

Shadows of Slavery

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in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)



“I have asked myself over and over again how people justify enslaving”

February 15th, 2015

Marco Gardini interviews Martin Klein¹

Marco Gardini: *When, how and why did you start to study slavery in Africa?*

Martin Klein: The long version or the short. I have always been concerned about evil, in particular, why good and ordinary people do evil things. When I started graduate school, I was in European history and wanted to understand the Holocaust. When I leaped into African history, my thesis project involved trying to understand how conquest shaped the conquered. I chose a limited area and did a good bit of field research. Slavery kept popping up in different places: in the archives, in popular traditions, in private conversations. For example, the jihads that were part of my dissertation research were clearly a response to the effects of massive enslavement, and yet, most of the jihad leaders became slavers. And the French clearly were ambivalent about to treat it. Colonial officers tended to believe more in property rights than in human rights. Slavery seemed like an interesting second project. I was not sure how much I would find, but it turned out to be life project. With time, I came to see slavery as a force that shaped not only African, but world history. I still, however, come back to a moral question. Just as I once wanted to understand how ordinary Germans could participate in a killing machine that murdered people who had done nothing wrong, so I have asked myself over and over again how people justify

¹ Martin Klein is a retired professor of history from the University of Toronto. He has written extensively on both comparative slavery and on francophone West Africa. He is best-known for *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 1998). He is the editor, among other works, of *Women and Slavery in West Africa* (Wisconsin, 1983, with Clare Robertson, of *Breaking th Change: Slavery, Bondage and Emancipation in Modern Africa and Asia* (Wisconsin, 1993), and with Alice Bellagamba and Sandra Greene, *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Cambridge 2013). He has served as President of the African Studies Association (US) and the Canadian Association of African Studies. In 2002, he was awarded the ASA's Distinguished Africanist Award.



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enslaving or denying the humanity of other people, often murdering those who defend themselves.

Marco Gardini: *In which political context did the academic interest on African slavery emerge?*

Martin Klein: We came at the study of slavery from three different directions. First, though many colonial administrators and anthropologists tried to ignore slavery, an increasing number of field researchers found they could not do so. Many of the contributors to the Miers and Kopytoff collection were not particularly political, and I think that Igor was fairly conservative, which shaped his approach to slavery. However, when asked, they had material on slavery in their notes. The cliometricians from Curtin through Eltis were largely in this group, though they differed from the Miers and Kopytoff people in that they were attracted by statistics. A second group was shaped by the Christian abolitionist tradition. I think that Suzanne Miers started with a good thesis subject, the Brussels Slavery Convention, but that opened Pandora's box. She began attending hearings of the UN anti-slavery committee and got involved with Anti-Slavery International and the struggle against modern slavery. Kopytoff was more theoretical than Miers. Much of the introduction flowed from his understanding of the society he studied in the Congo. The third group was influenced by the new Marxist writing of the 1980's which liberated Marxism from the straitjacket of Communist theorists. The most important were the French like Meillassoux, Jean Bazin, Olivier de Sardan and on the other side of the Atlantic, Fred Cooper. I am not sure how many called themselves Marxists then or would call themselves Marxists today, but many of debates and much of analysis of slavery was shaped by ideas originally articulated in a seminar that Claude Meillassoux organized in Paris in the mid-70s. They shaped many of us in North America. I was part of a reading group that read French Marxist anthropology, and when it turned out that most of us had never read much Marx, we then spent a year reading Capital. Lovejoy, originally a Curtin student, was influenced by it. I would say that the key result is that we learned to think structurally. Some of us straddled these three groups. Certainly, though Sue Miers was disturbed by the vehemence of Meillassoux's attack on the Miers & Kopytoff model, the debate was very productive. Many of us took ideas from different sources. Though I was a contributor to Miers and Kopytoff, I criticized their introduction. With time, I saw the applicability of both Meillassoux's analysis and that of Miers and Kopytoff.

Marco Gardini: *Which are the main goals achieved in the study of slavery in the last decades? Which are the crucial questions that still need an answer?*

Martin Klein: We have established the pervasiveness of slavery in Africa. Furthermore, we have established that many African societies were slave societies. We have shattered the notion that there was really no difference between slaves and other groups of the poor in



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Africa. Moses Finley wrote 50 years ago that there were only five known “slave societies” (similar to what Marxists call a slave mode of production). We now know that only on a few of the Caribbean islands was there a higher concentration of slaves than in the Sahel, the Sahara, Zanzibar, and some of the more powerful states. One cannot write about the Soninke, the Hausa, the Funji, the Ethiopians, the Zanzibaris without analyzing how they were shaped by participation in the slave trade and by the widespread use of slaves. We also know that we have to come to grips with the heritage of slavery, in particular, the persistence of servile relations in some areas and the stigma of slave origins in almost all hierarchical societies.

I think that we are now trying to understand how Africans experienced enslavement, the slave trade, and living with the constant threat of living in a world dominated by slaving violence. We are also coming to grips with understanding the stigma of slave origins and its persistence. I think that we need more research into belief systems and in particular, the belief systems of those who were not enslaved, but lived with the threat. We need to know more about slaving and slavery in decentralized societies, witchcraft and religious systems.

Marco Gardini: *Slavery existed in many different forms and historical contexts, and slaves' conditions varied widely. Given this plurality of legal status and conditions, is it still possible to give a general definition of what slavery is?*

Martin Klein: This is a continuing source of debate. Someone can be well off and still be a slave and in fact, the well-being of some is rooted in their being a slave. The crucial thing is that where slavery exists, it becomes a way of recruiting different kinds of services. This is true in the Americas as in Africa. Definitions of slavery stress two variables. The first is that a slave is property and can be bought and sold. The second is that the slave is kinless. Slaves struggle with both variables. The atomization of the slave community makes it possible to treat them as property because creole slaves or slaves “born in the house” struggle to overcome these two variables. It would be unwise for a ruler to sell his slave soldiers, and it becomes an unwritten rule in many societies (not the US) that those born in the house are not to be sold. Do they then become serfs? If so, at what point? Similarly, slaves form relationships with each other. The desire for some kind of family life is universal. Thus, the very things that define slavery are a subject of struggle. As for elite slaves, the crucial thing is that their privileges depend on their being slaves. They are dependent and presumably loyal.

Marco Gardini: *Which are the economic, political and technical conditions that have been historically necessary to create slave societies?*

Martin Klein: Though we know more about the emergence of slave societies than of slavery itself, I feel more confident talking about the emergence of slavery. The problem is that each of the known slave societies has a different trajectory. With Athens, is it Solon's



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reforms? With Rome, it is the huge number of slave captured in the conquest of other societies. In the Americas, it is the dynamics of European expansion into areas where European diseases have decimated native populations. What African has in common with the Americas is low population densities. In different parts of the Americas, low population densities, lower than Africa, are combined with the possibility of large profits if labor can be found. Low population densities mean that labor is in shorter supply than land and therefore, more valuable. This has been stressed by John Thornton in a book which is overstated, but very insightful. The African case is related to a side-effect of the slave trade. Where slaves are traded they are available? Whether one is looking for loyal soldiers, agricultural labor, docile sexual partners or a good carpenter, it is easier to buy one or perhaps train one than to find one in any other way. What is unique about Africa is that it is first, the business of slaving, and then, the trade in slaves that leads to the emergence of slave societies. Slaves are used to raid for slaves and to supervise them. Slaves can be re-directed into productive activities like cloth-making and agriculture. The trade and the development of slave-based production makes capital available, though not in the amounts or of the quality of the Americas. The other part of the world that is interesting is Southeast Asia, where low population densities make labor valuable. Anthony Reid argues that these do not become slave societies, but there are similarities. Areas with high population density like India and China use slaves, but do not become slave societies.

Marco Gardini: *Slavery has been a widespread reality in many different places and historical periods. As a legal institution, it has accompanied human history since relatively recent times. Slave labour was used in many productive activities, many religious and racist justifications have been elaborated in order to legitimise the enslavement of people, and slaves have been often a prestigious item for the elites of different societies. And yet today (with really few exceptions) none will agree on the morality of this practice and slavery has been formally abolished everywhere. Why this radical change occurred?*

Martin Klein: I am not completely satisfied with our understanding of this question. Thinkers in the Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist traditions have had misgivings about slavery, but it was abolished nowhere before the 1790s and there was before the late 18th century no abolitionist social movement. Yet within a century, it was abolished everywhere in the western world, and within 180 years, everywhere. Some 19th century historians saw abolition as a triumph of the good, but more recent historians are more cynical about human motivation. We have to see abolition as a reflection of deep changes in the nature of modern society. The abolition movement in the Anglo-Saxon world was an outgrowth of new forms of Protestant worship, which, in turn were a product of social change. For me, the most effective explanation for the sudden success of abolition came from Howard Temperley in the journal *Past and Present*. He argued that the acceptance of and a belief in free labour was a crucial part of the change. The energy in both England and the United States came from the churches, but industrialists also preferred a free labour



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system, albeit a very exploitative one and farmers did not want to compete with slave labour. It is worth underlining that the United States did not really reject slavery until well into the Civil and then largely to destroy the South. The Republican party was a free soil party opposed to the extension of slavery. The vast majority of its supporters did not oppose southern slavery, but the election of the Republicans threatened the balance of power and led to the revolt of the South. I think that there is one other factor. As slavery became more economically rational, it also became more brutal. The excesses of enslavement, the slave trade and slavery were in some way a factor in its own destruction. The key, however, is the acceptance of a free labour discourse first in Britain, then in the United States and all over Europe. An interesting subject for research would be continental anti-slavery after 1848.

Marco Gardini: *Have you noticed a growing academic interest on the topic of slavery in Africa? If yes, which factors do you think have played a role?*

Martin Klein: Some of it is a spin-off from what has happened in the United States, where the growth of slave studies has paralleled the emancipation of Africa-Americans from the restraints of segregation, but I think that the crucial thing is that we have proven our point. When I published my *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* in 1998, I tried to be a little provocative in the hopes of stimulating some debate. There are a few who disagree with me on some points, but what has been done by younger scholars like Rossi, Pelckmans, Bellagamba is more to refine and extend or open up new areas. Ana Lucia Araujo, for example, has pioneered the whole area of memory. The memories of African-Americans are particularly important because they have money and ask questions about the forts and castles. There are a number of other factors. An excellent band of African scholars like Thioub, Sehou, and Perbi are doing research on African slavery. Movements like Timidria, SOS-Esclaves and Temedt are raising questions. Scholars doing research in local areas are increasingly confronting the heritage of slavery, which is visible in different ways. When they try to understand what they are seeing, they now have explanatory models.

Marco Gardini: *How the historical debate on slavery could help to understand new forms of labour exploitation?*

Martin Klein: Contemporary forms of slavery are different from traditional forms. Slavery is illegal everywhere, even in countries like the Soudan, where it has been revived. It is also often not a permanent condition. The largest number of slaves today are women coerced into selling sexual services until they are no longer useful. Children in the rug industry are also no longer useful when their fingers are no longer deft. By this time, their health and future prospects have often been ruined. During the 18th century, slaves were openly and legally bought and sold. Today many, particularly in Western cities, are



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controlled by criminal gangs. Only a minority are involved in productive labor. In most parts of the world, poverty and population growth mean that labor is readily available for most activities. In some cases, anti-slavery organizations exaggerate the extent of slavery and define as slavery that which is not. Other problems, like forced marriage, have been defined as slavery. Anti-slavery has become a business. Still, the bottom line is that there are slaves. Most are recruited through deception, and then coerced when they no longer can count on any protection. Others like Mende Nazer, a woman from the Nuba Hills, were taken prisoner in a slave raids. However they are taken, they are slaves. They are bought, sold, and moved around.



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