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Citizenship Struggles and the Legacies of Slavery

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## **West African Antislavery Movements: Citizenship Struggles and the Legacies of Slavery**

Eric Hahonou & Lotte Pelckmans

This article analyzes the recent emergence of West African social movements that are putting social inequalities on the agenda of their respective government. Our focus is on the social movements of slave descendants in Benin, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. These 'anti-slavery movements' (ASMs) are addressing the legacies of slavery. Although slavery at the first glance seems to be an issue related to the past, its legacies matter in contemporary West African societies because they are impeding access to citizenship.

We aim to develop an integrated understanding of how and why ASMs are trying to change these legacies, under which circumstances they appeared, and what their claims and achievements are. We analyse eight ASMs in a comparative perspective. Antislavery claims are situated at the crossroads of two conflicting ideologies: democracy vs. aristocracy. The central claims of all these movements are identity based and deal with socio-economic inequalities such as access to land, equal justice, inheritance, and political representation. In West African contexts of political and institutional reform implementation, demands for recognition of new identities are a way of accessing resources. We argue that social movements such as anti-slavery struggles concerning identity are not replacing struggles over material issues, as observed by social movement theorists in European contexts, but are closely interlinked.

ASMs were amongst the first successful global transnational movements (Tilly/Tarrow 2006: 1). The British anti-slavery movement that emerged in the late 18th century resulted in the abolition of slavery and the end of the British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. The fight against slavery was, however, far from over. Apart from modern forms of 'slavery' (forced labour, human trafficking, sexual servitude, child labour) that will not be addressed here, various forms of so-called 'benign slavery' and chattel slavery can still be found in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in West Africa. For this reason, American ASMs such as the American Anti-Slavery Group (1994), the Coalition against Slavery in Mauritania and Sudan (1995) and the Abolitionist Leadership Council (1996) were set up to address the horrors of slavery. International and transnational organizations (Amnesty International, Anti-Slavery International,

the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination at the United Nations) were also created and have exerted pressure on African governments to criminalize slavery (Bullard 2005: 756-761). ASMs are not, however, monopolized by external and transnational actors. African ASMs have been emerging since the late 1970s, and more decisively since the 1990s, especially in Francophone West Africa.

While the study of African slavery was considered a blind spot in the social sciences until the late 1990s (Botte 2000: 8), a growing number of edited volumes on the legacies of slavery have emerged recently (Botte 2005; Rossi 2009). These show the resilience of slavery and its transforming patterns in contemporary Africa. Since slave status was a stigma, mainly seen as an obstacle to upward social mobility, slave descents have tended to hide their origins (Rossi 2009; Pelckmans 2011a). On the other hand, slave status today has not only become an instrumental identity in local level politics but has also been revalorized (Hahonou 2011). This was more remarkable when democratization and decentralization have taken place in West Africa in the 1990s. Democratic decentralization reform has generated opportunities and room for manoeuvre for the political rise of slave descendants in countries like Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Benin (see Leservoisier 2003; de Bruijn/Pelckmans 2005; Hahonou 2008). Several social groups (women, youth, craftsmen, etc.) that were formerly denied the right to participate in politics have seized the opportunity to access local positions of power and gain citizenship. Although people of slave origin have struggled collectively against the ideology of slavery and are demanding recognition and civil rights, very few studies have explored these dynamics as social movements (see Ould Ahmed Salem 2009 as an exception).

Research on ASMs examines global anti-slavery organisations and generally locates such dynamics outside Africa (Bales 2005; Quirk 2008). For social movement theorists, social movements are seen as the result of particular historical developments of state-citizen relations that took place in industrialized Western countries (Europe and North America). Social movements are therefore considered to be 'rare or nonexistent' elsewhere (Tilly/Tarrow 2006: 8). Unlike Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow who exclude the social dynamics that are taking place in contemporary Africa from their analysis, we argue here that social movements do exist in Africa. African social movements constitute an emerging field of research as this special issue and a number of studies illustrate (Lachenmann 1994; Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995; Ellis and van Kessel

2009; Larmer 2010). It is worth heeding these relatively new phenomena because they are stimulating the emergence of new forms of democratic dynamics in Africa and give birth to social change and new political actors in the public sphere. Most importantly, the interplay between social movements and authorities is generating new forms of governance.

The first section explains why slavery matters. We examine the interrelationship between politics, citizenship and slavery issues in the West African context. We then present a case study from Mali before moving on to a comparative analysis of eight organisations that address slave stigma in Sahelian West Africa. Our comparison is based on material by various authors describing the struggles of anti-slavery activists in Niger, Mauritania and Benin. In our conclusion we summarise how and why ASMs have been overlooked as social movements.

### **Slavery matters**

The fact that the marginalization of people of slave descent in Africa did not end either with colonialism or with postcolonial policies has been repeatedly demonstrated (Meillassoux 1986; Klein 1998; Botte 1999, 2005; Rossi 2009). Slave descendants constitute a significant proportion of the population of most West African societies where slavery as a mode of production used to play a central role. The importance and visibility of slave descent groups have been reinforced since the 1990s when territorial redistribution associated with democratic decentralization allowed them to become majority groups locally (Hahonou 2008).

Historians and political scientists do not pay much attention to slavery nowadays because the issue seems rooted in the past and to be of little value for the understanding of current African politics. It is true that slavery in terms of depriving people of their freedom and as a condition of forced work has almost<sup>1</sup> disappeared in most African countries but empirical evidence allows the assertion that slavery and its legacies matter. Among anthropologists, the interest in slavery started quite late. The focus was on the resistance of slaves to their emancipation (Rouch 1954, Olivier de Sardan 1975; Baldus 1969, Winter 1984). The passive attitude or psychological dependence of slaves was explained

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<sup>1</sup> Many reports and studies attest however that enslaved people, deprived of their freedom and forced to work for their masters, can still be found in West African countries such as Niger, Mauritania and Mali (Dandah/Gali 2003, Kadi Oumani 2005, Messaoud 2000, Keita 2009).

by the internalization of what has been called the 'ideology of slavery' (Lovejoy 1981). Whereas African slavery practices changed considerably over time and space, the ideology that supports the institution of slavery remained remarkably stable. With (Lovejoy 1981: 17), we define the ideology of slavery as "a cultural system which justifies and legitimizes a social order." This cultural system is characterized by a set of values and ideals that consider slaves and their descendants as inferior human beings. People of slave origins are labelled and stigmatized on the basis of their social status. Slave status is associated with pejorative connotations about physical, moral and behavioural attributes. Slave status is for example seen as incompatible with political leadership (Pelckmans 2011b). This ideology thus justifies the marginalisation of slaves and legitimizes aristocratic rule.

Other scholars have more recently shown renewed interest in the stigma associated with the status of slaves (Hardung 2009). Several authors described how slave stigma in everyday life means no access to high political or religious functions, no access to marriage with freeborn due to strict rules of endogamy and so on (Rossi 2009; Pelckmans 2011b).

We argue that such contemporary legacies of slavery in West Africa are at the heart of West African politics. In Benin, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, legacies of slavery shape the everyday lives of millions of citizens. Though this has constantly been neglected by colonial administration and disregarded by most postcolonial governments, the quasi silence surrounding the issue does not reflect its political relevance.

Directly after independence in the 1960s, most slave descendants adopted 'non-confrontational strategies' such as migration (Pollet/Winter 1971) in the hope that spatial distance and time would help them to forget their social status and descent (Pelckmans 2011b). Some of them were able to access senior political positions in Niger (Boubou Hama, former President of the National Assembly of Niger, 1961-64), Benin (Hubert Maga, former President of Dahomey, 1960-1963), Nigeria (Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, former President of Nigeria, 1985-1993) and Cameroon (Ahmadou Ahidjo, former President of Cameroon 1960-1982) but they remained stigmatized due to their supposed slave origins. Despite their success their slave origins remained subject to rumours and gossip. These 'public sources of reminder' (Goffman 1963: 40) disseminate and reproduce stereotypes of slavery.

For inhabitants of countries like Benin and Mali, the slave origins of their current presidents and high-ranking politicians are public secrets. At naming ceremonies, burials, public places under the *arbre à palabres*, people talk about their political leaders' origins on a daily basis. Amadou Toumani Touré (the present President of Mali, 2002-2011), Seydou Traoré (Malian Minister of Agriculture 2002-2007), Thomas Boni Yayi (current President of Benin, 2006-2011) and Issoufou Kogui N'Douro (Minister of National Defence of Benin 2006-2011) are all suspected of having slave origins. Such politicians adopt different attitudes: most hide their roots, some change their names (Pelckmans 2011a) and others try to avoid the topic because evoking slavery brings shame. None of them fully assume this part of their identity. Maintaining silence on the issue becomes a question of honour. This last attitude, we argue, corresponds to the internalization of the dominant ideology of slavery by top political leaders. Although these political leaders interact with anti-slavery activists, they do so secretly.

Things are however changing under the surface of silence or whispered public secrets. Since the 1990s, the globalization of human rights ideologies in combination with West African democratisation and decentralisation processes have created new niches for the political participation of marginalized actors, such as groups of slave descendants. They have engaged in 'identity politics' (Bernstein 2005) by negotiating inclusion in local politics and the state apparatus (Leservoisier 2005; de Bruijn/Pelckmans 2005). Some have actively engaged in a confrontational strategy and founded or joined social movements. Their goal is to re-establish the dignity and citizenship of slave descendants in political cultures and to gain access to political structures governed by discriminating aristocrats.

In the following section we present an empirical case from Mali. We explore the nature of political struggles related to the legacies of slavery. The focus is on the trajectories of ASMs, the situations they challenge and the claims they address to various authorities.

### **Temedt: social movement or civil society organisation?**

This section describes the emergence of an emancipatory movement engaged in identity politics on behalf of former Kel Tamasheq<sup>2</sup> slaves. The trajectory of Temedt shows how anti-slavery activists adapt to the legal and institutional framework provided by the Malian state. They first organised themselves in associations that later on became a NGO. Then they developed a set of collective activities whereby they raised awareness regarding the stigma and discrimination related to slave status in Mali. Today they address their claims to public authorities. We analyze such dynamics from a social movement perspective.

The legacy of slavery remains present for Kel Tamasheq slaves. Kel Tamasheq's socio-political organization is hierarchical and racialized (Lecocq 2005; 2010). Kel Tamasheq are agro-pastoral nomads of the Sahel. They relied on slave labour and trade and were hierarchically organised in various statutory groups. Noblemen, Islamic scholars and tributaries had free status (Illelan) and most of them entertained clientelistic relations with unfree groups. The categories of people who depended on them were freed slaves, artisans and slaves (Iklan).<sup>3</sup> Although most of the activists central to the case study prefer to describe themselves as Black Kel Tamasheq (black speakers of the Tamasheq language) and the colonial regime adopted the Songhay term Bellah to refer to this group, we will use the anachronistic Tamasheq term Iklan to refer to a large group of people who are categorised as 'slaves' today. Most of them are not enslaved, but because of their slave ancestry they suffer from a stigmatised slave status.

In the past, slaves constituted a majority among nomadic pastoralist Kel Tamasheq. Slave groups were internally subdivided. A main distinction was made between so-called 'slaves of the dunes' and 'slaves of the tent'. The former were nomads herding their masters' cattle. They benefitted from the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s for their de facto emancipation. Since the cattle died, their masters could no longer maintain clientelistic ties with them. In contrast, the 'slaves of the tent' who did domestic work for their masters, remained economically more dependent on their masters. They continue to live next to their former masters and share hierarchical but intimate relations with them. It is

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<sup>2</sup> *Kel Tamasheq* is the self-denomination of this ethnic group which is popularly known as *Tuaregs*.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed analysis of *Tuareg* slavery, see for example Winter 1984.

mainly on their behalf that anti-slavery activists of today make claims (see below).

Emancipation of slaves in Mali has always existed in different forms and times. For slaves of the tent, individual emancipations occurred mainly in religious realms before, during and after French colonial occupation. For slaves of the dunes, collective emancipations also took place before the colonial period but were rare (Klein and Roberts 1980). French colonial abolition of slavery in 1905 did not change suddenly existing hierarchies (Giuffrida 2005: 813). However from the 1940s onwards Iklan slaves started to seek their own liberation. More importantly, by the end of the 1940s, Malian intellectuals were accusing the colonial administration of tolerating slavery (Lecocq 2005). The first decade of Malian independence under the socialist and egalitarian regime of Modibo Keita was marked by attempts to change the hierarchical order. This dynamic was interrupted by the dictatorial regime of Moussa Traoré (1968-1991). Statutory hierarchies continued to exist among various ethnic groups<sup>4</sup> and persisted especially in Kel Tamasheq groups (Winter 1984).

From the 1990s onwards, voices calling for emancipation in Kel Tamasheq society became louder and were heard in public. For the first time, their claims were articulated collectively in radically different ways thanks to several structural conditions: democratisation, rebellion of Kel Tamasheq against the Malian state, droughts and the presence of development aid. These processes considerably increased the possibilities for slaves and their descendants to engage in collective emancipation. These conditions allowed civil society organisations like Temedt to emerge.

Temedt has its origin in the initiatives of individuals who felt the need to change the mentalities (especially the stigmatization of slave status) in their society. Temedt's current President Ibrahim Ag Idbaltanat was born into an Iklan family in north-eastern Mali where he experienced various forms of discrimination. After he obtained a degree at the University of Bamako, he returned to his village to teach in a primary school for Iklan children that had been closed by noble Kel Tamasheq. Convinced that subordination was deeply rooted in people's minds and prevented them from reaching their full potential, he persuaded his community to send their children back to school. After working on NGO

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<sup>4</sup> Other ethnic groups such as *Soninke, Fulani, Dogon, Bambara, Moors*. For an analysis of the legacies of slavery in different parts of Mali today, see Keita 2009.



projects, in the early 1990's he founded Groupement des Artisans Ruraux d'Intadeyni (GARI), an NGO based near Menaka in northern Mali. It enabled scattered Iklan settlements to set up schools. The interaction he had with other Iklan intellectuals, like Mohammed Ag Akeratane (former president of Temedt), at meetings and fora led Ibrahim to involve further in anti-slavery activism. He joined the association Tazolt, founded by Mohammed soon after the 1994 legislative elections. The Iklan community was underrepresented as it had only one deputy. Therefore Tazolt's aim was to strengthen the position of the Iklan in politics. Tazolt did not succeed since most of its members internalised the stigma of slavery which inhibited them to challenge their discrimination. Most members feared for their jobs in national administration and didn't dare to openly present themselves as being of slave status. Temedt was created precisely to change this attitude.

The critical event that led to the creation of Temedt was the exile of the newly elected mayor of the Iklan community after the 2002 municipal elections in Menaka. Threatened by the aristocratic elite, the mayor was forced to leave and was replaced by a noble. Frustrated by this, Iklan intellectuals were determined to pursue Tazolt's abandoned cause. Between 2002 and 2006, Temedt tried to unite all Iklan intellectuals at once so that they would strengthen each other. They organized a national forum in August 2006 in Essarakane near Menaka. The main activities for the 4,000 visitors ranged from debates over folklore evenings to the experiences of a brother organisation from Niger (Timidria). National authorities also attended the forum.

Temedt is a Tamasheq word that literally means 'placenta' and, by extension, stands for 'ancestry, lineage' (Lecocq 2010: 5).<sup>5</sup> Temedt's first official statement emphasized the difficulties that Iklan experience, such as insecurity due to rebellion and the trade in arms, poor management of collective resources, and weak participation in national and local elections. They signal how Iklan are marginalized in public affairs despite their demographic weight, economic contribution and their intellectual 'cadres'. They were officially established as a national Malian association on 21 September 2006.

Although most of the board members of Temedt are intellectuals who live and work in the Malian capital of Bamako, the association organizes its activities in

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<sup>5</sup> At its broadest, this can be interpreted as 'solidarity', which is the translation used in international press releases.

northern towns and villages. Temedt issued 18,000 membership cards in 2007. The organisation cooperates with other institutions, ensures access to the national and international press and is in regular contact with organizations in the sub-region.<sup>6</sup> International partners, such as Anti-Slavery International, also strongly support them, both morally and financially. To reach its goals, Temedt organizes public training courses, fora, public discussions, community activities and annual cultural festivals to celebrate Iklan identity. In addition to public meetings, it engages in awareness-raising campaigns and brings together Iklan to engage in public dialogue on taboo topics like the denunciation of slavery practices in Northern Mali. Cases of abuse are reported to local and national authorities and human-rights organisations in Mali. They are also published in newspapers such as *L'Essor*. Their press releases received comments and support from internet surfers.<sup>7</sup> Temedt occasionally finances special assignments with police forces to resolve cases and free enslaved individuals.<sup>8</sup> In the fight against slavery, Temedt contributed to a study on slavery in Mali,<sup>9</sup> on the basis of which the association claimed that at least two million Malians can be considered as passive or active slaves.

Temedt is trying to make progress in a legal context by putting lawyers on cases brought by slave descendants that have not been heard by Malian courts. In 2008, Temedt started a campaign insisting on the criminalization of slavery and asked the Malian government to excuse itself for having tolerated slavery. They are currently working towards the first law in Mali that would criminalize slavery.

The emergence of Temedt should be understood in a historical perspective. Since colonial times, intellectual slave descendants addressed their claims against slavery and its legacies to public authorities. The case of Temedt shows how they have been able to seize the opportunities created by successive regimes and global context. As a consequence the movement took the shape of so-called 'civil society organisations' which allowed them to implement their activities, pursue their goals and make claims to public authorities. On this basis, we argue that civil society organisations and social movements should not necessarily be seen

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<sup>6</sup> Such as *Timidria* (Niger) and *SOS Esclaves* (Mauritania) which are discussed below.

<sup>7</sup> See popular online Malian discussion fora such as [www.maliweb.net](http://www.maliweb.net)

<sup>8</sup> They pay policemen's fuel costs, for example, to enable them to take a 4-wheel drive and look for refugee slaves in the vast desert area.

<sup>9</sup> Unpublished report, Keita 2009.

as opposed. They are not mutually exclusive. In this case, we demonstrated how intellectuals of servile origins engaged in sustained collective action addressing their claims to public authorities in order to influence decision making and public policies, challenging dominant ideologies and structures of power.

### **Comparative perspectives on West African ASMs**

This section is based on selected empirical studies focusing on slave descendants' collective agency. The eight cases considered here are El Hor, SOS Esclaves (Messaoud 2000; Ould Ahmed Salem 2009) as well as Saafaalbe Hormankooobe, Fedde Pinal and Balagoss (Leservoisier 2003, 2005) in Mauritania; Semme Allah in Benin (Hahonou 2011); Timidria in Niger (Tidjani Alou 2000a, 2000b; Hahonou 2010); Temedt in Mali. For all these movements, we will describe who the claimants are, what their claims are about, how they claim and what they achieved.

Before that it is important to note that the cases considered here are not necessarily analysed by their authors as social movements. The authors of these case studies describe slave descendants' emancipation dynamics as democratic struggles and a citizenship issue (Tidjani Alou 2000a, 2000b; Hahonou 2010, 2011; Leservoisier 2003, 2005). Like Ould Ahmed Salem (2009) they may refer to 'emancipation movements' but do not link these dynamics to social movement theory. In this paper, we will analyse all these cases as social movements. Broadening Tilly and Tarrow's definition (Tilly/Tarrow 2006: 8), we define social movements as sustained collective action where claims are formulated and addressed to public authorities (e.g. central or local government, traditional leaders, chieftaincy) through various public performances (demonstrations, fiscal disobedience, lobbying, the creation of specialized associations, public meetings and statements, awareness raising, etc.) in order to influence decision making and public policies. Such movements can be spontaneous and unstructured initiatives or organized by the state, and later on re-appropriated by social actors. They may be institutionalized, are generally normative and aim to transform existing moral orders.

### **Who are the claimants?**

As we have seen earlier with Temedt, ASMs evolve and adopt various institutional and organisational forms according to the legal institutional framework provided by the state. Except El Hor that was a clandestine

organisation created in 1978, all ASMs compared here adopted the form of associations (Timidria, Balagoss, Fedde Pinal), NGOs (Temedt, SOS Esclaves), cultural movements (Semme Allah) or neo-traditional political groups (like the Safaalbe Hormankoobe) recognised by state authorities. Whereas they all emerge formally in the context of political liberalisation policies and democratisation processes that started in the 1990s in francophone West Africa, awareness and identity construction of slave descendants began under authoritarian regimes. This is important because it implies that democratisation processes are not the cause of these dynamics but rather a favourable context that enabled these groups to emerge on West African political arenas (Hahonou 2008). Furthermore this highlights endogenous initiatives in the struggle against slavery. The ASMs analysed here did not emerge on the initiative of global actors although some of them are connected to such actors.

Each anti-slavery movement is based on a collective identity related to a specific social status and a specific cultural group. Anti-slavery activists and leaders come from different backgrounds and social conditions. What all eight groups under study have in common, however, is that their members are categorized as slaves, former slaves or slave descendants. This does not mean that they lived in servile conditions or that they are actually of slave descent. All of them suffer the same stigma of servile status and various forms of discrimination and economic exploitation. The leaders are intellectuals and most started as activists following personal experiences of exclusion or discrimination on the basis of their ascribed slave status. These experiences led them to found various structures regrouping people of slave descent. Although they make claims in the name of the people who are stigmatized because of their slave status and glorify fraternity, their identity refers to slaves belonging to a specific ethnic group. For example, Kel Tamasheq anti-slavery activists in Niger or Mali do not fight for the emancipation of Songhay or Fulbe slaves. Their ties to the ethnic group to which they belong are strong and the language and culture of their former masters are the cement that binds them together and allows them to overcome internal differences (as descendants of bought slaves, manumitted slaves, etc.). All groups make an explicit effort to prevent dividing into sub-groups and to promote a homogeneous identity.

All the claimants of these movements share a common ideological basis but adopt different organisational forms. Some are NGO-like social movements (SOS Esclaves, Temedt, Timidria) that are highly dependent on external funding to

implement their activities and interact directly with national authorities. Others are rather grassroots-level organisations or community groups who share common problems they try to tackle at local level with little (e.g. diaspora) or no external funding or support (Semme Allah, Fedde Pinal, Balagoss).

### **What are their claims about? And how do they claim?**

'Slavery is not completely abolished in practice and even less in people's minds.' This statement, an excerpt from Timidria's report on slavery in Niger (Dandah/Galy 2003: 106), highlights two central issues in West African ASMs.

The first deals with the resilience of slavery practices. Anti-slavery activists are often attempting to free enslaved people from their masters, they lobby for the legal criminalization of slavery, organize demonstrations against slavery practices on which governments turn a blind eye, support slaves in court cases against their masters and assist victims morally and financially. Meaningfully anti-slavery activists in Mauritania have named their movement El Hor or the 'freeman' (in Arabic) and SOS Esclaves. Moreover their legal status (as association or NGO) allows them to collect contributions from members, to raise funds from abroad and to implement their activities.

The second issue concerns all ASMs and is related to identity politics. Borrowing from Anspach's definition (1979), we define identity politics as an array of activities led by people of stigmatized status who intend to transform both self- and societal conceptions of people with stigmatized status. Changes in 'people's mentalities' are seen as a key strategic action in the fight against slavery, with mentalities being seen as 'the roots of inequalities' (El Hor quoted by Ould Ahmed Salem 2009). The ideology of slavery postulates that slaves are inferior human beings. This justifies the discrimination people of slave status suffer. Therefore anti-slavery activists are trying to modify the image of slave descendants among freeborn as well as among people of slave origins. In Benin for example, a major figure of the Gando movement Semme Allah insisted to be recognised as an ethnic group, instead of a subgroup subordinated to their former masters (Fulani) (Hahonou 2011). Significantly, some associations have chosen denominations referring to awareness raising, such as the 'Mouvement pour l'Eveil du monde Bellah' in Mali (Botte 2000: 20) and Fedde Pinal meaning 'La classe de l'éveil' (Leservoisiere 2003: 174). Paradoxically raising awareness among the latter is sometimes a difficult task. ASMs are often misunderstood by

their potential supporters or beneficiaries (Bales 2005; Hahonou 2010) because the latter internalize the dominant ideology and accept their subordination.<sup>10</sup>

Through sensitisation and awareness-raising campaigns in rural areas before various audiences of stigmatized, petitions and propaganda, reporting and articles in newspapers, activists denounce a system of values, societal norms and beliefs that constitute the ideology of slavery. Such a change requires a break with the ideology of slavery and adherence to alternative ideologies inspired by democratization and human rights discourses. Charismatic leaders, whether or not connected with international anti-slavery organizations, generally provide these new ideas and ideals. Their discourses condemn the stereotypes (natural inferiority, lack of lineage and history, obscenity, honourless, etc.) commonly associated with slave descent.

Most emphasize 'modern' education and promote literacy among adults of slave status as well as the creation of primary schools and school enrolment in rural areas where the state rarely intervenes (for example, Timidria in Niger, Semme Allah in Benin). Promoting schooling also entails a strategic sedentarization for nomadic pastoral groups, which is encouraged by Timidria and Temedt.<sup>11</sup>

Antislavery activists are demanding reforms ranging from land-tenure reforms (SOS Esclaves in Mauritania) to religious and legal reforms (SOS Esclaves, Timidria, Temedt) to address discrimination against slave descendants in issues of land access, property rights, inheritance and marriage. It is worth noting that their demands are not exclusively directed towards national authorities. For instance, ASMs contest and challenge traditional authorities and municipal rulers (see Leservoisiere 2003, 2005), religious leaders (see Messaoud 2000) and even political parties (see Botte 2000). Concerning the latter, the issue of political participation or political citizenship is at stake. Activists actively negotiate better integration within political parties as did the leaders of the Safaalbe Hormakoobe

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<sup>10</sup> Bales (2005: 760) gives an example of a recently freed slave woman who returned to her master after having experienced freedom in a major city for some time. Hahonou (2010: 240-241) shows how the activities and discourses of *Timidria* are misunderstood by people of slave status. In a context where external intervention at local level is either the initiative of a development NGO or a political party, people have difficulties to label *Timidria's* range of activities (banishing *Iklan* from the vocabulary, repudiating societal conceptions of slave status, etc.).

<sup>11</sup> We should note here that most ASMs analyzed here are related to former agro-pastoral groups (*Fulani, Kel Tamasheq, Moors*). However, emancipation movements are not limited to pastoral groups as shows the case of the *Balagoss* movement (Leservoisiere 2005).

in Mauritania or the Gando in Benin (Leservoisier 2005; Hahonou 2008). If such strategies fail, some create their own political parties, as happened in Niger where Iklan created the Parti pour le Renouveau Démocratique Mahiba in 1996 (Hahonou 2010: 242) and in Mali where they founded the Union Malienne pour la Démocratie et le Développement (Botte 2000: 20). In Mauritania, the founder of El Hor established Action pour le Changement in 1995 (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009: 170). Other groups of slave descents, like the former slaves of Soninké and Haalpulaar, remain in the position of clients vis-à-vis their masters or traditional chiefs (Leservoisier 2003: 173-175).

Demands for integration in party politics are related to the capacity of the political community of slave descendants to take part in decision-making institutions such as municipal councils, Parliament and national government.

### **What are their achievements?**

West African ASMs were able to achieve their goals in three main fields: better access to political representation, more social inclusion and influence on legal reforms.

Access to power positions is among the most remarkable achievements of anti-slavery activists. In each country, anti-slavery leaders were able to win municipal and legislative elections. In contrast to past politicians of slave origins who hid their descent in order to make a career, these leaders pro-actively present themselves as protecting the interests of their status group. They were elected on the basis of their slave identity. Two of the leaders of Timidria in Niger for example built alliances with the ruling party and became parliamentary members. Both leaders of Semme Allah and Djanati in Benin became members of parliament in 2007, after having been elected as mayors in 2003 (Hahonou 2008). Leaders of El Hor were also propelled into top positions within the Mauritanian government (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009). Temedt in Mali obtained more deputies in recent years, who do not fear to reveal their social identity. When it comes to identity however, many paradoxes remain. Leaders of ASMs are often the first to present themselves as being of non-slave descent when interviewed by a scholar. This reveals that they themselves sometimes continue to perceive being of slave status as a negative identity. It is true that self-conscious assertion of slave identity can have real consequences in terms of access to politics, women, land and social standing. Therefore, depending on the circumstances people claim a slave identity and point out sameness (during elections) whereas in other

contexts (after having obtained a political position) they may underline their differences. Identity claiming is a matter of context and identities have an instrumental dimension.

A second important but less measurable achievement is increased social inclusion of slave descendants in their respective societies. Although the studies under comparison do not offer specific empirical evidence related to de-stigmatization, other authors studying the legacies of slavery mention progress. Eric Hahonou shows how the work of Timidria in Niger contributed to prohibit the use of the term *Iklan* in public (2009: 155). Most movements stimulated an increased scolarisation of children of slave descent, which raised awareness among new generations. This was also achieved by field expeditions organised by Timidria, Temedt or SOS esclaves to villagers in remote areas. To conclude, de-stigmatisation is a long-term process of changing mentalities.

The upsurge of audacious political entrepreneurs who wanted to end chattel slavery in their own nation-states has resulted in the legal criminalization of slavery in both Mauritania (2007) and Niger (2003) and in a proposal to revise the penal code in Mali (2011). Timidria has been so audacious to 'buy' high numbers of slaves and free them (Botte 2003) and in 2007 they realised a court case in which they managed to sew their government because a woman had been discriminated on the basis of her slave status in all jurisdictions of her country (Duffy 2009). Temedt and Anti-Slavery International organised a three day seminar for Malian lawyers to make them aware of the way in which court cases are often manipulated by those in power. They made an overview of several national and international laws on slavery and discussed how to avoid that legal complaints by people with slave status are abandoned, retreated or not taken seriously. Finally both SOS esclaves and Timidria were successful in negotiating land for slave descendants. This in turn probably led to their economic success and therefore social integration.

## **Conclusions**

Social movements' theorists have analysed the interactions between social movements and political structures in Western contexts (Eyerman/Jamison 1991, Tarrow 1994, Bernstein 1997). Similarly the case of Temedt shows us how social movements are shaped by external political opportunities such as the implementation of democratisation and decentralisation reforms. Temedt's case is not isolated but reflects other West African ASMs which take specific



organisational forms (associations, cultural movements, NGO) according to the legal frame provided by African states. Rather than seeing 'social movements as agents of civil society' (see Lachenmann 1994), we argue that frontiers between civil society organizations and social movements are blurred, not mutually exclusive, and not to be seen in a linear perspective. West African ASMs demonstrate the significance of the institution of slavery and invite us to seriously consider culture and ideology in the understanding of social movements.

The ideological character of ASMs's struggles and the success in the political sphere contrast with classical venues of struggles in Africa (food riots of the late 1970s and 1980s, women movements, peasant movements, etc.). ASMs challenge both structure and culture. On the one hand, they oppose the existing hierarchical power in which a small minority of noble origins has been ruling a majority of slave origins. On the other, they contest the ideology of slavery that justifies this domination by promoting democratic ideals and seizing democratic decentralisation opportunities. Whereas their slave status was a justification of their marginalisation in the past, today it is in the name of 'slave identities' that anti-slavery activists claim the access to resources. Their struggles have rarely taken the form of armed rebellions, like El Hor in Mauritania in the early 1980s (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009). Instead, members of ASMs with slave origins have accessed positions of power through electoral processes. They negotiated their rights as full-fledged citizens. Therefore we consider ASMs as 'pro-democracy movements' (Larmer 2010)<sup>12</sup>. Democracy has provided an alternative ideology and a pathway to access power.

Social movement theories suggest that ideological and material issues succeed each other in time (see Habib/Opoku-Mensah 2009). ASMs address both issues simultaneously. Against the dominant ideology of slavery, they try to establish new social values according to which people of slave descent should equally be able to access to resources and political offices. They not only orient their claims towards their nation-states but towards local authorities as well. Whereas some of these movements are connected to international organisations (like Anti-slavery International), most of them represent indigenous self-emancipation dynamics that reveal the agency of people of slave origins. These struggles that

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<sup>12</sup> Miles Larmer understand pro-democracy movements as social movements seeking to deepen democratic culture (2010: 256).

may appear as sporadic are in fact attesting the existence of everyday struggles of West African slave descendants to gain their recognition as full-fledged citizens. Their protests attest the social significance of slavery issues in public debate in contexts where the ideology of slavery still frames West African political cultures.

Several structural factors have constituted a favourable context for the creation of ASMs in West Africa. Firstly, democratisation and democratic decentralisation processes have created opportunities for new political deals. It was in this period (1990s-2000s) that most ASMs appeared in West African countries. Slave descendants who until then were minorities at national level (except in Mauritania) suddenly became an unavoidable political force and sometimes even the majority group at municipal level. In the same vein, it is worth noting that the climate of democratic high hopes in the 1990s guaranteed freedom of expression for the first time, with a growing number of independent newspapers and private radio stations as important outlets. Secondly, this climate of liberalization stimulated associational life. This was especially important for slave descendants who seized the opportunity to organize themselves into new identity groups. It also encouraged the flow of resources and development cooperation. Such international contacts were of considerable importance for African social movements. Cooperation with NGOs and development brokers made today's activists acquire experience, moral support, organizational skills and financial assistance. Thirdly, actions by international activists (Free the Slaves, Anti-Slavery International) to support victims of slavery in Africa are being increasingly coordinated by local ASMs.

Their sustained collective activities have thus had a profound impact on West African politics. Gaining access to political representation at various levels of the state apparatus has been a significant step. ASMs are contributing to societal and political transformations, constituting new political forces that inject social change in the daily governance of municipalities and nations in West Africa. Although they challenge the aristocratic ideology and the political structures, they do not pretend to radically transform dominant patterns of governance. They are instead participating in political dynamics and in the redistribution of resources.

ASMs introduced ideology into West African politics which used to be characterized by the absence of ideological cleavages. Moreover, we insist that African ASMs are playing a major role in the formation of new social identities,

sometimes resulting in the creation of new ethnic groups (like the Gando movement in Benin). In order to negotiate access to citizenship as well as symbolic and material resources for their community, these claim makers appropriate new identities, which is innovative.

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