walk Free published further editions of the Global Slavery Index in 2014 and 2016, substantially increasing its estimate each time of the number of people in ‘modern slavery’. From 29.8 million in 2013 the total went to 35.8 million in 2014 to 45.8 million in 2016. This month the Global Slavery Index has cooperated with the ILO to produce a new global estimate of the number of people in forced labour and forced marriage, a total of 40.3 million people – 24.9 million in forced labour and 15.4 million in forced marriage. This replaces the ILO’s previous estimate in 2012 that there were 20.9 million people in forced labour.

While numbers are always newsworthy, I don’t want you to be dazzled by them, for the organisations started by Mr. Forrest are having

influence in many other ways. Furthermore, two governments have embraced the concept of ‘modern slavery’: the United Kingdom, which [consolidated its existing legislation on human trafficking](#) in the (2015) Modern Slavery Act and persuaded the UN, at the last minute, to include a reference the same year to modern slavery in sustainable development goal 8.7; and Australia, which has been holding hearings about adopting [a similar law](#).

Now I’d better explain what is meant by ‘modern slavery’, given that it is not a term used in international law. Further, I’d better admit my involvement, for at the time of the adoption of the UN Trafficking Protocol in 2000, I was involved in preparing a [review of international law on contemporary forms of slavery](#), published by the UN in 2002. This referred to the UN’s two conventions on slavery and practices similar to slavery (1926 and 1956); the ILO’s conventions on forced labour and child labour; the new UN Trafficking Protocol (2000), and also to an earlier, 1949 UN convention on the exploitation of the prostitution of others. Urmila Bhoola, the UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, has written that “[T]he practices encompassed by the term ‘contemporary forms of slavery’ cover traditional slavery; the institutions and practices similar to slavery, such as debt bondage, serfdom and forced marriage; and forced labour”.¹

The harm of the ‘modern slavery’ paradigm

What then is the harm of using the term ‘modern slavery’, if it is just an alternate way of referring to what the UN calls ‘contemporary forms’? Let me list a few of my personal concerns:

1. Westerners seem happy to apply the term to a wide range of practices in developing countries, while human rights defenders in many developing regions think it is inappropriate. For example, in South Asia bonded labour is rife but activists do not believe that condemning it as ‘slavery’ will hasten its demise.

2. The term 'slavery' implies that the countries said to have large numbers in modern slavery are allowing something awful to occur. So, instead of the development/cooperation paradigm that was dominant in the second half of the twentieth century, with richer countries supporting efforts to bring about social and economic change in poorer ones, we revert back to the nineteenth century notion that some countries are uncivilised, requiring pressure from outside to abandon unacceptable practices. Even if I buy into the idea that extreme forms of exploitation are completely unacceptable, I don't support the suggestion that evangelising missionaries from a small number of rich countries are an appropriate method to bring about change.

We should avoid supporting terminology which sounds imperialist and potentially racist.

3. Using the term 'modern slavery' precipitates us into 'name and shame' mode, i.e., pointing the finger at governments or businesses which tolerate it or are not deemed to take adequate action to stop it. This is appropriate occasionally, but not a sound basis for international cooperation (as I think we've already learnt from the experience of the US TIP report).
4. In the minds of people in Western Europe and the Americas, the term 'slavery' refers to the transatlantic slave trade and the 400-year period when Africans were taken captive, transported across the Atlantic with high mortality rates and enslaved and routinely tortured, worked to death or killed. There is a real danger that

using the term to refer to levels of exploitation which do not meet the legal definition of slavery has the effect of trivialising or relativising historical slavery and thereby reducing any sense of responsibility for the countries that profited from slavery. This fits neatly into the agenda of white supremacists.

5. This brings me to one of my deepest worries, that the governments that have decided to use the term ‘modern slavery’ (Australia, the UK and the USA) are ones which appear keen to abandon conventional approaches to development and happy to seek to impose change from above. Further, this year Australia and the UK started using bullying tactics to persuade others to follow their usage, notably when there was a debate at the UN Security Council last March about trafficking, slavery and forced labour in the context of armed conflict and modern slavery.²

6. This is linked to the question of human rights. The rich philanthropists who finance anti-slavery organisations do not appear keen on human rights and certainly do not feel bound to implement anything called a human rights approach. Mr. Forrest has been relatively outspoken on this point, though more so in the context of action concerning indigenous Australians. Concerning charitable donations to indigenous Australians, earlier this year he [reportedly said](#): “We’ve been heavily influenced by the macabre mirage of the human rights argument as opposed to do what we know is better for Australia and our people”, and, “we tolerate any activist who says forced marriage is a human right of cultures; I say take your culture back to where it came from. Because here in Australia, forced marriage is just another form of slavery”. I agree with his condemnation of harmful practices that are condoned by some as ‘culture’ or ‘tradition’, but I’m afraid his use of words reminds me of how various dictatorships that I visited in the 1980s used to play with the term ‘human rights’ in order to belittle fundamental human rights principles.

7. Three years ago, when the Modern Slavery Bill was being prepared in the UK, I wrote [a blog](#) saying that “apart from questions of legal terminology...the use of the term ‘modern slavery’ has potentially damaging consequences for the very people whom a new law is supposed to protect. The prime problem is that the term implies a degree of exploitation that is so extreme as to fall outside the ordinary world of work. It also implies that such exploitation cannot be solved by any of the techniques that have been traditionally used to combat work place abuse, such as regulation, work place inspections and the formation by workers of associations to defend themselves against abuse (and trade unions)”.

8. This fear, that the term ‘modern slavery’ puts a focus on exceptional situations, such as the vile enslavement practised by Daesh in Iraq and Syria, rather than considering more routine patterns of forced labour and forced prostitution around the world, was borne out once the UN Security Council had its first debate about trafficking and slavery in December 2015 (focusing on Daesh). Further, introducing the new term also reignited Cold War battles at the UN, this time with the former Soviet faction leaping to the defence of the term ‘trafficking in persons’, in which Belarus, in particular, had invested, and defending the right of the UNODC to be the main UN agency active on this issue. Hence my feeling that moving on from the term ‘trafficking’ has opened Pandora’s Box (with the ILO challenging the UNODC and trying to increase its influence by organising SDG Alliance 8.7).

Let me conclude here by saying that I’ve been an ardent critic of the way the concept of human trafficking has developed, so it’s not that I’m in favour of one term over the other. However, having seen a poor legal definition (of human trafficking) oblige me to spend years explaining what it meant, I’m loath to see yet more time and money wasted on disputes about concepts, instead of investing in action to stop unacceptable exploitation and to assist the victims.

For the moment, the solution I propose is to invest as much effort as possible in developing effective methods to stop extreme forms of exploitation, but also to avoid supporting terminology which sounds imperialist and potentially racist. Primarily, this means encouraging measures by governments to amend existing policies that allow or even encourage extreme exploitation to occur.

Thanks for your attention.

1. See Urmila Bhoola (2017) Report of the special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, UN doc. A/HRC/36/43. This paper points out that, “A hierarchy in international law exists among slavery and other forms of exploitation, with slavery being the most severe type of exploitation. The element of control of the person or his/her labour is present in the various forms of exploitation to different degrees, and the most extreme form of control is manifested when it exhibits powers attached to ownership. This accounts for a distinction between slavery and other lesser exploitive practices, such as forced labour, servitude and the institutions and practices similar to slavery. However, such practices can also constitute ‘slavery’ in law and can be prosecuted as such if they manifest any or all of the powers relating to the right of ownership or if the control exercised over the person subjected to the practices is equivalent to possession of the person”. In addition, various topics are the responsibility of other UN special rapporteurs, such as sale of children, the commercial sexual exploitation of children, forced child labour, and some of the other ‘worst forms of child labour’ defined by ILO Convention 182 (1999).

2. During the debate, representatives of 13 states (out of the 60 who spoke) invoked the term ‘modern slavery’: UK, US, Uruguay, Australia, Spain, Colombia, Liechtenstein, Hungary, Cambodia, Slovakia, Ireland, Israel, Nigeria (listed in the order in which they spoke).

Brick kiln workers and the debt trap in Pakistani Punjab

Debt is everywhere a tool of social control, and no more so than in the brick kilns of Pakistani Punjab, where it travels across generations.

Antonio De Lauri

Central and south Asian brick kilns have long attracted the attention of humanitarian agencies, activists and scholars as sites of severe labour exploitation. Brick kiln workers are routinely described as ‘modern-day slaves’ in need of rescue. But we need to go beyond this simplistic ‘victim paradigm’ in order to understand the *social nature* of bondage as well as to situate that bondage within both local and global systems of domination and dependence. This is what I propose to do over the next 1000 words, using a case study of the brick kilns I researched in the Pakistani areas of Gujrat, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi in 2015 and 2016. First, however, we must understand the crucial role of debt as an engine of capitalism, as well as the ways in which it restricts the choices of nominally ‘free’ labour.

Debt bondage and the rise of Indian capitalism

Scholars of south Asia are divided over when and how capitalism first took root in colonial India (of which Pakistan was formerly part), yet most agree that it was already a reality by the late nineteenth century. One of its hallmarks was the growth of long working hours for low hourly wages in agriculture and industry, propelled by the imposition of debt.

Loans were given to workers in the ‘credit market’ at an exceedingly high price and then paid off in the form of low wages in the labour market. These wages were kept artificially low, ensuring the development of a cycle linking debt to labour dependence. Workers indebted themselves ‘voluntarily’ to help pay for their survival, and then had to ‘voluntarily’ take jobs which paid so little as to require their further in-





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debtedness. This flow of demand for both credit and wage-labour was continual, with debt thus playing a crucial role in the establishment – and maintenance – of capitalism in the sub-continent.

Life and debt in the brick kiln today

Such dynamics are echoed in contemporary Pakistani brick kilns. My research focuses on those at the bottom of the brick kiln hierarchy – people who typically work on piece rates to pay off debt accumulated with the brick kiln owner. This debt comes in the form of an ‘advance’ (*peshgi*) that people take to pay for things like marriages or illness, or to buy material goods such as motorbikes. Although the debt is held by an individual household head, *all* household members are involved in producing bricks to pay it off. And since households face regular deductions as part of their repayments, they are often compelled to ask for additional advances, with the ensuing debt *cycle* ultimately transferred inter-generationally.

An example of this indebtedness is Faisal, who I first met in October 2015 at a kiln near Rawalpindi. He was 41 and told me that he had been living in brick kilns for 25 years. His son and two daughters grew up in brick kilns with him. “I didn’t realise I was not a free person”, he said, “until I asked for a second loan from the owner of the kiln. I was young at that time and needed money because my father didn’t have a job... There is no other way for people like us to get money”.

The lack of basic social and economic protection, as well as the lack of access to credit, are the fundamental prerequisites of this kind of debt-dependence. Faisal’s story is a case in point, as is Syeda’s. Syeda is an 18 year-old girl I met in a brick kiln in Gujrat in June 2015. “In Pakistan”, she said, “once you ask for a loan, you become a debtor forever. Nobody cares. We ask for loans as the only way to make a living”. When I met her again in February 2016, she was pregnant: “I have to keep working”, she said, “even if it’s harder now”.

Because debt dominates the entire horizon for people like Faisal and Syeda, it is fair to say that their future itself is bonded. But as Syeda put it, “If we were not here in the kiln, how could we manage to have a child? It’s a bad life. But at least it’s a life”. Bonded relationships *can* provide a measure of security in situations of grinding poverty and insecurity, and workers exchange their subservience for protection.

Debt: a social relationship

Yet a full picture of debt bondage under capitalism can only really emerge once when we bring ‘the social’ back into our analysis. “*Pesghi* is the only possibility we have to fulfil our duties in society”, Faisal explained to me. “There are several issues to think about – *dowry* being a good example”. In his case, he also had to worry about remittances and the future of his children. These socio-cultural duties all require money – and when you’re too poor or too excluded to access cheap money, you end up needing debt.

Socio-cultural factors can be seen in other dynamics too. In Rawalpindi, the owner of a kiln explained to me that “migrants and low cast families tend to accept working conditions that locals would refuse. They are willing to live in a way that others would consider unbearable”. This often includes being deeply in debt and having that debt condition their labour. In part, this is the result of migrant and low caste poverty. But not solely. Low caste families, for example, also face radical social immobility due to their status, and debt offers them an alternative to street begging. Migrants, on the other hand, use brick kiln work as an alternative to escape agriculture, but their social and economic isolation strengthens the bonding capacity of the debts they accrue.

Fictions of freedom

Debt, in itself, does not lead to bondage. Rather, the potential for that kind of exploitation emerges out of the way in which indebtedness interacts with social, legal, and economic uncertainty, and with social and cultural inequalities and injustices. In situations of vulnerability

and social marginalisation, debt can become the crucial link between a person's 'free' choice and their unfree life – to paraphrase Marx, they might 'choose' their indebtedness, but they don't do so in conditions of their own making.

This is what is hidden behind the narrative of workers 'voluntarily taking on debts that they must repay', which one often hears amongst brick kiln owners. Such monetary-individualistic morality obscures the way in which 'modern-day bondage' is deeply rooted in local social webs of inequality, with global connections and implications. A so-called 'free person' may well create her debt by using the system of loans and 'advances'. But in doing so she plays out at a micro level an entire macro context of inequality and dependence. And modern slavery experts would do well to take this into account.

Modern slavery, child trafficking, and the rise of West African football academies

Ghanaian football academies have been accused of exploiting talent and promoting trafficking in search of profit, but the quest for social mobility is what drives young footballers into the industry in the first place.

James Esson

Football administrators, academics and human rights activists have recently drawn attention to some unsavoury activities taking place in West African football academies. Analysts are concerned that the academy system has become a vehicle for [neo-colonial exploitation](#) that fuels human trafficking. They argue that European clubs and speculators take ownership or executive control of African-based academies to sidestep certain regulations, such as the ban on the international transfer of minors, in order to sign African talent at an early age and then profit from their subsequent sale to rich, typically European, clubs. Some commentators, including [FIFA President Sepp Blatter](#), have gone as far as to label this situation a modern day slave trade. Meanwhile [UEFA President Michel Platini](#) has suggested this transfer process is tantamount to child trafficking.

It is true that a dynamic relationship exists between capitalism, colonial pasts and some current practices in the football industry. However I want to use this brief article as an opportunity to move away from headline grabbing hyperbolic statements, and towards a more critical reflection of events taking in place in West African football. To do so I will draw on my recent field research in Ghana, one of the top five exporters of African football players.

The exponential growth of Ghana's football academies

Some scholars of African football have highlighted how football academies have been a constant in post-independence Ghana's footballing

landscape. In Ghana, like other parts of the world, these academies take a variety of forms. They range from well-funded establishments affiliated with professional clubs to amateur, neighbourhood teams set up on an informal basis and lacking qualified staff or proper infrastructure. Researchers have drawn attention to the transfer practices of professional teams and a handful of other high profile, corporately sponsored academies, and it is here that debates over neo-colonial exploitation tend to emerge. Less well documented are the changes taking place at smaller academies associated with amateur youth football or, as it is colloquially known in Ghana, Colts football (under 12, 14 and 17 years of age).

The last two decades have witnessed a significant increase in the establishment of clubs and academies for youths, and an even more notable increase in player registrations. According to the Ghanaian Football Association (GFA) regional office in Accra, approximately 700 clubs in 12 regional zones are in the national 'Colts' league. In Accra alone there are 240 clubs, and combined they boast a registration list of more than 20,000 players. These figures constitute a significant increase when compared to the previous decade, and there is genuine concern among administrators that this growth is unsustainable due to shortages in referees and playing pitches.

This increase in the establishment of academies is being driven by unemployed and precariously employed youth in their twenties and early thirties who see themselves as entrepreneurs. They view owning a Colts team as more than a recreational activity or hobby. It is a window of opportunity, a chance to be self-sufficient and economically active. They take financial risks and invest in Colts football in the hope of making a profit.

Somewhat ironically, this situation is linked to the international transfer regulations introduced by FIFA in 2001. FIFA attempted to limit the international migration of minors by deterring rich—i.e. European—

clubs from signing talented young players based in the Global South. A ruling was made stipulating that clubs involved in the training and education of players between the ages of 12 and 23 must receive financial compensation from the buying club. This compensation can range from hundreds to millions of US dollars.

The 2001 FIFA regulations thus give the labour and investment spent training a youth player monetary value. This makes footballers at academies more than human resources. They are also a potential source of capital. Crucially, this financial value can only be realised when a player is transferred or sold to another club. This has resulted in intense financial speculation and increased trading of young Ghanaian players by academy owners, who are searching for a star to sell at a profit to a foreign club. This means that football academies no longer exist to merely create players for Ghanaian leagues, but are increasingly geared towards the grooming and export of players to foreign clubs.

Young aspirant footballers are not oblivious to the financial rewards football provides. In today's era of worldwide information streams, Ghanaian youth are not only captivated by the performances of the players who adorn their television screens, they are also made aware of the wealth and lifestyles associated with professional football. Yet we should look beyond the bling, glitz and glamour because this explanatory crux leaves much unexplained.

Football as a perceived path out of poverty

The idea that a career in football is a viable livelihood strategy capable of lifting an individual and their family out of poverty has emerged in a certain strata of society, especially among young, poorly-educated Ghanaian males from low-income families. These youths are acutely aware that they either currently are, or eventually will become, solely responsible for ensuring their future economic wellbeing. They are also well aware that financial support in the form of state welfare is unlikely to be forthcoming.

Alongside this construction of young Ghanaians as responsible for their future life chances is a widespread belief that migration offers a solution to economic uncertainty and marginalisation. Problematically, this migratory disposition is accompanied by a realisation that obtaining a visa to enter a European country is easier said than done. It is here that a key appeal of a career in football becomes apparent.

To many young Ghanaians, the rags to riches stories of the professional football player who used sport as a vehicle for migration offers a blueprint for obtaining the trappings associated with a successful life. In a context where youth are frequently encouraged to be job creators rather than job seekers, the idea that the answer to economic uncertainty resides within your own body is a particularly appealing proposition. In order to turn such ambitions into realities, entering the Ghanaian football industry and joining football clubs appear as obvious next steps. The increase in the number of youths involved in Colts football, as well as the upsurge in the number of football academies, both result from the convergence in the Ghanaian football industry of economic liberalisation with migration-based efforts at upward social mobility.

This is no trivial matter, because a generation of male youth are diverting their energies and attention to a profession that is unlikely to reward their devotion with the employment and social status they so desperately crave. As the Ghanaian Football Association executive Herbert Adika put it, “presently everybody wants to play football by force but all of us cannot be footballers”. This quote encapsulates one of my concerns with headline-grabbing, hyperbolic statements about neo-colonial exploitation, slave trades and child trafficking. These narratives often divert attention away from the broader structural conditions that funnel youth into the football industry in the first place.

Finding solutions will require looking beyond the football industry and asking tough questions about the state of play in Ghanaian society more generally, but that is what makes such an endeavour worthwhile.

Ghetto Ghana workers and the new Italian 'slaves'

Italy's public opinion calls migrant day-labourers in the agricultural sector 'new slaves', but where are the voices of these workers in the debate?

Gloria Carlini

According to a recent Eurostat [report](#), Italy is Europe's third largest agricultural producer, just after Germany and France, with an income of around €43 billion and almost a million agricultural workers. At first glance, this sounds like a success story. But is it really?

Contemporary Italian agriculture also involves physical violence, illegal labour recruitment through the gang-master system of *caporalato*, 'slavery-like' working conditions for some workers, passport confiscation, social and physical isolation, disease and even [death](#). It is populated by migrants from sub-Saharan and Northern Africa, Eastern Europe, and Indian Punjab. Yet these aren't just 'irregular' or 'clandestine' migrants in search of a job. Since 2008, when the global economic crisis started, refugees, asylum seekers, documented migrants and in some cases Italian citizens have all become involved. They work in poor conditions, without regular contracts, and for poor wages, to produce cheap food to be sold at the lowest price in the [supermarket](#). And although some call these workers 'invisible' because of their informality, in reality it is hard for [400,000](#) people to be hidden from view.

Now, as a result of all this, some trade unions, media outlets and civil society organisations have begun to respond by depicting these workers as '[new slaves](#)'. But the voices of workers themselves are too often sidelined in such depictions. How do these workers react to this image of submission and passivity? Do they consider themselves as 'slaves'?

The living and working conditions in Ghetto Ghana

In the North of the province of Foggia in Puglia, thousands of African workers come every summer to harvest Italy's 'red gold', the **tomato**. The majority are employed on day rates, recruited by gang-masters, and without a contract. But the poor living conditions that these workers experience, as well as the harshness of their work, are nothing new. They in fact **represent a continuation** of the Italian day-labour of the past many centuries. Until the mid-1960s, gang-masters hired Italian day-labourers to do the same work, and they too worked all day for poor pay and minimal social respect. From the 1970s onwards, then, migration has re-shaped the agricultural landscape to the extent that the workers have changed, but the working conditions remain very similar.

Victims of hard work, exploitation and physical isolation, migrants live segregated in informal camps, called 'ghettos', deep in the countryside. During my field research, I stayed in one of these ghettos, close to the city of Cerignola. It is inhabited by a community of Ghanaian workers and is therefore called '**ghetto Ghana**'. The camp is made of old and decrepit buildings – the former homes of one-time Italian day-labourers – with no furniture, electricity, running water, or sanitation.

At the peak of the tomato harvest, between August and September, the ghetto can host up to 1000 workers, ready to pick tomatoes 'from dawn to dusk' for between €22 to €30 a day. The high temperatures, burning sun, and pesticides make the job even more exhausting. There is no pause except for lunch. "We usually have one hour to eat", Moussa told me. "The *capo* [gang-master] decides when we can stop and gives us a sandwich and a bottle of water. But we pay for them, €3 for both. And when the time is finished, we go back to picking tomatoes".

The *capo* or *caporale* is a key figure in the management of their labour. Sometimes Italian, sometimes a migrant, he is in charge of several aspects of the labour process: organising the labour gangs, transporting them to the fields, overseeing the picking, and paying the workers. All

these activities can be performed by one single *caporale* or divided between many.

In a sense, *caporali* are mediators between employers and employees, actively involved in managing labour relationships and the entire production process. Yet they are also, at times, abusive. Workers have repeatedly reported episodes of physical violence, threats and the confiscation of documents. As Mohamed told me:

The *capos* do everything. They have power, they behave bad with us. They don't want us to stop working during the day, they decide when we eat or drink. Many of us, they took our documents, 'because they want to make contracts'. But it is fake, they just don't want us to go around, they want us to depend on them for transport, food, everything. The *capos* sometimes steal your money, and if you ask for payment, they tell you you're not going to work anymore. So I know I have to stay quiet or I can't work anymore.

“Am I a slave?”

The physical and psychological violence that are part of this work and that some *caporali* visit on their workers; the control over their mobility; the long and exhausting hours; the extra payments for food and water; these are just some of the factors that have led public opinion in Italy to decry the existence of so-called 'new slavery'.

But what do workers themselves make of this label? In Prince's words: “I know that in the newspaper they call us slaves. I saw it. For me this thing of picking tomatoes, or other vegetables, it's just a job. I'm not stupid, I know that we live in poor, very poor conditions, like animals, and we work a lot, too much, for little money. And the *caporale* or the Italian boss can be bad with me, but as long as I earn my money I can stand it, it's ok[...]Do I think I'm a slave? Well aren't we all slaves to something?”

Or, as Mohamed put it: “I am angry that they call us slaves, they call my

African brothers slaves. We came here to work, not to suffer. Now I'm suffering, but I'm doing this for money. As soon as I find something better, I'll go. I don't want to be treated like a child. I know the situation, but what can I do? I stay until God wants”.

Likewise Robert, who asked, “Why do they call us slaves? We are not slaves, but we work too much and we have no rights. Maybe for this reason they say this thing of slavery? Maybe it is true, but I can't think of me as a slave. It's a bad word’.

Or Frank, whose awareness of the rhetorical power of the word to a Western audience was acute: “We work like slaves, we are slaves, not in chains, but we are. Look around you, we are here alone and we depend on the *capo* for everything, like real slaves depended on the slaveholder. I hope that you, all Italians, come and see how we live, how we work and change all this. No human being should live like this”.

Listening to workers' voices

At this point, it is worth recalling the geographical provenance of these workers. The majority come from Northern and Upper Eastern Ghana. These regions served as a slave reserve during the trans-Saharan and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. But they were also sites of strong slave resistance. The memory of this slave past is still controversial and, in some cases, untold. Calling a worker a ‘slave’ evokes a past that is still sensitive, hence many refuse the term. If you come from a place which traditionally produced slaves and you find yourself trapped in a highly exploitative relationship, you try to distance yourself from such a definition. Or you use it as an instrument to raise awareness not of your own condition, but of that of your community.

This is why I believe that the voices of these workers must be at the centre of the debate on ‘modern slavery’ in the Italian agricultural sector. The working biographies collected in ghetto Ghana reveal a high level of consciousness of the limits of the terminology of slavery

and exploitation. What is seen as unbearable from the outside can, on closer inspection, seem tolerable and acceptable. This is not to deny the harshness of the human and labour rights violations that ghetto workers face. But it is to make a plea for outsiders to speak – and listen – to workers themselves.

The ‘top-down approach’ to their protection claims to help them whilst simultaneously ignoring their lived experiences, worlds of meaning, and practices of resistance. This is a mistake. It is vital to involve migrant labourers in any policy effort. They are not just victims of abuse and subjugation, but also agents aware of their conditions. Above all, they bring with them a legacy of past slavery that still affects their notions of labour, dignity and self.

What’s more, Italian analysis of contemporary exploitation and its links to past slavery need ‘to get structural’. When it comes to severe exploitation within Italian agriculture, for example, we simply cannot overlook the structure of the supply chain or the role that state migration policies play in fostering vulnerability. Likewise, when it comes to the use of the word ‘slavery’, we must advance [discussion](#) of Italy’s historical connections with slavery abroad and ‘slave-like’ exploitation at home. Italy was actively involved in Mediterranean slavery between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, while *caporali* exploited Italian day-labourers in similar ways to today’s Ghanaians up until the middle of the twentieth century. Is there nothing that contemporary debates about ‘new slavery’ can learn from this history?

What has forced labour to do with poverty?

Income-based measures of poverty are unreliable for determining who is most vulnerable to forced labour. More nuanced understandings of vulnerability are required to effect change in the global economy.

Nicola Phillips

Who is vulnerable to forced labour, and why? If you asked a random sample of people this question, whether they were well-informed about forced labour or otherwise, many would immediately mention poverty. And they would be right to do so. Intuitively it seems obvious that people who live in conditions of chronic and dire economic need are most vulnerable to the various means by which people are ensnared and exploited in conditions of forced labour around the world.

Available research confirms this intuition. We know from [recent estimates](#) that forced labour is located most prevalently—but not exclusively—in relatively poorer regions, such as South Asia, and in poorer parts of countries. A [study](#) in Pakistan found that 66 percent of rural households in lower Sindh Province lived in conditions of extreme poverty, and almost all of these were bonded sharecroppers and labourers. [Household surveys](#) in India also show that those with higher levels of income are less likely to use or sell the labour of their children.

In reality, though, the picture is not quite that simple. Few studies exist on the links between forced labour and poverty in the global economy, but what little we know suggests they are more complex and varied than we often think. My co-researchers and I, for instance, have focused on Brazil. [We recently analysed data](#) on more than 21,000 people released from slavery-like conditions—the vocabulary favoured in Brazil and used in the relevant legislation—in the agricultural sector between 2003 and 2010. We connected that information with our conversations with both workers and people involved in Brazil's extensive anti-



Harvesting sugar cane in India. AIDSvaccine/Flickr. Creative Commons by-nc-nd.

slavery programme. One of our most arresting findings was that the people most likely to work in slavery-like conditions tended not to be the poorest of the poor.

Instead, they tended to fall into the category of the ‘working poor’. These are people across the world who exist above the extreme poverty line of \$1.25 per day, usually at or slightly below (but sometimes above) minimum wage levels. In fact, worldwide the number of people living between the \$1.25 and \$2 per day poverty lines—the classifications used by the World Bank—doubled between 1981 and 2008. It is no coincidence that our research found indicators of profound vulnerability to forced labour in this category, including in Brazilian agriculture.

The additional reason for this pattern of vulnerability is simple: recruiters and employers in agriculture are looking for workers—most often young men in the 18-34 age bracket—who have the physical condition necessary to endure the most intense forms of manual labour. They are not looking for the chronically malnourished and destitute.

Our research also revealed that two factors were more important than income poverty levels in this context. The first was education: in the data we analysed, fully 68 percent of the workers either were illiterate or had no more than four years of schooling. The second was economic insecurity, where the availability of work is erratic and income is precarious. In other words, the key is the insecurity and unpredictability of income, not the overall level of income.

In other settings, the picture is different. Most victims of trafficking for forced labour to (or in) countries like the UK are again not the extremely poor, but rarely are they the least educated either. Research on global migration patterns helps explain why this is the case. The poorest of the poor are the least mobile because they lack the resources to move. The propensity to migrate increases with education, yet migrant workers often end up in occupations well below their [level of education](#) and [qualifications](#).

So, because trafficking situations often begin with an individual's decision to migrate, it is safe to assume that victims of trafficking often fit this profile. They may be relatively poor, or relatively less educated, but it is not unheard of that they may have university degrees. In these scenarios, the sources of vulnerability might instead be a lack of employment opportunities or decent wages, alongside a wide range of other forms of social and personal deprivation.

What does all this tell us, and why does it matter? It tells us that forced labour is deeply connected to poverty, but understanding poverty in terms of income—and particularly focusing on extreme poverty and destitution—can often be a highly unreliable guide to who is most vulnerable, and why.

Poverty has many other dimensions: education, opportunity, access to services and social safety-nets, rights for women and girls, access to decent work and wages, and a host of other 'human development'

issues. Which of these are most tightly connected to patterns of slavery varies in different contexts and for different groups of people.

It matters because effective policy responses depend on understanding these variations. There are calls for forced labour to be better integrated into national and international poverty reduction strategies. This must happen, as the inclusion of forced labour in national legislation and priorities is an indispensable prerequisite to addressing forced labour and slavery in the global economy. In doing so, however, we must shift the focus away from income measures and extreme poverty, thereby opening up poverty reduction strategies to more nuanced and accurate understandings of vulnerability and forced labour. Social protection policies aimed at the lowest-income households are unlikely to make a significant positive impact on many workers' vulnerability to forced labour. Indeed, such policies may end up having the opposite effect, increasing the vulnerability of workers by letting them slip through social safety nets and become more dependent on highly exploitative work. The more effective strategies in this scenario may relate to education, skills and labour market policies.

The challenge—and it is a big one for both research and policy—is to figure out which forms of poverty, in which contexts, make people most vulnerable to forced labour, and to work out appropriate strategies on that basis. Yet again, one size does not fit all.

Harsh labour: bedrock of global capitalism

Global supply chains are not benign spheres of opportunity, but tools for increasing the exploitation of labour in both the Global North and the Global South.

Benjamin Selwyn

In June 2014, *The Guardian* ran a [story](#) about how slave labour is used in Thailand to catch the prawns sold on UK and US high streets. The previous year it [reported](#) how child labour is employed in Apple's factories across China. In April 2013, the collapse of the 8-story Rana Plaza in greater Dhaka, Bangladesh, killed 1,129 people, many of whom were women garment workers. These cases of forced, child and extremely dangerous labour are part and parcel of contemporary global capitalism.

Global supply chains are frequently portrayed as generating win-win situations, not only creating new profit opportunities for multinational firms and delivering cheap goods to northern workers, but also creating employment and reducing poverty in the Global South. For example, Jeffrey Sachs, former director of the United Nations Millennium Project, argued in *The End of Poverty: How We Can Make it Happen in our Lifetime*, that the proliferation of sweatshops across the Global South should be welcomed because “sweatshops are the first rung on the ladder out of extreme poverty”.

The proliferation of global supply chains has taken place within the context of the rapid expansion of the global labouring class—from around 1 billion individuals in 1980 to over 3 billion today. At the same time, global wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. Indeed, Oxfam [estimated](#) in 2014 that the world's 85 richest *people* were as wealthy as the poorest *half* of the world.

Is there a relationship between highly concentrated wealth and mass, global poverty? Where does the proliferation of global supply chains fit into this picture? And what about highly exploited and forced labour?

Over the past four decades, transnational corporations have used global supply chains to obtain cheaper inputs from, and outsource labour to, lower cost regions of the world economy. This not only cuts overheads and boosts profits, but also pressures workforces in advanced capitalist countries to accept cuts in wages or face their work also being outsourced. Put differently, global supply chains have been used to raise the rate of exploitation of labour.

Transnational firms have raised the rate of labour exploitation throughout their supply chains, north and south. Downward pressure on wages and conditions in one part of the chain generates similar pressures elsewhere in the chain, *ad infinitum*. In the Global North, where trade unions, labour standards and state regulation of labour markets are still relatively robust, increasing the rate of labour exploitation occurs mainly through technological innovation, wage reduction, and the worsening of conditions.

Robert Reich's film *Inequality for All* shows the collapse of wages for the typical male worker: from US\$48,000 a year in the late 1970s down to US\$33,000 a year by 2010 (inflation adjusted). In terms of maintaining consumption, there are two ways in which this wage decline can be bridged. One is through debt (which led to the subprime mortgage crisis). The other is through forcing down the price of goods imported from abroad. The latter has been achieved—and generated huge profits for US firms in the process—through reliance upon harsh labour regimes in the Global South.

Labour market regulation is weak in much of the Global South. Trade unions are, or until recently were, banned in many countries, or under tight state control (as in China). This has allowed the increased ex-



A mine worker in South Africa. Jan Truter /Flickr. Creative Commons by-nc-nd

exploitation of labour to take different forms from those in the Global North. Here there are opportunities aplenty for child and forced labour, harsh treatment, long hours, poverty pay, and minimal or no safety standards. For example, in 2014, a Cambodian working a minimum wage job in the country's booming textile industry earned US\$100 a month (USD in Market Exchange Rate). The Clean Clothes Campaign calculates that [a living wage in Cambodia](#) – enough to meet the basic needs of a family of four – is US\$283 a month, almost three times the minimum wage.

Harsh labour regimes in the Global South ensure that workers obtain a tiny fraction of the value they create. In the above case in Cambodia, workers [receive around 24 cents](#) on an US\$8 T-Shirt.

Contemporary global capitalism is predicated upon an enormous and impoverished global labouring class toiling to generate wealth for a tiny, super-rich elite. The mainstream media and development industry portrays globalisation in benign terms, framing it as an opportunity for the world's poor to access the benefits of the world market. In re-

ality, large sections of the world's labouring class are severely exploited by global corporations. This is the bedrock of global capitalism.

There are many grass roots campaigns by labouring class and non-governmental organisations, as well as by more responsible governments, to combat one aspect or another of harsh labour. However, many of these campaigns understand harsh labour as a consequence of corporate malpractice, rather than as a structural feature of the global economy.

Moreover, these campaigns are hampered by a developmental discourse that portrays the world market as a benign sphere of opportunity, and sweatshops as pathways out of poverty. Such discourses and practices serve to reproduce harsh labour and to delegitimise campaigns against it.

Hopefully one of the outcomes of this forum in Open Democracy will be to persuade a few people to question the portrayal of the global market place as a benign sphere of opportunity. Challenging such assumptions can also feed into the attempts by harshly exploited workers to ameliorate their conditions.

Capitalism's unfree global workforce

Neoliberal migration and border regimes instantiate a de facto forced labour regime. Migration is increasingly key to providing capital's precarious workforce, but unfree labour has long been central to global capitalism.

Susan Ferguson and David McNally

Obscured by rhetoric about free markets, new forms of bonded labour have proliferated in recent decades. The millions of precarious migrant workers toiling in homes, fields, hotels and construction sites are just the latest version of a centuries-long process that has seen tens of millions of dispossessed people transplanted to labour in mines, on plantations and railway projects, and in sweatshop industries. From the seizure and sale of 12 million Africans for transport to the Americas to the so-called 'coolie system' that, starting in the 1880s, saw at least 17 million Indians and other Asians pressed into bonded labour, poor people from outside the heartlands of capitalism have persistently fuelled modern industry and commerce. But the Second World War and the human rights regime that emerged during the 1940s and 1950s was supposed to have changed all that, explicitly banning forced labour in various international charters, and enshrining basic rights along with paths to citizenship in "host" countries of the Global North.

While these governments still rhetorically espouse such principles, the reality has changed dramatically. The current neoliberal system of migrant labour—firmly entrenched in liberal democracies and vital to capitalism's on-going expansion—is a *de facto* regime of forced labour. It is simultaneously a direct product of the dispossession of millions in the Global South from the lands on which they have lived, and of demands for mass supplies of cheap labour in the Global North. Capital wants not just workers, but precarious, low-wage labour. Migration and border regimes effectively secure this, as people who cross borders or migrate internally to deregulated zones are routinely

deprived of the rights to vote, to change employers, to join a union, or to access healthcare and education systems. The constant threat of deportation is then leveraged to ensure compliance under these conditions. In addition to facilitating the harsh exploitation of migrant workers, this system also disciplines the citizen workforce. It dampens their demands and expectations by reminding them that they can always be replaced by vulnerable migrants.

At the heart of this system is a transnational rescaling of migrant workers' lives in ways that keep their costs of daily and generational reproduction extraordinarily low. Crucial to this rescaling is a radical separation of the site of capital accumulation (the workplace) from the site of labour renewal (primarily households in their countries of origin). Receiving countries in the Global North do not have to pay a cent for the migrant workers' healthcare, training and education prior to their arrival, and they pay a bare minimum after. Meanwhile the remittances that migrant workers send back—conservatively valued [at \\$530 billion worldwide in 2012](#) and upon which half a billion people on the planet depend—are vital to sustaining the survival of their family members. They are also vital to the economies of some sending countries: the export of labour power to the Global North is now an explicit 'development' policy in places like the Philippines and Mexico, which in turn suffer the loss of millions of trained and educated people. So, employers in the Global North, aided by policies designed to export people, not only get access to a workforce whose reproduction is effectively cost-free for them. The wages sent home once these low-cost workers have migrated also enable the cheap reproduction of the next generation of potential migrant labourers.

This spatially rescaled system of social reproduction develops within a racialised and gendered order that devalues and dehumanises migrant workers. The hierarchical organisation of global capitalism exploits the differences inherent in migrant workers' social and geographic origins, a process that is intensified by regulations blocking paths to citizenship

in the receiving countries. The social abjection that results is expressed in a variety of ways, including regular [moral panics](#) that often deploy racist arguments about migrant workers ‘taking’ citizen population jobs. Furthermore, women migrants—whether they work in middle and upper class households as domestics, in maquiladoras, or in the sex trade—are routinely sexualised and subjected to gender-based forms of oppression (e.g. routine pregnancy tests, mundane work ‘suitable’ for women, and intimidation from male supervisors). While the threat of deportation robs them of basic biological reproductive rights and healthcare, the deregulated conditions of their workplaces—along with the disruption of conventional gender norms (as in the case of women working in the maquiladoras)—leave them especially vulnerable to sexual assault or abuse.

It bears emphasising that this social degradation is tied to the very conditions of the neoliberal regime of migrancy. Built upon dispossession and a denial of basic rights, this regime ensures that migrant workers live relatively desperate, anxious and insecure lives. As such, they are capitalism’s ideal subjects: precarious bearers of labour power available for the harsh exploitation meted out to racialised and feminised workers.

This is nothing new. Capitalism has always relied on social processes of abjection, and frequently they have been secured and perpetuated in and through systems of forced labour and migrancy. However much we tend to think of these periods of coerced labour as critical to capitalism’s historical establishment, the current era makes it clear that unfree labour is not a relic of the past. Indeed, capital is not only increasingly reliant on migration, but specifically on the transnational flow of people who are deprived of full citizenship, people who to varying degrees comprise an unfree global workforce. Yet, like enslaved Africans and “coolie” workers before them, they continue to find ways to organize, resist and reclaim their dignity in the face of intense oppression.

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