

# The legacies of slavery in southern Senegal

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



Sare Dembayel, Upper Casamance region, southern Senegal in 2014. Photo by author.

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

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

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

## No longer slaves, but still vulnerable

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

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

## Complex relationships

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

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

The Upper Casamance is a Fulfulde-speaking region. The local term that roughly translates into the concept of 'slave descendant' is *jijaado* (plur. *jijaabe*), while *dimo* (plur. *rimbe*) identifies a person with a noble ancestry. People describe the traditional relationship between these two social categories in terms of subordination, patronage and even friendship. In exchange for manual labour and social devotion, the *rimbe* supported the *jijaabe* economically, socially and morally. Whereas a noble man could marry a woman of humble origins, the contrary was unthinkable. *Jijaabe* and *rimbe* either cohabited in the same community or settled in separate villages linked by ties of mutuality and collaboration. "He did everything for me" is the kind of expression some of the elderly *jijaabe* I met used to describe the person under whose 'shadow' they spent their lives.

Other interesting hints come from popular etymologies. One version states that *jijaado* means 'my property'. This interpretation casts light on the old days in which *rimbe* pastoralists bought slaves in exchange for cattle to increase the size of their entourages, and to acquire agricultural and domestic work force. A second telling suggests "the *jijaado* is somebody who was seen". Here, the picture gets complicated, as historical evidence support two different readings of this sentence. The first is that the category of *jijaado* served to integrate a lonely person, a stranger that wished to build a new life but lacked resources, or even a runaway slave. This kind of person joined a community of *jijaabe*—always ready to

increase their ranks—or sought the protection of a socially and economically powerful *dimo*. We have many examples of *jiyaado-dimo* relationships along these lines in the twentieth century.

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

## Reductive labels, diverse histories

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

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

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

*This article builds on fieldwork in the Upper Casamance supported by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC Grant agreement n° 313737: Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond: A Historical Anthropology*