POWER, HONOUR AND SHAME: THE IDEOLOGY OF ROYAL SLAVERY IN THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE

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One obedient slave is better than three hundred sons, for the latter desire their father’s death, the former his master’s glory.

Nisam al-Mulk, Siyasatnameh

In 1893 Kano emirate was devastated by a civil war between two rival claimants for the throne: the rebel Yusufu and the newly appointed emir, Tukur. The war, known locally as basasa (the ‘pillaging’) dramatically realigned local and regional politics after the rebel victory in 1894–95. The victory of the rebel forces (the Yusufawas) was in part made possible by the astute leadership of a number of powerful royal slaves. All of these royal slaves used the opportunity provided by the civil war to accumulate power, influence and wealth. In particular, Shettima Shekarau led a newly formed contingent of slave riflemen, while another royal slave, Dan Rimi Nuhu, crowned Yusufu and his successor, Aliyu, as the new emirs of Kano. At the outset of the war the rebels left Kano for Takai, a town in the south-eastern section of the emirate. Nuhu came to Takai after this initial exodus, presumably having made his own decision about which side to take in the coming conflict. Nuhu’s arrival on horseback was met with great delight from Yusufu: ‘Yusufu saw the man on horseback and said, “Our trip is successful, our trip is successful! Nuhu has joined us. He has joined our camp!”’ Thereafter, Nuhu transformed Yusufu’s military camp into the proper seat of a rival emir. He brought with him the royal regalia, which he gave to Yusufu, and insisted that Kano court protocol be

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3 In general see Fika (1978) and Smith (1997). There is considerable debate over who rebelled and who should be regarded as the legitimate successor to Bello. Fika is pro-Yusufawa, and argues that Tukur’s appointment was unconstitutional because it was an imposition from Sokoto, made without reference to the Kingmaking Council in Kano itself. Likewise, Fika argues that Yusufu’s claims to the throne were stronger. Fika is also very critical of Bello’s policies after his succession in 1882. Smith, on the other hand, views Bello’s reign in a more favourable light, and argues that Tukur’s appointment was indeed legitimate, even if it was unpopular.

4 Shettima was a royal slave title created by Emir Aliyu, the Yusufawa leader appointed as emir in 1895. Shekarau was appointed shettima in 1895.

5 Dan rimi was a royal slave title dating from the reign of Ibrahim Dabo (1819–45). Nuhu was appointed dan rimi even before the rebel victory in 1895.

6 Interview with Waktuins Panshekera Alhaji Abba Sadauki, 30 March 1998.
followed. At one point Nuhu noticed that no trumpet had been blown to mark Yusufu's accession. He asked the assembled crowd, 'Where is Sarkin Kakaki?'6 The son of the trumpet master then brought out a trumpet (kakaki) and blew it, but strangely it produced no sound. In response, Nuhu opened his Arabic books, took out some paper, wrote a few sentences on the pages and tied them to the ceremonial trumpet. The kakaki was blown again, and this time its sound could be heard 'from afar up to the sea'.

The sound of this trumpet did more than herald the succession of a new emir. It marked the assumption of 'honour' by a slave. Nuhu was not simply a military figure but was associated with the legitimation of the Yusufawa cause. While this slave safeguarded the traditions of the court, a long-standing practice in Kano, he also came to represent and embody the ideology of the entire system (which was otherwise in disarray). The roles of these elite slaves in the Kano civil war points to the emergence and consolidation of a royal slave office-holding elite by the end of the nineteenth century. While the precise details of the above story are no doubt apocryphal, it nonetheless suggests that the royal slave elite created codes of conduct—a system of honour—that gave them social claims to influence, offices and wealth. This article explores the limits of this honour and the many contradictions and conjunctions between 'slavery' and 'honour' in the Sokoto Caliphate. Rather than assuming all slaves were permanently dishonoured individuals (Patterson, 1982), I focus on the historical process that allowed and encouraged the appropriation of honour by certain royal slaves. The creation of a 'slave identity' is thus situated in a particular historical moment: the formation and development of elite slave communities in the Hausa emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate after the jihad (holy war) of 1804–09.8

Martin Klein has noted of French West Africa that honour 'defined not only the boundary between slave and non-slave, but also the identity of the non-slave'.9 The free were defined as free because they possessed honour. Klein argues that the social distinction between 'those who are honorable and those who are not was crucial to a hegemonic ideology which enabled ruling elites to control both agricultural slaves and the more privileged slave warriors'.10 The ideology of Islam further reinforced the importance of honour and kinship in defining both who was slave and who was free. In this regard,

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6 Ibid. Literally 'king or chief of the royal trumpets'.
7 Ibid.
8 For general background on the history of the jihad and the Sokoto Caliphate see Last (1967, 1985) and Hiskett (1973). For a general discussion of the ideology of slavery in the Caliphate see Lovejoy (1981).
9 The question of honour and shame was first suggested to me by Klein (1999: 249). See also Bazin (1982).
10 Ibid. This is also the basis of Orlando Patterson's definition of elite slavery. See Patterson (1982: 77–94, 299–333).
the Sokoto Caliphate and the states of the western Sudan shared much in common. In Kano royal slaves stood outside the systems of honour and shame that governed the behaviour of the free elite. This was indeed the central reason why royal slaves were able to attain positions of power and authority in Kano. Although the emir gave royal slaves their titles, he did so because they were slaves and therefore could not claim to be honourable. With the appropriation of power and authority, however, royal slaves began to develop their own systems of obligation and belonging grounded in a shared system of honour. As others have noted, the ‘powerless’ were often preoccupied with honour. By gaining honour slaves could claim a more legitimate and secure place in the political hegemony of the dominant elite (e.g. Reddy, 1997: 5).

Honour . . . provides a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual through his aspiration to personify them. As such, it implies not merely an habitual preference for a given mode of conduct, but the entitlement to a certain treatment in return. The right to pride is the right to status . . . and status is established through the recognition of a certain social identity. [Pitt-Rivers, 1966]

Thus the concept of honour is not simply related to a person’s conduct or behaviour but relates to a person’s ability to claim a rightful position and place in the dominant culture. As I discuss below, the position royal slaves occupied as ‘outsiders’ was the primary source of their power and, in the end, the assumption of ‘honour’ by royal slaves was limited to, and governed by, what the free aristocracy would accept and allow of all their slaves. Furthermore, the ability of royal slaves to operate outside the system of honour and shame that regulated the behaviour of free officials offered individual slave officials opportunities to contravene and transgress social and political norms and codes of behaviour. This article, then, will explore the tension between the status of royal slaves as ‘outsiders’ and their position as ‘honoured’ officials and leaders. Understanding and contextualising this tension will help us move toward a more complete analysis of the institution and ideology of royal slavery not just in the Sokoto Caliphate but throughout Africa and the Islamic world.

THE EVIDENCE

This article reconstructs the history of royal slavery, using mainly oral evidence collected in the twentieth century. The evidence, although rich and valuable, is also loaded with subjectivity. Current royal slave title holders, and the descendants of former royal slaves, are very willing to discuss the institution of royal slavery and their places in the history of Kano and the Sokoto Caliphate. They also, however, sometimes present an idealised version of the institution and the social world that royal slaves helped to create in the nineteenth century. Individuals from certain families are also understandably unwilling to cast aspersions on their predecessors or ancestors. This ‘servile perspective’ must therefore
be carefully judged, and balanced by other oral and written sources. Despite these problems, this article will demonstrate that the ‘texts’ of the interviews can be used to reconstruct and explore the ideology of the institution of royal slavery. They are especially valuable for determining how the system was supposed to work. Of course, the way the system was supposed to work was not necessarily the way it worked in practice. As indicated below, despite attempts to claim honour in both the present and the past, royal slaves were, in the end, simply unable to do so to the extent they wished.  

HONOUR, SHAME AND SLAVERY: SLAVES AS OUTSIDERS

Both slaves and the freeborn represented ‘wealth in people’ and were valued by the elite as a result. Indeed, African political leaders and household heads strove to increase the number of dependants they controlled in order to secure access to labour power and to increase their own prestige and authority. The social status of freeborn and slaves, as well as the opportunities open to them, varied dramatically in most cases. In the case of the Sokoto Caliphate, as in many highly stratified African societies, slavery and kinship were mutually exclusive. As dishonoured outsiders, royal slaves were used and valued in a manner that was very different from free clients and kin. The use of slaves in the military and government was tied to the fact that they were indeed slaves, and thereby valuable to the ruler and the state. As slaves, they were more readily subject to control and coercion. They were thus brought within the fold of Islam and used to enhance the position of the ruler and facilitate the centralisation of power in his hands. In a political system divided between family and household loyalties, royal slaves served as the perfect solution to ensure that the emir would retain his position and expand his power. Moreover, their own privileges were also firmly rooted in their status as slaves.

11 Between 1995 and 1998 I conducted seventy formal interviews with current slave title holders, descendants of royal slaves, free title holders, and knowledgeable non-title-holding persons in and around Kano. I have also relied on the relevant interviews collected during the 1975–76 Economic History Project at Ahmadu Bello University, including those by Yusufu Yunusa (twenty-six interviews), A. B. Umar (four interviews), Aliyu Musa (ten interviews), Ahmadu Maccido (three interviews), Haruna (one interview) and Jan Hogendorn (one interview). Other scholars have collected oral data in the course of their fieldwork that have enabled me to further supplement the range of source material available. Although I did not have access to her interviews, Nast (1992) is an invaluable account of the historical geography of the palace, based partially on oral data. Likewise, Smith (1997), based on extensive fieldwork conducted in 1958–59, and Fika (1978) have also proven to be useful sources with which to cross-reference my own oral data. John Edward Philips (1992) graciously lent me a number of his recorded interviews. Finally, material in early British colonial documents has been useful as well, especially because much of what is contained in these early reports was based on oral information collected by the British, and is thus in one sense an extension of the oral data.


13 In general see Mottahedeh (1980: 86–90).
Slaves were different from the free in numerous ways: they could be bought and sold, they had no right to their labour or sexuality. According to some interpretations of Islamic law, ‘From the religious point of view a slave is a person, but being subject to his master he is not fully responsible; he is at the same time a thing’ (Schacht, 1964: 127). Slaves were excluded from the rights, duties and obligations that integrated ‘free’ individuals into a shared social world. Although slaves belonged to others as property, by definition they did not belong to the broader social and political world of their masters. Their relative status as outsiders differed according to their ability to claim to ‘belong’. In Kano royal slaves were distinguished between first-generation slaves (bayi) and those born into slavery (cucanawa).14 Many first-generation slaves were also known as baibayi or ‘deaf’ because they could not understand Hausa.15 Sometimes even first-generation slaves spoke Hausa well, which distinguished them from those who could not. Second-generation slaves were never baibayi or bayi because they were acculturated and could thus claim at least an attenuated Hausa identity. They remained property (they could be bought and sold, although this was in theory discouraged; Lovejoy, 1981: 222),16 but were contrasted with first-generation slaves, who simply did not belong.17 The claims cucanawa could make ‘to belong’ were nonetheless tenuous. Royal slaves could not completely bridge the chasm between slave and free, an indication of their isolation from bonds of origin and ties to the past (Hausa asali) that permitted full membership in Hausa and Fulani society.18 Indeed, the word cucanawa implies that they had been ‘cheated’ out of their rightful inheritance because they were born slaves.19 According to a Hausa proverb, even poverty does not ‘make the freeborn a slave’, talauci bai ya maida yenci baata (Prietz, 1904: 3).

This feature of royal slavery was most apparent with the enslavement of eunuchs. A number of slave offices were in theory reserved only for eunuchs in Kano, including the sallama, kasheka and turakin soro. Eunuchs were mainly purchased from centres near to Kano that specialised in their production, including Bagirmi and Nupe. As others have noted, theoretically eunuchs were the ‘ultimate’ royal slaves. Unable to reproduce, and often reviled by others, they were firmly tied to, and dependent upon, the ruler they served.20 Eunuchs performed a variety of roles, from domestic tasks to guarding the emir’s concubines

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14 This distinction was also common among non-royal slaves.
15 Interview with Mai Tafari Hussaini, 12 March 1998.
16 See also Lugard (1906: 300): ‘... in every case a master had an invariable and inalienable right to sell any slave at any time, even those born in his house, i.e., so-called “domestic” slaves’.
17 Interview with Alhaji Wada, 18 July 1975, Yusufu Yunusa Collection.
18 See interview with Malam Muhammadu, 9 October 1975, Yusufu Yunusa Collection.
19 Interview with Wada Dako, 14 March 1998.
20 Of course, their inability to produce progeny did not prevent them from attracting clients and dependants.
to political and military duties of the highest order (Nast, 1992: 104–15).

This feature of slavery guaranteed both the master’s ability to dominate and the slave’s own subservience. The master-slave dichotomy was made possible because slaves could not possess honour (Hausa martaba). They were isolated from hierarchies and meanings of power that were based on ‘belonging’ and honour. Royal slaves are generally said to have possessed great influence (Hausa kasaita) rather than exercising legitimate power as an honourable official. Their status as slaves meant they lived apart from the codes that defined the lives and statuses of the free: kinship, family and religion. Conversely, as beings without honour, slaves could feel no shame, as an illuminating comparative example, from the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi, suggests:

The mawali [freed Mamluk slaves] deserve such treatment, for only they combine in themselves the following qualities. When I sit in public audience, I may call a mawla and raise him and seat him by my side, so that his knee will rub my knee. As soon, however, as the audience is over, I may order him to groom my riding animal and he will be content with this and will not take offence. But if I demand the same thing from somebody else, he will say, ‘I am the son of your supporter and intimate associate,’ or ‘I am a veteran in your (‘Abbasid) cause,’ or ‘I am the son of those who were first to join your cause.’ And I shall not be able to move him from his (obstinate) stand. [Cited by Ayalon, 1975: 49, and Patterson, 1982: 310–11]

Like the Mamluks of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, royal slaves in Kano were used because they could not claim the same social rights and obligations ‘honourable’ persons could, nor could they be shamed. The parameters of the ‘honourable’ social world were enforced by the possibility of shaming oneself or one’s family should ‘taken for granted’ norms be transgressed. This is not to argue that slaves could not feel shame (Hausa kunya) themselves; rather, broader society considered it impossible for slaves to feel shame or possess honour. Immune from shame, slaves could violate social norms without risk to their personal or their family’s reputation. This dynamic also operated in non-royal slave communities, especially in the context of gender and sexuality. Imam Imoru, the noted Hausa scholar, stated that when a free woman left her compound ‘she first covers all her body, so no part of it can be seen. But slave women do not have to cover their bodies because there is nothing wrong with female slaves going out and about’ (Ferguson, 1973: 174). Likewise, according to a poem composed before 1865 by the imam of Chediya, ‘Farm work is not becoming for a wife, you know; she is free, you may not put her to hoe grass [like a slave].’

This is not to say that slave women could not feel shame; rather, others conceptualised them in this way. Indeed, Imoru himself noted that people in Hausaland had ‘nothing but contempt for slaves’ and they

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looked ‘at slaves as worthless creatures; they do not consider them human beings; and they treat them harshly’ (Ferguson, 1973: 230). The Hausa proverb *Bawo ba ya gasa da da*, ‘A slave doesn’t compete with a son,’ suggests why this was so: slaves were explicitly contrasted with sons in order to emphasise that sons belonged to a kinship group (that in turn structured the system of honour) whereas slaves did not (Whitting, 1967: 87). It was said that a freeborn woman would marry a slave only if she was ‘a good-for-nothing’ (Ferguson, 1973: 230). Likewise, royal slaves were used not simply because they possessed an abstract sense of loyalty to their master but because they were unconstrained by some of the norms that confined free officialdom and commoners alike.

Their isolation from a system of honour and belonging was further reinforced by the inability of royal slaves to inherit property from their fathers. When a senior slave title holder died, his possessions were transferred to his successor (not his son if he had one). Garba Dogari, a slave captured at the age of 7 during the reign of Emir Aliyu (1894–1903) stated:

I was living with my parents when I was caught and taken to the emir’s house as an official who is taking care of horses. Q. Do you own a farm which you inherited from your parent? A. A slave never inherits anything. I never inherited anything like a house or farm. You would be lucky when you are given such a thing as a present, but [you can] never inherit it.\(^2^3\)

Although some slaves did have children, they did not acquire the full benefits that kinship granted the freeborn. This limited the ability of royal slaves to consolidate within their own lineages the material gains they had made during their careers. Likewise, the demands of power meant that slaves of the same family were sometimes placed in conflict. A distinct royal slave corporate identity was difficult to establish because individuals sided with different factions among the aristocracy (and thus had different interests) and/or competed with each other for access to the highest slave titles and offices. Nuhu’s brother, Yahaya, held the title of dan rimi before the Kano civil war. After Nuhu took over from Yahaya, the norms of ‘kinship’ were ignored. Yahaya was forced from the palace and Nuhu ‘used to give Yahaya orders and he used to send him to some places even though he is the senior brother’.\(^2^4\)

The emirs of Kano also chose to appoint slaves because they could rely more completely on their loyalty than they could among those officials and lineages (including the emir’s own sons) who were

\(^2^2\) See also anon. (1968: 202). See also *ibid.*, *Akwyaya ba ta gasa da kura* (A goat doesn’t compete with a hyena), cited by Philips (1997: 8–9). I disagree, however, with Philips’s contention that slaves should not be seen as property in the context of the ideology of the Sokoto Caliphate.

\(^2^3\) Interview with Garba Dogari, 19 June 1975, Aliyu Musa Collection.

\(^2^4\) Interview with Wada Dako, 21 February 1998.
competing with them for the throne. Slave identity was initially constructed through this relationship with their master. For this reason, as Patterson himself notes (1979: 121), slaves could not be ‘debased by third parties with impunity’ because such action would be taken as an insult to the master—the emir—whose honour was thereby challenged. The loyalty of royal slaves to the emir should not be overstated. Individual slaves sometimes rebelled at the directives and demands of their masters. Nonetheless, the most influential slaves—those who held the highest slave titles—had been socialised and raised alongside the emirs they served under. Emirs and slaves played together as children, grew into adulthood together, and fought together for places in officialdom. According to Dan Rimi Abdulkadir Kwaru this relationship sometimes compromised the emir’s own ability to depose his royal slaves:

No, anybody who made a mistake or committed an offence, he could be removed; if it was the end of his stay here he could be removed. Whether you like it or not, somebody could be removed if he made a mistake, whether he died or not. But simply because a new emir was appointed? He couldn’t remove royal slaves. Anybody who was made emir of Kano, we transferred our loyalty to him. Anybody who was made emir, we never spent a day disliking him in our minds, or being disloyal to him, we just look at him like the other one. We just wait and see. It is God who will decide.

This description, from a long-standing member of the Kano royal slave community, expresses an idealised version of palace history and politics. Nonetheless, the ideal as ideology is important. The unique bond between emir and slave was a central plank of royal slave culture. The bond could exist only because royal slaves could not legitimately threaten the position of the freeborn officials with whom they were associated. Certainly, royal slaves represented the power and status of their masters, yet they were useful to their masters because they could and did operate outside social codes of honour that regulated general behaviour. Their power sprang from this relationship: they had no responsibility to any person other than the emir, and could be disciplined only by him. This also led to what was viewed as a great deal of presumption, arrogance and brutality on the part of some members of the royal slave community. Insulated from blame and punishment, the most powerful of the royal slaves could and did act

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25 In Kano these were shamaki, dan rimi and sallama.
26 For details see Stilwell (1999), especially chapters 2–3.
27 Interview with Dan Rimi Abdulkadir Kwaru, 17 July 1996. In practice, royal slaves were regularly deposed and were sometimes tortured or executed. See interview with Alhaji Muhktar Kwaru, 31 July 1996, and Stilwell (1999: 129–30).
28 See interviews with Dan Iya Alhaji Yusufu Bayero, 28 June 1996, and Shamakin Turakin Kano Alhaji Kabiru, 21 August 1996. See also NAK SNP 10/9 105p/1921: ‘a slave is by his position incapable of being a responsible official, added to which he cannot transmit property to his children, he as a rule lives for the moment.’
with impunity. They are known to have intimidated other palace officials, and in the process of training the elite of the royal household they could torment as well as train their charges. They effectively operated outside the system of honour and shame that governed and regulated behaviour. Salih, the *shamaki*29 between 1919 and 1926, was powerful not because of his position, relatives or duties, but because ‘he had no obedience toward anybody except the emir’ 30 Likewise, in 1889 Paul Staudinger noted:

Slaves of ministers or kings are often rewarded with high positions and many a freeborn man has to bow before them. They keep slaves themselves. The king’s slaves often distinguish themselves by impertinent and violent behavior . . . it is best not to get involved in quarrels with them, as their owner, to whom they have made themselves indispensable usually lets them off scot free. [II, 72]

Staudinger’s description is highly suggestive. On one hand, freeborn men had to bow down before the slave official, a dramatic inversion of the usual social order. Lest we think that these slaves were honourable persons, they were also distinguished by their ‘impertinent’ behaviour, suggesting that their ties to the emir and their positions of power, made possible by their status as slaves, allowed them to violate the norms of social and customary behaviour. Likewise, these royal slaves were able to use, in Staudinger’s words, ‘violence’ to achieve their own ends. Royal slaves did indeed use their special social position to commit acts of violence, especially against freeborn commoners. They are reputed to have forced people to pay bribes and to beat those who disagreed with or challenged their authority.31 As Patterson notes:

the liminality of the slave is not just a powerful agent of authority for the master, but an important route to the usefulness of the slave for both his master and the community at large. The essence of caste relations and notions of ritual pollution is that they demarcate impassable boundaries. The essence of slavery is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and the secular. [1982: 51]

Because royal slaves remained largely outside the honour-shame nexus they were able to cross the boundaries of the sacred and profane Hausa society (Marron, 1995). This was most visibly represented by their unique access to the emir. Close physical proximity to the emir, both in public and private, gave royal slaves the opportunity to offer advice at times no others could, to gather personal and household secrets, and to prevent others from gaining access to their patron. Royal

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29 The *shamaki* supervised the palace establishment (including the emir’s stables and horses) and lived in a compound inside the palace.
30 Interview with Mabadi Alhaji Sale, 11 January 1996.
31 See, for example, interview with Dan Madani Alhaji Nura Mohammad, 9 March 1998.
slaves surrounded the emir at the *fada*, or council meetings, where they guarded his physical body and his image as a sacred monarch. *Dan Rimi* Barka was the first slave in the nineteenth century to enforce adherence to the custom of bowing down before the emir:

Before Barka all the councillors will come here in this house [the palace] and sit side by side with Dabo . . . so one day Barka removed all the others to sit apart from Dabo. When you come here they [the slaves] will grab you and force you down to greet the emir. And from then on until today, that’s how it is going.  

From the time of Ibrahim Dabo (emir 1819–1845) the *fada* was held daily in a special room inside the palace where everything from local politics to international diplomacy would be discussed.  

The rituals and symbols associated with these council meetings reinforced and shaped the social rankings of the emir, royal slaves and free officials. Court ritual emphasised the singularity of the emir and his removal from the profane. The presence of royal slaves at the council meetings was an integral part of the public spectacle associated with royal power. The special relationship between royal slaves and the emir was visibly demonstrated by the close and privileged access they had to the emir’s person. Royal slaves were also able to ‘stand in’ as representatives of the emir and, with his permission, make decisions in his name. In effect, royal slaves could sometimes serve as extensions of the emir, in the same manner as ambassadors represent their governments in European protocol. Imam Imoru, who was born in Kano in 1858 and later travelled throughout Hausaland and West Africa, was a first-hand observer of court ritual and practice:

When [the court] has assembled, the *kilishi* comes out with the king’s couch and prepares the hide mats. It is as if he is saying the king is ready to come out, so the gathering gets comfortable and sits at attention. When he returns, the king prepares to come out: he ties his turban and passes it across his mouth, and he puts on sandals decorated with ostrich feathers. Then he holds his staff, *kandiri*, and the eunuchs and slave officials say, ‘Step forward, Lion!’ *Cirawa saki!* The king walks slowly, and half the entourage walk in front while the other half follow him. [Ferguson, 1973: 211]

The emir was supposed to speak very quietly, almost inaudibly, and the *kilishi* would repeat his words so all could hear them. ‘After he is seated, his elder sons, the territorial administrators . . . go to greet him . . . the king replies with his hand, or in a whisper people cannot hear’ (Ferguson, 1973: 211). The emir was generally veiled from public view to symbolise his removal from the profane world: ‘Horses surrounded the king on all sides and his face cannot be seen for he is wearing a white hooded gown’ (*ibid.*: 216). This was also reflected in the layout of the

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32 Interview with Wakilin Panshekara Alhaji Abba Sadauki, 30 March 1998.
33 For a description see Barth (1857: I, 493–4).
palace, where visitors had to pass through a series of gates guarded by slaves in order to see the emir (Denham et al., 1828: II, 243, 253). Royal slaves were granted access to the emir at points in his daily routine no others could dare to claim. They likewise cared for the body of a deceased emir: ‘When they gather on that evening they close the gate of the king’s palace so they can dig his grave in privacy.’ Their access to the body and family of the emir was possible because, as slaves, they were placed outside the formal restrictions that kept the freeborn away from the emir’s sacred person.

Why did this ability make slaves valuable? What social conventions were being transgressed? As suggested above, royal slaves did not have to treat other officials with deference, honour or respect, as Dan Iya Yusufu Bayero noted, ‘These slaves of the emir can do whatever they want to do to you. They do not fear telling you anything. Because they do not fear you. Whatever they want to tell they will tell you.’ While the emir was himself bound by these norms, defined by broader kinship and clientage networks, his slaves could carry out his orders without the need to observe the values that constrained the emir. In short, royal slaves employed violence against the freeborn in the course of carrying out both personal goals and state endeavours (Hamza, 1994: 38). Royal slaves were used to forcibly seize free women who later became the emir’s own wives. They likewise seized property. According to Muhammadu Rabi’u, royal slaves were much better-off than regular slaves, because ‘They are very powerful. They can arrest a person in order to get money from him before they free him. Slaves living at gandu [plantation] can only farm.’

Anybody who was dan rimi was more than a slave, all the town belongs to him. Whatever any slaves of the emir wanted, he goes to dan rimi and asks, even if you wanted a house and it is available you take it. All the town belonged to dan rimi. The whole of Kurmi market belonged to dan rimi.

Of course, the dan rimi and other royal slaves got what they wanted not because the ‘market’ actually belonged to them but because they and they alone could employ the force and violence necessary to seize

34 For a history of the social and physical geography of the palace see Nast (1992).
36 Interview with Dan Iya Yusufu Bayero, 28 June 1996.
37 See interviews with Wada Dako, 21 February and 14 March 1998. Imam Imoru notes that in Zamfara when the king wanted a wife ‘his people’ went ‘looking for one’. When they ‘see a beautiful maiden, no matter whose daughter she is, they return to tell the king. The king tells them, “Go with a camel and take these body clothes to wrap her in. Put her on this camel and bring her here.” This is how she becomes the king’s wife, and it’s done the same way in Kabi’ (Kebebi).
38 Interviews with Wada Dako, 21 February and 14 March 1998. This continued even into the colonial period; see interview with Dan Madarin Alhaji Nura Mohammad, 9 March 1998. See also Christelow (1994: 156–7).
39 Interview with Muhammadu Rabi’u, 13 July 1975, Yusufu Yunusa Collection.
40 Interview with Dan Rimi Abdulkadir Kwaru, 17 July 1996.
As nominally the power of the emirs, the slaves were not insulated from harm and censure. At the root of this relationship was the fact that, as slaves, they had no legitimate claim to honour and were thus released from the demands and obligations that 'honour' imposed upon free officials. Their social status as slaves was the central reason royal slaves were trusted so completely by a number of nineteenth-century emirs. Royal slaves ultimately helped the emirs of Kano to expand their control of Kano officialdom and reduce their dependence on the caliphs at Sokoto, culminating in Aliyu's seizure of power at the conclusion of the Kano civil war. According to W. F. Gowers, after 1895 the 'power and authority of Sokoto over the nominally subordinate Emirates had been greatly shaken'. This was the culmination of a process beginning as early as the mid to late 1870s. As the royal slave community enlarged, both Abdullahi Maje Karofi (emir 1855–82) and Mohammad Bello (emir 1882–93) made 'arbitrary appointments' that undermined the power of freeborn officials by 'concentrating power in the hands of the royal slaves'.

The pages inscribed with Arabic that Nuhu used to release the trumpet from its silence effectively proclaimed both the independence of Kano and the instrumental role royal slaves played in subverting Kano political tradition and custom. 'It was Dan Rimi Nuhu who was the leader of the Takai people. Anyone who wanted to go to Takai [and join the rebels] was enlisted into the rebel party by Dan Rimi Nuhu.' Of course, some might argue that this was and is an 'invented tradition'. While the notion that Nuhu and Nuhu alone recruited followers for the Yusufawa cause is unlikely to be true, it does nonetheless appear that Nuhu's support of the Yusufawa faction helped to marshal support for the rebel cause during the civil war.

THE STRUCTURE OF SLAVE HONOUR

Royal slaves were not always and generally dishonoured. Their social status and identity changed over time. The central paradox of royal slave power in Kano was that it gave individuals—defined in general by a lack of honour rooted in their social isolation and kinlessness—opportunities to create and sustain slave families and households. Indeed, as Klein (1998: 250) has noted, slaves 'struggled to gain control of their productive and reproductive life'. The system that was instituted by

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42 Gowers (1921: 14), also cited by Paden (1973: 261).
43 NAK SNP 7/9 1538/1908. See also Northern Nigeria Annual Report 1902, 89, 109.
44 Interview with Dan Rimi Abdulkadir Kwaru, 17 June 1996. On slaves in the Kano civil war see also East (1933: II, 66) and Faid al Qadir Li-Awsaf Al-Malik Al-Khattir.
Dabo c. 1819 relied on a small number of slaves. Many of them had been inherited from the pre-jihad or Hausa administration, while others were Dabo’s own personal slaves (Stilwell, 1999: chapter 2; Nast, 1992). Initially they had little, if any, corporate identity as a community of royal slaves. During the reigns of the following emirs, however, royal slave households evolved and began to provide royal slaves with corporate support, communal bonds and kinship structures. During this process, slaves manipulated their liminal position to acquire ‘slave honour’ while retaining the ability to act in ways that contravened accepted codes of conduct. Slaves claimed ground closer to that of the freeborn. They never escaped their status as slaves, but by the end of the nineteenth century the social dynamics of royal slavery had changed from a system based on isolated, individual slaves to one in which slaves used their power (founded initially on their status as slaves) to create and define honour. Royal slave identity was dynamic and developed over the course of the nineteenth century as individuals grappled with changing political circumstances and ideologies.45

We are, of course, dealing with the very few slaves who were at the apex of the ‘pyramid’ of power. Most of the slaves employed in emirate palaces worked in the stables, or at other, basically mundane and labour-intensive, jobs. Slaves were therefore divided and ranked hierarchically within the palace, based on the titles and positions they held. Competition to reach these positions was intense. Hence, as Nast (1992: 101) has shown, the layout of the northern section of the Kano palace, which was occupied by slaves, reflected this competition, as she notes: ‘this opposition provoked a “healthy” rivalry [with] each group looking out for the other’.46 Both the dan rimi and shamaki lived with their households in the northern section of the emir’s palace, whereas the sallama lived outside the palace gate, from where he supervised his household and the palace blacksmithing operations. A community of slave households thus grew up in and around the northern, and later the southern, sections of the emir’s palace. Men entered the palace community in a number of ways. Many were captured in war and brought directly to the palace. Others were transferred to the palace


46 Royal slaves were also employed outside the central palace, in various ‘sub-royal’ palaces located throughout the emirate. The status of the slaves in these palaces was much reduced compared with those in Kano proper, although slaves from these palaces, as well as the houses of free title holders, often competed with one another to be posted in the Kano palace.
from one of the royal plantations or sub-royal palaces located outside Kano. Some royal slaves had been employed in aristocratic households before being brought to Kano, while many others were born into the palace community. Regardless, the competition to be taken into the service of the emir was fierce, as was the competition over the senior slave titles.

By the mid-nineteenth century the sons of senior slaves could and did follow their fathers to positions of power. Lineage affiliation did not guarantee succession, because many slave titles were open to the entire palace community. Nevertheless, the sons of slaves were trained by their fathers and as a result many came to assume important slave titles. By the mid-1850s royal slaves lived in households located in or near the palace. These houses were not simply physical collections of people but linked together groups of slaves through bonds of real or adoptive kinship. Thus the slave ‘houses’ of the dan rimi, shamaki and sallama evolved into the extended ‘families’ called rimawa (people of dan rimi), shamkawa (people of shamaki) and sallamawa (people of sallama). Slaves were raised and trained in these households. Kinship ties became the primary means that slaves used to establish a corporate identity. Slaves created kinship networks, in theory denied to them, and thereby established a system of honour that depended on belonging to a larger household unit. Slaves married, created ties of obligation and status, ate together, and honoured their fathers. This communal identification cannot simply be dismissed and ignored because, according to a static ahistorical typology, all slaves were dishonoured outsiders. Certainly, such a typology is extremely useful, because it explains the reasons why slave status was important; however, as human beings royal slaves were able to create ties that not only bound them together but were also recognised by the free palace community. Royal slaves were not necessarily ‘contemptible’ in Kano; indeed, ‘honour’ and ‘slavery’ were not always mutually exclusive. Free officials recognised that royal slaves could easily undermine their relationship with the emir and thus their own power. Slaves exercised power on behalf of the emir, but they also came to exercise power on their own behalf as well. The heads of royal slave households were most certainly ‘honoured’ by others in the palace community, because, as individuals, they were known to be knowledgeable, influential and capable. They had their own political goals which they pursued with considerable acumen. During the reign of Abdullahi Maje Karofi members of the royal slave community began marrying free Fulani women. The royal slave community was thus given the opportunity to expand and formalise kinship ties beyond the world of the slaves into the domain of the free. This was a remarkable privilege. However, it was soon revoked by the next emir, Mohammad

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47 Known as the third most important slave title in Kano. The holder supervised both the palace eunuchs (although he was not necessarily a eunuch himself) and the slave riflemen (‘yan bindiga).
Bello. Bello forced his royal slaves to divorce their freeborn wives and proclaimed a new law ensuring such marriages would be prevented in the future.48

By establishing, maintaining and protecting their large households, title-holding slaves created social networks that granted them honour. Persons in these households honoured powerful royal slaves as family members, patrons and successful politicians in their own right. Younger slaves had to prove themselves to their patrons after a lengthy course of training in the household. The senior slave household heads were also responsible for appointing and promoting these younger slaves during their early careers. Marriages linked the slave households together, and the sons of slave title holders moved between as well as within the three major households. The importance of the household (as a family unit) was reiterated when Shekarau was given the title shettima by Aliyu as a reward for his support in the civil war. Soon thereafter, the shettimawa became a prominent extended slave family in the Kano palace. Similarly, Nuhu was the son of Dan Rimi Barka, the first slave to hold the title after the jihad. Including Nuhu, Barka fathered five sons who held the title of dan rimi. Nuhu could thus claim a slave heritage similar to the heritage free officials traced to their own title-holding fathers. Barka was also associated with the Islamic revival of the jihadists, and thus with a shared set of religious values. Barka was remembered as a pious Muslim and scholar who together with the young Ibrahim Dabo studied at an Islamic school under Malam Dando.49 According to these traditions, Barka went with Dabo to collect the jihadist ‘flag’ from Sokoto.50 Although clearly untrue, the tradition provides Barka and his progeny with the specifically jihadist Islamic credentials: ‘the Rimawa are those who held the flag of the Shehu Usman dan Fodio. That is why you will find Malams in the house of dan rimi.’51 This pedigree in turn granted Nuhu social esteem and respect in the eyes of many palace residents and officials. Indeed, powerful and influential slave officials were remembered as the ‘fathers’ of certain titles, while later occupants were linked with the ‘father’ by

48 Smith (1997: 303), ‘Henceforth let slave men marry slave women (only), and free men marry free women.’ See also NAK O/AR10/2, Kano Chronicle: ‘He intervened in the marrying of his slaves known as Asaku and forbade them to marry free women.’ Others have discussed Bello’s policies; see especially Nast (1992) and Fika (1978). See also interview with Dan Iya Alhaji Yusuf Bayero, 28 June 1996.


50 Usman dan Fodio did not directly prosecute the jihad outside Gobir and Sokoto. He gave his permission/recognition (symbolised by a flag) to the leaders of locally recruited forces who then prosecuted the jihad and thus became part of the broader jihadist movement.

51 Interview with Makaman Dan Rimi Mustapha, 26 June 1996. See also interviews with Sarkin Shani Muhammadu Mansur, 7 June 1996, and Wakilin Panshekera Alhaji Abba Sadauki, 30 March 1998.
being called magajin Barka or magajin Ahoda, the successor of Barka or Ahoda. 52

Royal slaves also gained access to aristocratic lineage networks via the institution of concubinage. By taking some of the sisters, aunts and daughters of royal slaves as concubines the aristocracy bound itself to individual royal slaves in the most intimate of ways, through their households. The male children of the emir’s concubines were eligible to succeed to the throne; indeed, emirs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were almost universally the sons of concubines. 53 Because concubines were often the sisters and daughters of royal slaves, some royal slaves could and did claim familial ties with the royal household. These ties were expressed through the idiom of kinship, as Wada Dako noted. ‘The emir has no right to send them [certain royal slaves] away, because his mother is their sister.’ 54 Likewise, Makaman Dan Rimi Mustapha noted that ‘uncle means brother-in-law to the emir. That is because they used to marry our sisters or our daughters, so whenever they gave birth the son is either our son or our nephew.’ 55

Patterns of concubinage and child-rearing in the palace dramatically affected the relationship between master and slave. The ties were informal; nonetheless, they encouraged the development of non-institutional, personal ties between individuals, and provided royal slaves with access to the family and personal secrets of aristocratic households. These social linkages also affected formal court procedure. Before a new emir could be appointed the senior title-holding slaves had to be consulted. They advised the freeborn Kingmakers, who nominated two or three candidates to the Caliph at Sokoto, about the character of each person so nominated: ‘[the councillors would say to the slaves,] “It is you who have known him since childhood . . . if we select such a person, what is the character of his mother? Is she a good person?” She has to be made known [to the councillors] and how she controls her affairs with other groups of people in the palace.’ 56 Heidi J. Nast has also noted that day-to-day social relations between slave and free were transformed by the institution of concubinage:

A certain prince named Shehu prostrates himself before the powerful title-holding slave Shamaki. He does this not because Shamaki is powerful, but because Shehu’s mother (a concubine) is Shamaki’s sister. According to familial status rules of age (for Shehu and Shamaki now belong to the same

52 Interview with Dan Rimi Abdulkadir Kwaru, 17 July 1996.
54 Interview with Wada Dako, 21 February 1998. See also interviews with Wada Dako, 14 March 1998, Makaman Dan Rimi Mustapha and Malam Aminu, 1 April 1998, and Sarkin Ruwu Shu’abu, 12 August 1996.
55 Interview with Makaman Dan Rimi Mustapha, 26 June 1996. See also Gigniyu (1981).
extended family through kinship and not purely slavery), Shamaki is of higher status than the prince.\footnote{Nast (1992: 20), citing an interview with Tijani Garba, June 1990.}

The freeborn bowed before royal slaves not simply when or if they shared kinship connections but because of the position, power, reputation and influence held by royal slaves. The respect and deference granted some royal slave individuals was more than simply the trappings of honour, as Patterson would suggest, but was based on their political ties with the emir, their own abilities and influence, their connections with the royal household through kinship, and on the broader system of honour and deference that developed within royal slave culture and ideology. Julian Pitt-Rivers has suggested that ‘Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognised by society, his right to pride’ (1966: 21). According to Alhaji Wada, royal slaves were unhappy when they were ‘given their papers’ (freedom) by the British because being a slave of the emir was an integral component of their character and pride.\footnote{Interview with Alhaji Wada, 18 July 1975, Yusufu Yunusa Collection.} Likewise, in 1907 a royal slave requested permission from the British to return to his old position as slave to Emir Abbas in order to regain ‘his old status and friendships in the Emir’s household’.\footnote{Northern Nigeria Annual Report, No. 594, 1907–08.} By establishing their own networks of honour royal slaves created a community not just to give themselves economic, political and social support but to partially transform their identity from that of dishonoured slave to honourable official.\footnote{Interview with Sarkin Shanu Muhammadu Mansur, 7 June 1996. This comment was followed by laughter and joking, which in turn suggests two issues: first, the notion that slaves were ‘respectable’ is now thought of as odd, and, second, that the honour slaves formerly could claim is no longer forthcoming from the free elite.} Sarkin Shanu Muhammadu Mansur stated that ‘now you can go see them in the palace. In reality they were sarakuna [nobility] in the past. Now, if I go to the palace, I know where shamaki is. I will then go to him. However, if it were the sallama [for example] of those days, I would go humbly and greet him with the utmost of respect.’\footnote{Northern Nigeria Annual Report, No. 594, 1907–08.}

THE LIMITS OF HONOUR

As demonstrated above, individual slaves were ‘honoured’ as other successful officials would be. But their status as ‘honoured’ persons was more fragile because their main source of social esteem was located in their office, position and responsibilities (which were dramatically determined by individual ability, personality and relationship with the emir). The following will demonstrate that slave honour was both transitory and precarious. Royal slaves remained subject to the power of
another—the emir—in a manner that was particularly related to their status as slaves. Royal slaves were the property of the ruler and the emir could transfer palace slaves to farms outside the palace, depose them, seize their possessions as well as execute them. The three senior slaves were almost always deposed or executed by incoming emirs (Stilwell, 1999: esp. chapter 3). The ‘average’ reign of senior slave officials in the nineteenth century was 9-9 years (ibid.: 130). There were exceptions, of course, but in general the tenure of office among the senior slaves was associated with the reign of a single emir. When a new emir came to power he generally appointed new slaves to their positions. Even emirs could not trust the slaves of their predecessors and preferred to appoint slaves with whom they had developed their own bonds of obligation and trust.

The bonds of kinship—or belonging—described above were of a different order from bonds among the freeborn. Despite their attempt to develop ties of kinship and marriage with the free, they were never thereby able to transcend their slave status. As a result, these relationships were more vulnerable than would have otherwise been the case, as demonstrated above by Mohammad Bello’s order that his slaves must divorce their freeborn wives. Likewise, once a prince assumed a title he no longer bowed before a royal slave: ‘A shamaki will lay [bow] down before his grandchild if he is an emir because a shamaki is still only a shamaki.’ Royal slaves were still perceived and treated as slaves in Hausa/Fulani society. Slave status was deployed specifically to make slaves unequal and dependent. It was this process that made slaves so valuable as officials and soldiers. Sarkin Shanu Muhammadu Mansur placed particular emphasis on this unbridgeable dichotomy:

The thing is that the cucanawa became so many during the reign of the Emir of Kano, Abdullahi Maje Karofi. So that in that time Maje Karofi had so many children, his blood children numbered 107 . . . And there were also cucanawa children of slaves. So when he wanted to give certain things to his children each one will come and collect. That is, the children of the [cucanawa] and his own children will come to him all together and each will be given his or her share, so the Emir gave an instruction that in order for the children in his house to be differentiated, the children of slaves should all have the three tribal marks on their cheeks . . . so that he could know his own children.

In 1907, after the British conquest of Kano, Resident F. Cargill developed a close working relationship with Dan Rimi Allah Bar Sarki, whom the new emir, Mohammad Abbas, promoted from the position of

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61 Interview with Madakin Kano, 4 February 1996.
62 Interview with Sarkin Shanu Muhammadu Mansur, 7 June 1996. There are many such traditions about the origins of the ‘three-three’ facial markings. Most refer to the necessity felt by the emir to differentiate between slave and free, although the precise details differ from person to person and story to story.
sarkin hattsi\footnote{An important nineteenth-century royal slave title, literally 'King or Chief of the Grains'. Allah Bar Sarki has been well discussed by Kwaru (1991), Lovejoy \textit{et al.} (1993), Nast (1992) and Ubah (1985).} in 1903. Allah Bar Sarki was captured during the reign of Abdullahi Maje Karofi, likely in 1871 (Lovejoy \textit{et al.}, 1993: 27). He soon showed himself to be extremely capable and advanced quickly up the palace slave hierarchy. Although British officials were, as a rule, hostile to the royal slave palace establishment, Cargill believed that by working through Allah Bar Sarki he would be able to reduce the power of the emir, who Cargill believed was deliberately obstructing British tax and land 'reforms'.\footnote{The ideology of the British colonial administration was based on regularising offices, making officials responsible for the territory they administered and curbing the 'despotic' power of the emirs. Increasing revenue through the development of regular taxation was also a central goal of colonial policy. In general, the objective in Kano was to decentralise the administration. See Ubah (1985), Lovejoy and Hogendorn (1993) and Fika (1978).} Cargill therefore demoted Abdullahi Bayero, Abbas’s son and heir apparent, from the position of wasiri to that of ciroma. In his place Cargill appointed Allah Bar Sarki as the new wasiri. Although the title of wasiri was adopted in Kano late in the nineteenth century, it was an influential and prestigious post. Furthermore, the title of wasiri was supposed to be reserved only for freeborn officials, and the appointment therefore violated the custom, traditions and political culture of the palace and Hausa society.\footnote{See interview with \textit{Magajin Mallam}, 10 July 1996, and Lovejoy \textit{et al.} (1993).}

Elements of the aristocracy who were hostile to Abbas used the appointment of Allah Bar Sarki to reduce the emir’s political influence. They dealt directly with the British Resident through Allah Bar Sarki, and Abbas’s power diminished with each passing day. The appointment had been made on Cargill’s supposition that Emir Abbas would not be ‘jealous of a trusted slave’.\footnote{SNP 7/9 5141/1908, cited in Lovejoy \textit{et al.} (1993: 16).} In practice, it was simply not acceptable to the emir and most of the freeborn aristocracy for a slave to have been elevated so far beyond his appropriate position. ‘The nobility of the country would not really accept an ex-slave as the deputy of the Emir.’\footnote{SNP 6/4 c. 111/1908.} While it is possible that Abbas initially supported the appointment, hoping to use his own slave against Cargill, Allah Bar Sarki soon began to use his position to amass followers and power while simply ignoring the emir’s orders, directives and authority. For Abbas and his supporters the affair came to take on elements of an affair of ‘honour’. According to colonial and oral sources, Allah Bar Sarki ‘began to behave in an off hand manner to the Emir and Chiroma and encouraged his people to do the same’.\footnote{SNP 7/10 6415/1909.} The new wasiri even became embroiled in a dispute over whether he or the ciroma should pass through the town gate first.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} Allah Bar Sarki was a slave. His attempt to transcend his position and status as slave, and acquire the honour
and office of a free official, was simply unacceptable. Allah Bar Sarki was demoted in January 1909, but C. L. Temple, the new Resident, believed that should he have remained in office six more months ‘there would have been street fighting in Kano between the Emir’s following and the Waziri’s’.  

When he was deposed Allah Bar Sarki was stripped of his alkyaabba robe (robes reserved for state officials) and was forced to wear only his slave loincloth in public. After literally and symbolically stripping Allah Bar Sarki of his position and power, the emir is reputed to have told the assembled crowd that had Allah Bar Sarki not been wearing the slave loincloth he would have been executed. Of course, the British would never have allowed such an execution. The statement instead epitomises the broader ideology and theory that drove the entire system (and in the nineteenth century he would no doubt have been executed). Another version depicts a similar public humiliation based on the removal of the symbolic manifestations of state power, a visible affirmation of the emir’s own position and power, and enforced exclusion from the royal household and the palace:

The Emir went to Bompai. He [the Resident/Governor] went there and met him. They sat there together with the Waziri and Ciroma and Alkali. Then the Governor said to him, Well, Emir, there is your slave. Whatever you want to do with him you can go and do it. From there he ordered that his turban be removed. He went out and rode his horse. And he [Allah Bar Sarki] did daguma [put/secured the sleeves of his gown behind his neck]. The Emir was riding his horse and he [Allah Bar Sarki] following him on foot showering epithets to the Emir (from Bompai to the palace). When they reached home, the Emir left him at the field of Kofar Kudu [the southern palace gate]. He stayed there for seven days. He was sleeping there at the field.

Allah Bar Sarki’s status as a slave had thus been reinforced for all Kano to observe. However, the benefits of royal slave status had also been removed. Allah Bar Sarki’s exile from the palace ensured that he would have no access to slave networks of kinship and family—or honour—so vital to royal slave power and authority. The emir also clearly demonstrated that the line between a free and a slave official could not be bridged. Although colonial sources claim that Allah Bar Sarki was reappointed dan rimi, Allah Bar Sarki was effectively eliminated from the palace power structure after 1909. Although he may have been reappointed dan rimi, another slave, Sambo, effectively carried out the duties and responsibilities he formerly held.

70 Ibid.
72 Interview with Dan Masanin Kano Maitama Sule, 28 January 1996.
73 Interview with Dan Iya Alhaji Yusufu Bayero, 28 June 1996.
Royal slaves were perceived as slaves in Hausa and Fulani society. Slaves were not slaves simply because they performed manual labour in the fields and farms of the elite. In short, that royal slaves did not labour in the fields is not reason enough to claim that they were not ‘real’ slaves. Slave status was not restricted to lowly agricultural slaves because slave status was not tied solely to the types and kinds of labour slaves performed, although the rank, honour and social status applied to slaves could and did most certainly relate to the kinds of labour slaves performed. Slave status meant that human beings were subject to the social, sexual, economic, political and psychological dominance of another. Their freedom was profoundly and sometimes completely circumscribed. While the meanings of slave status and the forms that slavery took as an institution could and did vary with time and place, the discourse and practice of slavery made slaves unequal. Although this meant that some slaves were forced to perform menial tasks, many worked in positions that offered chances to achieve power and influence.

All slaves, whether rich and powerful or destitute and powerless, were subject to the power of another. In the case of Kano, royal slaves were the property of the state and the ruler. They were never able to bridge the social distinction between slave and free which was vital to the construction and definition of status. Executions of high-ranking slave officials were rare, but royal slaves were subject to whatever punishment the ruler could devise. He could appeal to his slave kin, possibly even a daughter or sister who lived in the emir’s household, but such executions were nonetheless seen as the legitimate and proper mandate of the ruler. This was not the case for free officials, who could not normally lose their heads to the executioner’s sword simply because the emir wished it so. Certainly, on some occasions free officials were indeed executed, as Abdullahi Maje Karofi’s execution of Alkali Ahmad Rufa’i indicates, but the emir nonetheless had to be much more careful and circumspect when dealing with free officials, who, because of their position as free men and their networks of kin and client, could not be regularly dispensed with on a whim. Of course, in practice, an emir’s freedom of action was also circumscribed when he dealt with royal slaves. He most certainly had to take account of an individual slave’s power, position and level of political support. However, the emir had different rights and obligations in relation to his royal slaves than free men, a fact of which royal slaves were most certainly aware. For royal slaves, the possibility that they could be dismissed to a life of poverty and isolation, or even executed, constrained their ability to act as ‘free men.’ This surely had an impact on what royal slaves thought possible, and

74 See Davis (1984: 8–22). Davis also reaffirms the importance of slaves ‘as property’ and slavery itself as a form of institutionalised marginality.
75 Likewise, a slave’s juridical status did not define his condition in practice; see, for example, Genovese (1974) and Davis (1984: 12–13).
76 On the execution of Rufa’i see Smith (1997: 287).
how they viewed themselves and their world. Generally, disobedient slaves were transferred to the royal plantations outside the palace, where they were more isolated from their social and political networks. Others who were too powerful to remove physically lost their duties and responsibilities, which were shifted to other slaves in the hierarchy. Although they may have retained their formal title, the real basis of their power had been drastically reduced or, in many cases, eliminated. This robbed the slave of opportunities to exercise power, recruit clients and acquire wealth, all necessary elements in establishing a successful career. In short, to be forced from the palace, from the side and favour of the emir and from royal slave households, was a powerful tool used by the emir to keep royal slaves under his control and domination.

CONCLUSION: ROYAL SLAVERY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

How were human beings made into slaves? This question lies at the centre of the meaning and practice of slavery as a social and economic institution in Africa. Although this article is specifically focused on the Sokoto Caliphate, the general social dynamics discussed can be broadly applied to the institution of royal slavery. Much of the previous scholarship on elite slavery has attempted to resolve the apparent dichotomy between the power wielded by many royal slaves (and their correspondingly high social and political rank) with their status as slaves. Resolution has generally come in the form of two extremes: the elimination of slavery as a social factor (e.g. Toledano, 1998; Hill and Hogg, 1995; Gibb and Bowen, 1950: I) or arguing that slave power was entirely rooted in slave dependency and subordination (e.g. Meillasoux, 1991; Pipes, 1981; see also Crone, 1980). The former ignores the fact that slaves were used as soldiers and officials because they were subject to control and coercion by virtue of their status as slaves, while the latter tends to diminish the roles that slaves, as human beings and individuals, could bring with them to the institution of slavery. Slavery was a social relationship, and the terms of servitude were constantly subject to negotiation. Royal slaves used the material, political and cultural resources attached to their offices to alter the more restrictive practices of slavery. Because slaves were human beings as well as property, individuals resisted and contested the control of their masters over their lives and bodies (see Miller, 1985; Brown, 1993). This cultural, social and economic interaction between individuals and corporate groups defined the royal slave system (Toledano, 1998: 159–64; for a critical view, Spaulding, 1982). Slaves deliberately chose to acquire honour as part of the process. Dan Rimi Abdulkadir Kwaru’s main complaint about the current state of affairs in the Kano palace is that the honour he should be afforded is no longer forthcoming, a small indication of just how important ‘honour’ was to royal slaves in the past:

Look at me now. I am just living among these people who do not care who I am. Probably even one of them can even beat me among the people in the household. Well, we have to accept it like that. [In the past] this is my gate,
whatever is in the field doesn’t belong to anyone but it belongs to me. All these large fields, all the houses, they are my own. But now everything is taken away. We utilise only what is available to us. Now it is difficult to know who is under you. 

The above reflects the way in which one person has understood and analysed historical change. For him, the changes experienced in the twentieth century have meant that the ‘honour’ some royal slaves could claim or attempt to claim, and the recognition associated with that claim, has vanished. This inversion is expressed by the fact that whereas in the nineteenth century royal slaves inflicted violence on others, now, in the present, it is the royal slave who can be ‘beaten’.

Thus, by exploring the social processes involved in transforming people into slaves, and the role of honour and shame in the foundations of social life in Hausaland, this article demonstrates the manner in which slave status was an important—even the defining—feature of royal slavery. The status of royal slaves as slaves paradoxically made possible both their subordination and their ability to acquire privileges and influence. Their power was rooted in their exclusion from systems of honour (being outsiders) and their consequential immunity from shame, as well as in their ability to develop and create their own system of honour (as human beings and historical actors). It is vital, however, not to rely on one archetypal model to explain the history and dynamics of the institution across different geographies and time periods. Unique historical circumstances often dictated how royal slaves were used and the manner in which the institution developed. Nonetheless, the institution tended to develop in times and places where governments were based on the ‘household’. As rulers attempted to increase their personal control of the state they came to rely on slaves, whom they selected and promoted because, in theory, and often in practice, slaves’ social isolation encouraged the development of singular loyalty to the sovereign. Furthermore, as outsiders they could transgress cultural, social and political norms that even the ruler was beholden to obey. This was not necessarily the result of a ‘rational’ or ‘conscious’ calculation of interests but arose from the fact that in a very real way royal slaves remained outside relations based on kinship. They were feared because they were responsible to no person, idea or set of values beyond the ruler they served. In practice, however, the actual social world of royal slaves differed from the theoretical imperatives encouraging their use. They became part of the state and developed their own political and social cultures in tandem with their participation

77 Interview with Dan Rimi Abdulkadir Kwaru, 17 July 1996.
78 This was the case throughout much of the Islamic world, including the Abbasid Caliphate, Mamluk Egypt, Ottoman Turkey, the Sokoto Caliphate and Dar Fur. Likewise, household governments in imperial Rome, Ming dynasty China and Dahomey all used elite slaves in one form or another. See Irwin (1986), Toledano (1998), Lassner (1980), Kennedy (1981, 1985), Bay (1996), Weaver (1972), Boulvert (1970) and Torbert (1977).
in the world of the dominant elite. Participation in the system also reinforced their status as slaves. While royal slaves created their own system of belonging, their status as slaves ensured that they remained outsiders. This dichotomy was created and contested through struggles to define and appropriate honour.

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**ABSTRACT**

This article takes issue with ahistorical typologies that depict all slaves as ‘dishonoured’ persons. It demonstrates that royal slaves in Kano emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate were initially valuable to the elite because they were indeed dishonoured outsiders. But, over time, slaves tried to limit their exploitation by developing their own systems of honour and status. The article traces when, where and how royal slaves in Kano acquired and attempted to acquire ‘honour’ as officials, kin and members of a broader social world. However, it concludes that, although slaves did indeed develop systems of honour, their ability to acquire an honourable identity was nonetheless limited by their status as slaves, which they remained despite their power and position.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article exprime son désaccord avec les typologies ahistoriques qui dépeignent tous les esclaves comme des personnes « déshonorées ». Il montre que l’élite attachait initialement une valeur aux esclaves royaux de l’Emirat de Kano, rattaché au Califat de Sokoto, parce qu’ils étaient en effet des étrangers déshonorés. Au fil du temps cependant, les esclaves ont tenté de limiter leur exploitation en élaborant leurs propres systèmes d’honneur et de statut. L’article retrace le moment, le lieu et la façon dont les esclaves royaux de Kano acquièrent et tentèrent d’acquérir de l’« honneur » en tant qu’officiels, parents et membres d’un univers social plus large. Il conclut cependant que, bien qu’ayant effectivement élaboré leurs propres systèmes d’honneur, les esclaves jouissaient néanmoins d’une capacité limitée à acquérir une identité honorable compte tenu de leur statut d’esclave, statut qu’ils conservaient en dépit de leur puissance et de leur position.