Gender, Migration, and the end of Slavery in the Region of Kayes, French Soudan

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French Soudan is a former French colony now known as Mali. From the end of the nineteenth century onward, with the gradual abolition of slavery in this part of West Africa, newly emancipated slaves began to leave their former masters. Some of them left for their region of origin. Others went to colonial towns or founded new villages. It is estimated that after the introduction of legislation permitting them to do so, an average of one third of the French Soudan slaves left their masters.¹

The first attempts to restrict the slave trade in this region of West Africa began in 1895 with the banning of slave trade. Slave caravans crossing the territory of French Soudan were to be seized and slaves sent to the ‘freedom villages’ where they would be issued a freedom certificate after three months of stay. The ‘freedom villages’ had been founded by the French administration in the first years of the conquest. In the beginning, they hosted the slaves of the defeated enemies of the French army. They also provided a refuge for mistreated slaves, for those threatened with sale by their masters or whose family masters had already sold. Above all, ‘freedom villages’ were an attempt by the French administration to control increasing slave flights in the region and to create permanent settled communities in deserted areas around colonial posts and along the main conquest and trade routes. They were also a first response to the lack of a labor force. In fact, they enabled the administration to organize a cheap labor supply, as the inhabitants of the freedom villages were the first target for colonial labor requisitions and corvée labor.²

¹ M. Klein, Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa (Cambridge, 1998), 197.
However, up to 1901 slaves were systematically returned to their masters if the masters claimed them within three months of the date of entry into the freedom village. Slavery abolition politics took a new impulse under the administration of William Ponty, the Délégué (representative) in Kayes of the Governor-General from 1899, especially with the promulgation of the Decree of 12 December 1905, abolishing the slave trade in French West Africa. If the Decree as such did not seem to ban domestic slave ownership, circulars of 20 February 1906 and 24 April 1908 clearly invited colonial administrators to ban all forms of slavery.

At the end of the nineteenth century in the region of Kayes, the economy relied heavily on slave labor. The slave population represented around 40 per cent of the total population of the region, but this number could be as high as 60 per cent in some areas. Moreover, female slaves formed the majority of the slave population. Women had a greater value than men. Female slaves gave new dependents to their masters, but above all, female labor was predominant in production. Their domestic labor was also essential to the family economy. Their value was therefore attached to their reproductive role, as well as to their productive role. In the region of Kayes, they formed at least 60 per cent of the slave population.

Some scholars have argued that it was easier for men than for women to leave their former master, as female slaves had often children born in the community, and

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3 There were two ways of becoming a slave in Western Sudan: One could be bought or captured as an adult (i.e. ‘trade slave’ or ‘captif de traite’). Or one could be born in the master’s household from slave parents or acquired as a child and brought up in the master’s household (i.e. ‘domestic slave’, ‘slave born in the household’ or ‘captif de case’).

4 The region of Kayes is located in the Western part of French Soudan, it is bordered by Senegal, Guinea, and Mauritania. Kayes was the first capital city of the colony of French Soudan up to 1904. The region of Kayes refers in the French colonial archives to the Cercles (Districts) of Bafoulabé, Kayes, Kita, Médine, Nioro, and Satadougou.


were therefore said to be more socially attached. A closer examination of the colonial archives shows, however, that former female slaves in the region of Kayes, alone or with their family, even if they were the wives or the concubines of their masters, did participate in the migratory movements spurred by the abolition of slavery. The two following petitions (and the related exchange of correspondence) are dated 1900 and 1907 and addressed to the colonial administration of the region Kayes. Both allow us to uncover slave women’s migratory strategies at the time of. Actually, the petitions were written by men. But their analysis can help us recover female slaves’s voices in the process of emancipation. We do not hear women speaking directly in these documents because French colonial archives were essentially produced by male colonial civil servants and politicians who, in their project of domination, were little interested in women. When women are mentioned in colonial documents, they are discussed in stereotypical reproductive roles, like wives and mothers; this is one of the reasons why, in the two petitions, the issue of their marital situation is central for the colonial administration. Colonial administrators seem to have been reluctant to disentangle the complex relations between slaves and masters. The colonial administration defended an ambiguous position towards slave women’s emancipation. Since slave women were the cornerstones of the economy in the region, colonial administrators preferred not to confront this ambiguous status and therefore the consequences of a true emancipation. They claimed therefore that, as wives and daughters, they had to remain under the control of male guardians. A gender approach to these sources can help us

disentangling women’s voices in order to build up a history of their mobility. When reading these petitions we have to ask ourselves what it meant to be a female slave at the time. What were the options available to them to enhance their position in a society where being a slave or of slave ancestry was a serious stigma? Furthermore, we have to question to what extent slave women’s voices were likely to disrupt supposedly fixed relations of gender and power hierarchies. The end of slavery not only disturbed slave and master relationships but it also troubled gender relations because of the massive participation of women in the slave exodus.

I present the two petitions in the same order in which they are filed in the archives so as to give to the reader a glimpse of the historical work of reconstituting slaves’ histories using scattered documents. The first petition is concerned with the efforts by a master to claim his slaves back, while the second petition deals with a soldier of slave origin who struggles to assist his family and to create his own household.

**The Beydy Couloubaly Petition**

In September 1900, the Délégué in Kayes of the Governor-general received a complaint from Beydy Couloubaly asking for the return of his three wives who sought refuge in the freedom village of Kita. In a preceding letter, the Commandant in Kita had declared that these women were free since they had left the freedom village after a three-month stay. He considered henceforth this case as a divorce that had to be brought in front of the colonial court. This petition encourages us to question the colonial use of categories like ‘wife’ and ‘slave woman’, and highlights the ‘shifting’ border between the two at the time in which colonial government was making its first political steps toward slave emancipation. A female slave was a worker and a commodity but she was also often the concubine of her male master. Slavery for a

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10 To adopt a gender approach is to take into account in the analysis of the text the discourses, performed identities, behaviors, and power relations that are associated with one sex. The social construction of masculinity and femininity has varied among societies; their meaning has constantly shifted. See N. Vince, M. Rodet, O. Goerg, ‘Introduction: Shifting Gendered and Colonial Spaces in Africa’, *Stichproben*, Special Issue: Fracturing Binarisms: Gender and Colonialisms in Africa, 12:3 (2007).

woman meant that her body became the property of her master; it was subjected to her master’s will, unlike a free woman whose sexuality and virginity was tightly controlled. This explains why some masters claimed that their slave women were actually their wives even if they bought them as slaves.

Discussion Questions

1. The three women did not go first to the freedom village, why?

2. Why did the administration refuse to give Beydy Couloubaly his ‘wives’ back?

3. Could these women be at the same time the slaves and the wives of Beydy Couloubaly? Why?

ANM 1 E 201 (FA): Political Issues. Correspondence. Cercle (District) of Kayes. 1882-1921.

Letter from Beydy Couloubaly to the Délégué (Delegate) of the Governor General. Médine, 19 September 1900.

Sir,

By sending this letter I beg to inform you that my three escaped wives took refuge at the freedom village of Kita. The named Dadié Bakayoko who I bought from Mamadou Dambélé for 350 francs. This woman has been living with me for thirteen years.

Fatimata Couloubaly who I bought for five hundred francs, who has been living with me for five years.

The third one Téné Sidibé who I bought for five hundred francs [sic], she stayed with me for about ten years.

The named Dadié Bakayoko the first of my wives got two children from me.

These three women went to do trade in several villages and got captured and dragged to Kita by a fellow who I do not know.

12 Klein, Slavery and Colonial Rule, 247.

13 [sic] has been added here and in other parts of the text by the author of the chapter in order to indicate an incorrect or unusual spelling in the original archival document.
Last July I went to Kita to take them but these women had been staying for more than three months in the freedom village, the Commandant has therefore categorically refused to give them to me.

I went back another time, but the answer of the Commandant was not more favorable. I therefore turn to you, Mr. the Délégué and I come to beg you have all of your authority [sic] so that these women are given back to me as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Your humble servant.

Beydy Couloubaly.


Sir,

In response to your letter n°487 of last 26 September concerning the three wives of the named Beydi Coulbaly [sic] I could not do better than sending you a copy of my letter #164 of 2 August to the Commandant of the cercle of Médine, in response to his letter #232 of 25 July. I would only add that these women have left indeed and they must be, at the moment, back in their village of origin from where, whatever Beydi Coulbaly [sic] might say, they had definitely been abducted as captives by the columns of Samory.15

14 Each French West African colony was administratively divided into districts called ‘cercles’. Each cercle was run by a Commandant of cercle and each colony by a Governor.

15 Samory Toure was a military leader from Upper Guinea who successfully conquered West African territories extending from Sierra Leone to Northern Côte d’Ivoire in the second half of the nineteenth century (Klein, Slavery and Colonial Rule, 52-3). He financed his warfare by selling slaves. From the
Only one of them, having had children, must be considered as free and her case would then fall within the competence of the court of cercle upon which she depends.\footnote{French interpretation of customary law on slavery was that any slave woman marrying a free man and bearing him a child had to be considered as free. According to local customs, a slave woman could be a concubine but as long as she was not officially married to a free man and therefore freed, she was still considered as a slave and her children would also be slaves.}

As for the two others they have been well and truly bought by Beidy Coulbaly \textit{sic} as captives and cannot be considered as free if Beydi \textit{sic} has not made a freedom certificate issued for them and if he has not paid any bridewealth to the family. This is at least an uncompromising custom for the Malinkës and Bambaras\footnote{Malinkës and Bambaras are West African peoples belonging to the larger Mande cultural and linguistic group.} from the cercles of Bafoulabé and Kita: The cohabitation between a captive and a free man only became a lawful union, therefore shielding the woman from a possible sale in days of misfortune or when this woman gives birth to children.

In the first petition addressed by Beydi Coulbaly \textit{sic} to Mr. Maubert, the Commandant of the cercle of Médine, and when he [Beydy Couloubaly] himself came to Kita he never mentioned the abduction of these women; he said before numerous witnesses (the heads of the village of Kita) that these women had escaped. In the aforementioned letter he simply tried to incriminate the non-commissioned officer of the Post. In the petition he addresses to you, he seems to accuse somebody of having captured and dragged these women to Kita; but, as you will see in the copy of my response to the Commandant of the Cercle of Médine, I brought them from the village in Kaarta all the way back to Kita.

I would be very eager if Beydi Coulbaly \textit{sic} could be more explicit in his information and if, by an investigation, he was obliged to prove that these women had indeed left for trade and had then been victim of violence; in the case he could not 1870s, he resisted French expansion, but he was captured by the French and deported to Gabon in 1898.
prove such a fact and as it would be the second time that such a thing happened to him, I would be pleased if a punishment could be imposed on him since he addressed a ill-founded petition and begged for your authority rather than for your benevolence.

Yours sincerely,

[Illegible Signature].


My dear friend,

I am writing you to acknowledge receipt of your letter n°232 dated 25 July 1900. Moussa Coulibaly\textsuperscript{18} must have mislead you concerning the date on which these women left Médine, since on 6 May, as I was in Diougou in Kaarta, the head of the neighboring village, the one of Labadéri, sent his son to give account that three escaped women from Médine had been staying at his home for one month. I told him to keep them to my arrival in his village.

Due to diverse circumstances, I was unable to go to Labadéri and the three women in question were brought to me to Sakara on 17 May when I went by this village. On 28 May, when I came back to Kita, I inscribed them, since they claimed to be captives, in the freedom village, I made the date of their inscription go back to 10 April, the approximate date of their arrival in Labadéri. But, Moussa came to me only on 17 July to claim his three escaped captives, that is seven days too late, so that I could not give them back to him.

The date of 15 June mentioned on his pass is the one when he came to the post to claim his three captives. According to custom, he had to search for them by himself

\textsuperscript{18} Here you have to understand Beydy Couloubaly. The colonial administration often mistook one person’s name for another.
and came on 17 July to report that he eventually found them; but the normal
prescribed time of three months was over and I could not give freed women back to
him.

Today the three women are free and they will soon go back home. I therefore advise
Moussa Coulibaly [sic], since he pretends to treat them as free women, to approach
the Commandants of cercle in which they will stay. In the settlement of this case,
which becomes a simple divorce case, I do not have to interfere further as neither the
women in question nor the husband fall within the scope of my authority.

I do not know whether the sergeant school instructor had or did not have one of these
women as his mistress. What I can affirm to you is that I was not called as civil
officer to sanction this union. Moreover, when I ordered Moussa Coulibaly [sic] to
prove his statement, he based his responses on what two old procuring Muslim
women from Kita told him. As the custom goes, these women today have sworn on
the Koran according to the rites that they had not said anything to Moussa Coulibaly
[sic].

I would be therefore grateful if you could punish this native for having put forward a
fact that he cannot prove.

You will well understand, my dear friend, that only my obligation to obey rules in
force prevents me from conforming to the wish indicated in your letter and that I am
not worried at all about the supposed alliance with the sergeant school instructor,
since the three women who are concerned by the petition of Moussa Coulibaly [sic],
as I was telling you at the beginning, will have left the cercle of Kita tomorrow on 3
August.

Sincerely yours…

Signed: Pierre Dupont.
The Amady Penda Petition

This second set of documents deals with the petition addressed by Amady Penda, police guard in Louga, in September 1907 to the colonial administration in order to set free his family who, he claimed, was still enslaved in French Soudan. Unfortunately the original petition by Amady Penda was not to be found in the file. We do not know either how the story of Amady Penda ended. But the exchange of correspondence highlights to what extent the struggle for the control over the family life was a very important issue during ‘emancipation’. It shows that (former) slaves were neither without connections and social networks nor without family ties.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Amady Penda seek the help of the colonial administration to set his family free?

2. Why did the Governor of Senegal disagree with the decision taken by the administrator Bonnathiès to authorize Amady Penda’s sister Kouta Bâ to join him in Louga?

3. Why was the colonial administration reluctant to encourage the true emancipation of former slave women?

4. Why was the bridewealth of Amady Penda’s two sisters kept by the master and why did Amady claim it?

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19 Louga is a Senegalese town located in the northwest of the country.
In response to your letter #646 of last 5 September concerning a petition from Amady Penda, police guard in Louga, I am writing to you to transmit, as follows, the results of the enquiry that I confided on this matter to the Administrator of the cercle of Kayes. Kouta Bâ, married to Tiébilé Sidibé, servant of Amady Coumba, declared that she would join her brother, Amady Penda. She has been granted a pass to go to Bakel where she was eager to see her sister, Sadio Ba; from there, she intends to go directly to Louga. Kouta Bâ left Kayes with her two children, Mamadou Sidibé and Fatoumata Sidibé. The preceding facts having occurred while Tiébilé Sidibé was absent in Saint-Louis for two months, we have every reason to expect him to claim his rights as husband and father. Personally I cannot sanction the decision taken by the Administrator Bonnathiés.

Penda Bâ, second sister of the plaintiff is currently married to Mamady Diénéba. She declared that she is entirely free and indicated that she wanted to stay with her husband. With such a definite declaration, the Administrator of Kayes refrained from pushing his intervention any further.

As for the despoilment the plaintiff charged Amady Coumba with, the sisters of Amady Penda have categorically declared they had no complaint to register.

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20 We can suspect here that Mamadou Penda got special consideration for his petition because he was a former soldier and an employee of the French colonial administration.

21 Saint Louis was the Capital of French West Africa up to 1902 but remained capital of the colony of Senegal up to the independence.
I am writing to you to acknowledge receipt of your letter #B.705 transmitting a petition formulated by the named Amady Penda, police guard in Louga (Senegal), and to give you the account of the follow-up that this case appeared to have entailed.

In 1906, Amady Penda, at that time spahi in the 1st squad of the Senegalese Spahis, had already made a complaint concerning his family.

By letter #9 dated 6 January 1906 this petition was transmitted to my predecessor by Mr. the lieutenant-governor of the Upper-Senegal and Niger.

From the response made by the administrator of the cercle – copy enclosed – it results that Amady Penda partially obtained satisfaction.

The sisters of the one lodging the complaint invited at the cercle came yesterday and made the following statements to me:

1° Kouta Ba, married to Tiébilé Sidibé, non-free who is in the service of Amady Couma, declared that her husband had been to St Louis for two months; she said she would be only too pleased to join her brother.

I therefore put immediately down the named Kouta Ba and her two children Mamadou Sidibé and Fatoumata Sidibé in the registers of Kayes-Refuge.

The Senegalese Spahis were a cavalry army corps created in 1902 in French West Africa. French sometimes tried to recruit free men, but generally accepted that military service was a slave role. Slaves were therefore numerous in entering the colonial army at the time, either because the masters sent them in order to avoid forced recruitment of their own children or because slaves willingly enlisted and used this opportunity to emancipate themselves from their masters. We can suspect here that Mamadou Penda enlisted in the Spahis to escape slavery. Before 1905, enlisted slaves were officially freed by the colonial administration at the end of their service. Former soldiers were also often employed by the colonial administration as police/colonial guards.

Kayes-Refuge’ is the name of the former freedom village of Kayes. Following the promulgation of the decree of 1905, the administration could no longer use the appellation of ‘freedom village’, which implied that the administration recognized the existence of a non-free population. It is also from this time that the colonial administration started to use on purpose the word ‘refugees’ or ‘domestics’ rather
issued a pass as she asked for one to Bakel where she wishes to go in order to see her sister before going to Louga.

2° Penda Ba, married to Mamady Tienéba, declared that her husband had bought her back from Amady Coumba, she was therefore entirely free, she wished to stay with her husband and did not want to go to Louga.

Regarding the petitions from Amady Penda concerned with the spoliations of which his family would have been victim by Amady Coumba, it is not up to me to give a follow-up, they are first of all expressed in too hazy terms, moreover the two sisters of Amady Penda informed by myself that they had to submit the case to the province court of Kayes, have declared that they did not have any complaint to register. In this case, it is besides a matter of the bridewealth of the two sisters of Amady Penda, which has been kept by Amady Coumba according to the native custom.

Copy. Administrator of the cercle of Kayes to Acting Lieutenant-Governor of Upper-Senegal in Kayes.

By letter #9 of last 6 January under the stamp of the first Bureau you were kind to transmit to me a request addressed by the trooper Mamadou Penda of the first squadron of the first Senegalese spahis to his captain for investigation in order to have several members of his family who are held in captivity in the village of Kotéra (cercle of Kayes) allowed to join him in Senegal.

I beg to inform you about the results of the inquiry I carried out.

The father of Mamadou Penda, Samba Bâ, died about ten years ago.

The mother, Penda Bâ, spent her entire life in the village of Kotéra in the service of Mr Amady Coumba, I informed him of the desire expressed by Mamadou Penda to

than ‘former slaves’ because of its reluctance to recognize the difficult issue of slavery and its legacy in the region.
have his mother join him in St Louis: he made no objection to the departure of this woman.

The wife of Mamadou Penda, Fati Madia is currently living in Kotéra in the house of Boubou Kamara, whose servant she has always been. This woman had two daughters from Mamadou Penda who live with her; she showed a very strong desire to join her husband from whom she had been separated for four years. Her owner (patron) Boubou Kamara without being absolutely opposed to the departure of this woman explained to me that Fatou Madia however never lived at his place like a servant of the house, that she never provided any work and that not only had he constantly provided for her needs, but he also covered all the expenses for her marriage with Mamadou Penda and raised the two children born of this marriage. He asked me whether I did not reckon under these conditions that he would be entitled to ask Fatou Madia, who wishes to leave him, to reimburse a part of the expenses caused to him by her presence in the house.

The woman Fatou Madia recognized the exactness of the observations of Boubou Kamara. She told me he had always treated her well and that she had even been able to treat herself to the luxury of having a servant and to acquire a cow, a heifer and three donkeys thanks to his liberalities.

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24 Traditional masters’s obligations towards their slaves were those of their daily maintenance. They were also in charge of finding a wife to their male slaves. It is possible, as Boubou Kamara declared, that Fati Madia never worked for him in the sense that she never worked on his fields but it is very unlikely that she never provided any housework for him and his family.

25 It is difficult to know why Fatou Madia admitted she was treated well. One can suspect that she simply considered herself as well treated compared to the slaves of other masters: as she said, her master always provided for her, she did not have to work on his fields and she could acquire some properties thanks to his generosity. It is probably also why she never left her master. Most of the slaves who left at the time did it so because their master mistreated them or were not able to provide them with their daily sustenance. These flights especially happened in times of food shortages. Between 1897 and 1915, the region of Kayes suffered fourteen years of bad harvests and food shortages with the most severe crises in 1905-07 and 1913-15. 1913-14 was the worst. The most important waves of slave exodus happened between 1908 and 1914.

26 Slaves were allowed to buy slaves for their own use. They could buy and own whatever they wished during their lifetime but once they died their masters always inherited their belongings.
She had furthermore recognized that Boubou Kamara had personally paid the total of the head tax for her and her family. In order to testify to her gratitude, Fatou Madia spontaneously offered to abandon the five animals she owns to Boubou Kamara.

The two parties being in agreement, I thought I had to sanction this transaction thanks to which Boubou Kamara will be partially reimbursed for his costs of maintenance.

It has been furthermore agreed that the servant of Fatou Madia would not come with her to Saint-Louis and that she would be free from now on. The woman Fatou Madia has been authorized to get under way to Saint-Louis at the same time as the mother of Mamadou Penda.

I thought I could not grant the same permission to two sisters of Mamadou Penda who are in the following situation:

The first named Kola Bâ lives in the village of Kotéra with her husband Tiélélibé Sidibé and her two children and is in the service of Amady Coumba.

The second Penda Bâ who is also in the service of Amady Coumba is married with Mamady Diénéba in Kotéra.

These two women declared to me that they had a happy married life and had no complaint to express against their owner Amady Coumba. They wish however to join Mamadou Penda in Saint-Louis and to abandon their husbands and children if necessary because as according to the native expression: ‘They cannot refuse the word of their brother’.

I draw the attention of these two women to the fact that the Koranic law obliged a woman to live with her husband; that they themselves reckoned they had no reason to get a divorce and that in any case I did not have authority to dissolve their marriages.

27 Following the French conquest and the introduction of a head tax, paying the head tax became also part of masters’s obligations towards their slaves.
Under these conditions I sent them back to take their case to the jurisdiction concerned and have forbidden them to leave their husbands before a court order had authorized them to do so.

The spahi Mamadou Penda got thus satisfaction at least partially; his mother, his wife and his children will join him. Only his sisters have been refused authorization.

Petition of the named Amady Penda. #B.765. 13 September 07. Administrator Kayes.

I am writing to you to send you as enclosed the petition of the police guard Mamady Penda in service in Louga.

This native claims that his two sisters, Penda Ba and Coula Bâ as well as their children are held in captivity at the place of Amady Coumba, in the village of Kotéra, province of Gadiaga. The plaintiff also declares to have been despoiled by Amady Coumba.

I would be most obliged to you if you could examine whether these allegations by the guard Amady Penda are well founded and if you could send me as soon as possible the results of your investigation.


I am writing to you to send you the petition of the police guard Amady Penda who asks that his two sisters, PENDA BA and COULA BA and their children held in captivity at Amady COUMBA’s place in Kotera, province of Gadiaga, be returned to him.
Amady PENDA who is the former captive of the same master would have found himself stripped of his trunks [full of his personal belongings] and his animals, which he had left at his sisters’ place.

**Suggested Additional Readings**


Rodet, Marie. “Migrants in French Sudan: Gender Biases in the Historiography”,