

Becoming a slave-descendant: labels and paths of emancipation in Northern and Central Chad

ABSTRACT In the Sahel, labels related to slavery are often tools used to marginalize specific social groups. Scholars and activists for decades underestimated this issue, which was also underemphasized by theories describing slavery in Africa and among Muslim communities as mild. Exploring two specific labels related to slavery – Yalnas and Kamaya – in Chad, the article argues that the status of slave descendants is deeply connected to the colonial encounter, when most slave descendants' labels were created; and that if slave ancestry matters today it is mainly because of forms of governance that facilitated the reproduction and political use of these labels. The focus should therefore move on from the debate about African or Muslim slavery and explore contemporary struggles around the meanings of labels used to stigmatize slave descendants.

KEYWORDS Post-slavery; Sahel; postcolonial state; ethnic identity; citizenship rights

I. Introduction

Jujube¹ is a village in the Guéra region, a mountainous area in the southern part of Chadian Sahel. This village is the capital of a canton that used to be called “Yalnas”, a word meaning “the sons of the people”, from the Chadian Arabic *yal* (plural of *wal*, son) and *nass* (people)². The label Yalnas is not a neutral ethnonym, but hint at a presumed slave ancestry, in part because it assume the lack of a common ancestor (the Yalnas are the “sons of the people”), in part because the colonial sources describe the Yalnas as runaway or liberated slaves. In 2003, the inhabitants of the canton renamed their canton as “Abbassid.” Through renaming it, they claim an aristocratic origin: indeed, the sultanate of Waddaï dynasty, locate a few hundred kilometers north of Jujube, labels itself as Abbasid, claiming a connection with the family of the Prophet and the inhabitants of Jujube state that the founder of the village was a member of that dynasty who migrated to Guéra in the 19th century.³

Hence, they dismiss the label “Yalnas” as a strategic term used in dealing with the French colonial government in the early 20th century, when the French were fighting against Waddaï. Adam al-Ada was the chief of Jujube at the time of colonization, and according to the story had to hide his origin to keep all his people together. Saleh, the leader of ADES – a Chadian Abbassid association that supported the name change process – explained the process leading to the renaming of the canton:

“The French asked him who they were and at that time, if he had said, ‘I am Abbassid,’ he would have been separated from all the other men who were not like him. So, he said, ‘We are Yalnas;’ Yalnas at that time were the slaves. So, the French said, ‘You are slaves? Oh, ok, here is your canton, the Yalnas canton.’ In order to avoid being separated, he said they were Yalnas; it was a strategic choice. After that, they suffered many attacks, as if people said, they are slaves, so everyone tried to own them. But then everyone saw they were good warriors, they knew how to fight, so they could defend their territory over time. Therefore, people were surprised, as they were slaves, but they knew how to fight very well, as warriors.” (Saleh, Mongo, March 2015)

This statement emphasizes the importance of not being descended from slaves, and how this condition is not only about origin, but also status. Moreover, while the story stresses how the person recognized as the chief was not a slave, it leaves room for ambiguities about the origin of the people under his authority. At that time, the French were fighting against Waddaï, therefore, it makes sense that a local leader connected to them would hide this. However, it is not clear if all the other people under his authority were also relatives of the chief, therefore Abbassid, or there were there also former slaves among the people recognized as part of the Yalnas canton of Jujube.

The stress of the quote about who was of slave origin and who was not tells us something more. Saleh subsequently added that being Yalnas was not only a matter in relation to the French colonial government, but also in relation to the other local inhabitants of Guéra

“They [the people called Yalnas] received verbal attacks, as they could not be physically defeated, but then after the death of Adam al-Ada, they found the [written] genealogy that their father had

hidden. He stored it in a horn of an antelope. And then they used it in order to check the past and show their real origin. This proved they were Abbassid, so nobody should mock them now.” (Saleh, Mongo, March 2015)

Although none of the other Guéra groups - nowadays globally called “Hadjiray”, which means the people of the mountains - claim to be the descendants of Yalnas’ masters, they sometimes used the past implied by their name to verbally attack them, as a label like “Yalnas” implies a slave ancestry. The renaming of the former Yalnas canton is aimed to prove that the label was a strategic invention and the people indicated by it are not slave-descendants. Once the canton got the new name, their neighbors were formally no longer allowed to call them this derogatory name. The canton was labelled as Yalnas in 1923 and renamed in 2003 - exactly eighty years later – and the topic is still debated on the ground. Why is a label like “Yalnas” important nowadays? What are the social dynamics behind the reproduction and use of such a label? This article analyzes why and how labels indicating a presumed slave ancestry are reproduced over the time, arguing that slave-descendant labels are a social construction and if they nowadays matter it is because of their historical value, but because they keep being reproduced and used by relevant social actors. The article, therefore, suggests that scholars and anti-slavery activists should focus on the strategies of reproduction and the political use of these categories, rather on their historical roots. I develop this argument by exploring the processes of creation and reproduction of labels related to slave-ancestry in Chad.

In Chad, as well as in the whole Sahel, colonial regimes blocked the slave trade and outlawed slavery (Lovejoy, Hogendorn 1993; Sikainga 1996; Klein 1998), often forcing the former slaves into new hierarchies with their former masters (Botte 2000, Rossi 2009). Former slaves were not supported by colonial governments, so they sometimes tried to build new communities by migrating away (De Bruijn, Pelckmans 2004) or, more recently, uniting around new identities (Hahonou 2011, Rodet 2015). These are the interactions that created the labels used to indicate “slave-descendants”, then reproduced in post-colonial political arenas. These identities, although embodying negative

stereotypes, have at times also been adopted as a tool to access protection or resources, or to create some forms of belonging. My assumption is that the nature of “slave descent” as a constructed category leaves room for a variety of different uses. Therefore, there has not been a unilinear path following abolition, but the quality of interactions and the level of integration of slave-descendants in the societies varies according to the political context. For example, Jean Schmitz (2009, 90 – 98) explained how in Senegal slave-descendants – locally labeled as *maccuBe* - had already started accessing some form of clientelist protection before colonization and is therefore still used in some clientelist relationship between former master and their former slaves. More recently, Eric Hahonou (2011, 10 – 13) showed how the Gando of Benin have been embracing their past as slaves as a tool to unite together and get access to some forms of protection and resources unlocked by humanitarian aid, while Benedetta Rossi (2020) explored the different uses and meaning of the label Haratin in Mauritania and Morocco

The article explores these issues, focusing on the creation of ambiguous labels in Sahelian Chad. The recent work of the geographer Julien Brachet and Judith the anthropologist Scheele (2016, 2019) and the findings of my fieldwork⁴ emphasize how important the elaboration of ethnic labels related to slavery there was and how they radically affect contemporary political life. Exploring and comparing the construction of these labels as “slave-descendants” labels and their impact on contemporary political life give fresh and pertinent evidences about this topic. I first summarize the historical abolition of slavery and its weakness in the Sahel, then explore the cases of the labels ‘Kamaya’ and ‘Yalnas’, emphasizing their ambiguous origin in connection to the issue of slavery and their impact on the contemporary social status of the groups indicated by them.

II. The Issue of Slave Ancestry in the Sahel.

In the last fifteen years, the emersion of slave-descendants’ movements in countries like Mauritania, Mali, Niger or northern Benin has put this topic at the center of the political and academic

debate. This debate tackled the very idea of “slave-descendants” and why and how this concept continues to have important political value in many Sahelian contexts. In the Sahel, the abolition of slavery was achieved by European colonial powers whose main objective was to legitimize their occupation and reform the local economic system according to their needs (Miers, Roberts 1988). Hence, the policies of colonial governments following the outlawing of slavery did not empower former slaves but contributed to the creation of new hierarchies and cleavages, generally preventing the social mobility of former slaves (Rossi 2009; Bellagamba et al. 2013). Indeed, a common problem emerging from analysis of slavery in Africa is the role of colonialism in bringing abolitionism as the only morally acceptable ideology (Lovejoy 1981, 15 – 26) and its inability to impose it on various local arenas where other ideologies remained hegemonic (Thiouh 2016, 6 - 7). A variety of studies has exposed the ambivalence in the colonial government’s attitudes toward the slaves (Klein 1998), the limits of colonial abolition (Miers, Roberts 1988), and new forms of exploitation or racialization of former slaves and slave-descendants (Sikainga 1996). As the colonial administration generally relied on precolonial elites to rule over its new territories, social mobility was very difficult, especially in rural areas (Thiouh 2016, 9), where often the only pathway for emancipation was migration (De Bruijn, Pelckmans 2004). Indeed, the descendants of slaves could become empowered only through directly engaging in activism for freedom or thanks to broader socioeconomic transformations.

The category of ‘slave-descendants’ and its use in colonial and postcolonial Sahel is an outcome of these complex dynamics and a crucial root of contemporary issues related to memories of slavery. There are a variety of points that make this issue particularly relevant in the Sahel. In precolonial times, slavery was the backbone of Trans-Saharan trade, where local sultanates dealt with the Ottomans to buy weapons and other products, and nomadic groups needed slaves to work in the oases (Wright 2007, 103 – 113). Therefore, the whole area had similar dynamics related to slavery, as it was part of what anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1991, 43 - 66) defined as the “Sahel-Saharan system of slavery”, a concept he uses to describe the formation of various political institutions that

based their wealth on the capture and trade of slaves through the Sahara towards North Africa and the Middle East. Moreover, the difficult livelihood conditions due to the arid climate made the emancipation of former slaves even more difficult (Rossi 2015). Although the occupations of the slaves were different, ranging from slaves working in the palaces of sultans to rural manpower, and presented different degrees of exploitation and marginalization, the presence of local groups indicated by specific labels and stigmatized as slave-descendants is frequent in various Sahel countries (Ould Saleck 2000, Diop 2003, Lecocq 2005).

Slave-descendant movements have drawn increasing attention to what activists called “active slavery”, which is the actual enslavement of people because of their origin; but also to various forms of “passive slavery”, indicating people who suffer some forms of discrimination despite being formally and practically free (Thioub 2016, 8). Indeed, the Yalnas mentioned in the initial quotes are free from any patron-client relationship, but their status matters, as proved by their need to rename their canton. They inhabit a political arena where rights – especially those relating to accessing resources in rural areas – are connected to belonging, and where the post-colonial ideologies behind local hierarchies are often reproduced by slave-descendant labels. In the next section, I explore the way this issue emerges in the political arena in contemporary Chad.

III. Legacies of Slavery in Chad

Chad was integral part of that “Sahel – Saharan system of slavery” described by Meillassoux (1991, 43 – 66). When, between 1900 and 1911, the French took over the sultanates of Kanem-Bornou, Bagirmi and Waddaï and defeated most of the nomadic groups controlling the Saharan belt of contemporary Chad, the slave trade slowly vanished. The main outcome of colonization in most of Sahelian Africa was a process of ethnicization of the lower strata of the society, whose subaltern role was crystalized and reproduced by colonial and post-colonial forms of governance (Rossi 2009, 16 – 17). Although there are less data for French Equatorial Africa – the administrative division

covering Chad – than for French West Africa, the policies implemented by the government were similar. The French tried to formally abolish slavery without affecting the capacity of local elites to impose taxes on their subjects as they needed their cooperation. Colonial officials, such as George Bruel, Henri Carbou (1912), Albert Le Rouvreur (1962), or Jean Chapelle (1957), carried out an intense project of ‘classification’ of the different groups, outlining the main ‘races’ – according to colonial language – present in the country. Their work was part of the French *politique des races* aimed at recognizing existing authorities and recruiting them as ‘customary authorities’, either ‘sultans’, ‘chefs de canton’ or ‘chefs de village’, so that they could administer their subjects according to the colonial government’s needs (Largeau 2011). Historians have emphasized how the practical purpose of French colonial rule was to divide local groups into administrative units that could not challenge the central government (Conklin 1997, 110 – 115). In the case of Chad, Bruel, quoted by Lemarchand (1986, 31 – 32), openly stated that “to hold an equal balance between them [Chadian local groups], playing one off against the other without ever granting pre-eminence to one group or the other, for such pre-eminence must belong to us and no one else”.

The impacts of these policies on previously enslaved people have been less studied. In Chad, Le Rouvreur listed some of the groups of presumed slave-descendants, such as “Kamaya” (Le Rouvreur 1962, 387 – 392), “Yalnas” (Le Rouvreur 1962, 123), “Kadjidi” (Le Rouvreur 1962, 104) or “Ounia” (Le Rouvreur 1962, 415 – 416). In these descriptions, he imposed the label of slave descendants on groups who openly denied this origin, such as the Kamaya or the Ounia: and his analysis focused more on the contemporary economic livelihood of these groups rather than on their history or their relationships with their presumed former masters, which are mentioned only very briefly. In the collection of the reports of Victor-Emmanuel Largeau (2001), the governor of Chad in the first decade of the 19th century, there are mentions of slave traders blocked by the colonial government, as fighting the slave trade was a way to block the economic resources of Waddaï, which resisted French domination until 1911. The colonial reports from the first decade of the 20th century mention the

need to protect local groups against *razzia*h and to liberate captives in the area controlled by the French as part of the campaign to defeat Waddaï and control the territory (Gatta 1985, 19 – 72). However, in my visit to the archives at Aix-en-Provence and N'Djamena, I could not find detailed analysis of the origin of the slaves or following up of the trajectories of liberated slaves.

Most of the labels used to divide local groups became ethnonyms recognizing different cantons when the French set up their administrative system in the 1920s. Even in the case of the Yalnas, belittled by Le Rouvreur (1962, 123) as being “not even a tribe” but an array of “slave-descendants”, the government recognized them as a canton when this institution was created in Guéra, in 1923 (Duault 1938, 28 - 29). Moreover, as the central state had no interest in a detailed division of resources and territories among the colonized groups, different interpretations about the meaning, value and rights to resources related to these divisions were never tackled by the government. This is particularly true of a Sahelian region like Guéra, where there were not the conditions to foster market-oriented agriculture, and the main aim of the colonial government was to prevent fighting and obtain taxes from local groups (Seli 2013, 30 – 33).

After independence, the topic of slavery remained neglected. Despite the existing literature about neighboring countries such as Cameroon (Saibou 2005, Mahamat 2008), or Sudan (Sikainga 1996), in Chad both scholars and politicians marginally dealt with the topic. René Lemarchand (1980, 452 – 456) described the role of memories of enslavement in the formation of a common identity among the Sara, the main ethnic group in the south of the country. Beyem Rone (2000, 207 – 248) criticizes the way politicians simplify the history of the slave-raids and contribute to the relatively recent identities of ‘northerners’ as descendants of raiders and ‘southerners’ as descendant of raids’ victims in Chad a point more recently agreed also by Gondeu Ladiba (2013: 16 – 23). Claude Ardit (2003, 65) mentions the story of a high school professor who was stabbed by one of his students in N'Djamena because he defined people labelled as Kamaya as ‘slave-descendants’ among the various cases of ‘daily violence’ likely to emerge in Chad between social and ethnic groups that share the

same political spaces but have different memories of the past. None of these researches dealt specifically with the condition of people labelled as “descendant of slaves”. Indeed, most of label related not only to slavery but also to other stigmatized groups such as Haddad, used to indicate and marginalize the “blacksmith” in Sahelian and Saharan Chad, are widely used in the country and occasionally creates conflict, but neither the government nor scholars considered it as a priority (Gatta 2008).

Focusing on civil society, the situation is not very different. Chad is the only Sahelian country where the Anti-Slavery International could not find a local association dealing with slavery.⁵ In subsequent meetings I had with representatives of Chadian civil society in N’Djamena⁶ in January 2014, they told me that the main problems they feel are a priority for social cohesion are other matters, such as inter-community dialogue, sensitization and cooperation between herders and farmers, while discourses about slavery are potentially divisive and dangerous. This approach is connected to Chad’s political history. Indeed, the politicization of the identities denounced by various local scholars (Bane 2000: 207 – 248, Ladiba 2013: 16 – 23) contributed to weaponizing the memories of the slave raids in the broader national division between northerners and southerners. Hence, the national government avoids any national discussion about it. In January 2020 I talked with some editors of a Chadian journal about the country’s history, who told me they were not able to tackle that topic as it was too sensitive. In the same period I also met with the head of a human rights association based in the Mandoul Region, in the south of the country, who explained to me how he initially wanted to create an association to deal with social issues related to slavery, but the ministry of internal affairs refused to mention that in either the name or the statute of the association, forcing him to call it instead *Association pour la Réinsertion des Enfants et Défense des Droits de l’Homme*.

Nevertheless, legacies of slavery are a constituent part of many social problems in Chad and emerge spontaneously. In February 2016, I attended a meeting held by UNICEF in N’Djamena about the outcomes of a development program based on community interactions in school. During the

meeting, the director of a local NGO described their project in the Kanem region, in the north-west of the country. He mentioned as the main issue for the project the refusal of most local people to interact with the local ‘slave-descendants’. He did not present this as an exceptional case, but framed it as one of a variety of cleavages that may easily emerge between different rural communities, comparing it to the marginalization of the blacksmiths or the conflicts between herders and farmers. His explanation is that communities who do not have a tradition of cooperation continue to mistrust each other, and a previous relationship of dependence may be an additional factor among a variety of cleavages. However, the story of Adam al-Ada which I quoted in the introduction shows that a stronger moral judgment permeates the idiom of slavery. Moreover, in various conversations local people warned me about how sensitive the topic can be. Labels related to slavery impact on the social interactions that people indicated by them could have with the other local groups, on their self-representation and on their interactions with the state. The recent evidence collected during my fieldwork in the case of the Yalnas, and by Brachet and Scheele (2016, 2019) in the case of Kamaya, show how these two labels, and the memories and the meanings attached to them, are a crucial political tool in contemporary Chad, as I will show in the next two sections, where I explore the creation and reproduction of the labels “Kamaya” and “Yalnas”.

IV. Origin and Meaning of the Labels Kamaya and Yalnas

I chose to focus on the labels “Yalnas” and “Kamaya” because they are both described by colonial sources as “slave-descendants” labels, and their meaning and use on the ground survives even now, despite being contested. Indeed, for both groups, accepting these labels was the best option to gain some recognition from the colonial state and political independence as cantons with their own *chefs de canton*⁷ and land. However, because of these labels their rights might be challenged locally and need to be re-asserted, which is what led the Jujube people to rename their own canton. The information about the label “Kamaya” mainly comes from the research of Brachet and Scheele (2016,

2019), who conducted an in-depth analysis of the political life of the oasis of Faya-Largeau, in the Borkou region (northern Chad). The analysis of the label “Yalnas” is based on my nine months’ fieldwork between 2014 and 2015 in the canton of Jujube, one of the three cantons in Guéra recognized as Yalnas⁸. In the research context I was introduced by some colleagues of the *Centre de Recherche en Anthropologie et Sciences Humaines* (CRASH) in N’Djamena and some members of Chadian civil society that I met during my previous experience in Chad, working for an Italian NGO, between 2010 and 2013. An historian who is also a relative of the Jujube canton chief introduced me in Jujube, explaining that I was a researcher interested in learning more about their past. I was warmly welcomed, mainly because the canton chief wanted “the history of the canton” to be better known. He thought that greater knowledge of their history would contribute to promoting the new name of the canton, Abbassid. With the help of the community, I analyzed in depth the history of the 13 villages under the authority of the Jujube canton chief, interviewing its elders about their past through collective interviews. Indeed, the elders generally preferred to consult with each other and present a collective version of the past, based on the genealogy that describes the origin of the canton. I realized that sometimes among the younger member of the communities or individuals living in the regional capital, Mongo, there was a more critical view of the value of the “old histories”, so I tried to triangulate the versions of the elders, some alternative views obtained through interviews with individuals or members of the civil society, and other information about that label and its contemporary role coming from direct observation.

Nowadays, the word “Kamaya” is used to identify a group of farmers living in the oases of the Sahara all along the north of the country and is often associated with a past as slaves. Contemporary Kamaya accept the contemporary use of this term, although they refuse the colonial version of it, 'Kamadja', which they interpret as derogatory because of its connection with slavery. French colonial reports never questioned the servile origin of the Kamaya, even though the word already existed before colonization and is not exactly synonymous with slave. Indeed, it emerges in the relationships

the Kamaya have with the Anakazza, the nomadic group claiming control of oases and herds in precolonial times. The two groups have the same language and religion but do not intermarry between themselves. At the time of colonization, the Kamaya were free and able to participate in economic activities in the region (Le Rouvreur 1962, 387 – 391). Moreover, they do not recognize their previous relationship with the Anakazza as slavery, but as complementary: the Kamaya were cultivating the Oasis and exchanging their products with the Anakazza, who owed the herds and needed to move seasonally for this. The Anakazza, on the contrary, consider the Kamaya as their former slaves who used to take care of their Oasis. The first colonial accounts focused on Kamaya capacity to emancipate themselves and be active actors in the new economic system, where agriculture acquired importance. Brachet and Scheele (2016, 128) noticed that local authorities in Faya-Largeau framed the Kamaya as “landless laborers”, shaping their rural development policies around the opportunity to monetize this aspect of Kamaya people. The importance of the connection between the label ‘Kamaya’ and their labor status will be further explored later. At this stage, it is worth noting that the connection with slavery is assumed and reproduced by the French on the basis of the account of the locally powerful group – the Anakazza – but is rejected by the Kamaya and not supported by other evidence. It is also important to notice that in Faya-Largeau there is a group locally defined as “slave-descendants” and made of more recently captured slaves who got their own canton at the time of colonization.

As well as “Kamaya”, the label “Yalnas” implies a slave-ancestry refuted by the people indicated by it. Unlike “Kamaya”, there is no evidence of its use before colonization: Peter Fuchs (1997, 17 - 18) reports that when Gustav Nachtigal visited Waddaï mentioned its *razziah* in what is nowadays the Guéra region, but could not visit the area (as it was not directly controlled by the sultanate) and do not report any ethnonyms or mention any group of Guéra slaves in Waddaï. I could not find any other mentions on neither Nachtigal, Barth or Al-Tunsi diaries, the explorers who visited Waddaï before colonization. The first written evidence about this label comes from Lieutenant Jean Robert

Derendinger (1912), a colonial official working in the Guéra region at the beginning of the twentieth century. Derendinger mentioned at least three specific groups who were using this label, but he only reported the story from one of these groups in the south of Guéra. This community presented themselves as descendants of runaway captives of the nomadic Arabs, who started settling on a mountain which was difficult for their former masters to access. Once they became a consistent group, they negotiated to be recognized as “Yalnas”, in exchange for some yearly tributes and the promise of rejecting any new runaway slaves seeking to join their community. Although this story comes from a specific community, the French used the label for every Guéra group of farmers already Islamized and having Chadian Arabic as mother tongue (Duault 1938, 28 – 29). Hence, the servile origin attached to this label became the blueprint for a variety of other similar groups scattered all over Guéra mountains. The story reported by Derendinger is nowadays refuted by the people of that specific community: they claim that some people labelled as “Yalnas” may have found it convenient to present themselves as slaves to obtain the protection of the colonial government, but in fact there were no slaves in Guéra when the French arrived, and there are no descendants of slaves nowadays.

In the case of the Kamaya, the colonial officers noticed no cultural or esthetical differences between them and the Anakazza, who are both Muslim and speak a Tubu dialect. In the case of the Yalnas, there are two elements that make them different to the other groups in Guéra: they speak Chadian Arabic, rather than a local dialect, as mother tongue; and, when the French arrived they were already Muslim, unlike the other local Guéra farmers’ groups, who were mainly animist. Even though both groups accepted a canton named after these “slave-descendants” labels, none of the groups formally embraced this presumed past, neither in colonial time nor nowadays.

In contemporary Guéra, the people labelled as Yalnas present their label as a strategy used by their ancestors to be recognized by the colonial government and regroup a variety of people who lost contact with their original groups because of the frequent raids that happened in pre-colonial Guéra.

“When the French arrived, they divided all the people depending on the language they spoke. When they asked Al Ada where he came from, he was afraid to say he was from Waddaï. The French had just come from the Kousseri battle between General Lamy and Rabih, so he was afraid to tell them, ‘I am from Waddaï’. So, he said ‘all these sons of nobody (Yalnas) are under my authority’. (...) This is why the canton got a bad name at the beginning, it was called ‘canton Yalnas’, the canton of the ‘sons of the people.’” (Sheba, Jujube, October 2014)

The role and status of both groups over time are far from linear, as is their interpretation of the past. Brachet and Scheele (2016, 130 – 132) stress how the definition of Kamaya and Anakazza in terms of labor occupation – which facilitated the employment of the Kamaya in developing agriculture and fulfilled the colonial need for landless laborers supporting production – hides the fact that agriculture was barely practiced in pre-colonial times hence it is more an outcome of colonization than a long-standing division. Moreover, we should consider what Rossi (2020, 4 -5) defines as the problem of homogeneity: there might be more relevant social or economic differences among the people designed by the same label. Indeed, focusing on the contemporary condition of poor Anakazza and wealthy Kamaya, there is not a clear difference between the two “complementary” or “subaltern” groups: a wealthy Kamaya can be much better off than a poor Anakazza and labor division and wealth inequality are greater in terms of gender than ethnicity (Brachet, Scheele 2019, 168 – 171). For the Yalnas, in colonial times the priority was the security guaranteed by the French army. To achieve that, they had to hide their connection with Waddaï, who was resisting the French. Being recognized as “Yalnas” was, therefore, a convenient option. Among people labelled as Yalnas, as well as among the other Guéra groups, there are relevant differences in term of wealth, but more related to the urban-rural division or to the access to political role and development money rather than to the belonging to a specific groups, most of the traders being Arabs connected with some nomadic groups.

In the case of Kamaya, the label was appropriated to indicate a specific occupation and a complementary role in relation to the other major local group. Among the Yalnas, it guaranteed some

sort of recognition and rights when Guéra was for the first time under a single central power. Nowadays, both Yalnas and Kamaya are farmers with their own official cantons and some related formal entitlement to land under the colonial administration; hence, they avoided the problem of not having an independent access to land that often affect people labelled as slave-descendants (Rossi 2020, 7 - 8). Kamaya and the Anakazza already adhered to Islamic rules on colonial time (Brachet, Scheele 2016, 158 – 160), while in the 1920s the Yalnas were the only group of Hadjiray already Islamized. Islam boosted in Guéra in the 1970s; since then, all Hadjiray progressively emphasized connection with migrants “from the east” in their genealogies and developed network of marriages and exchanges that increased the connections among them (Fuchs 1997, 213 – 241). As Islam is the main religion in both Guéra and Faya-Largeau, the two groups formally share a variety of social institutions such as the *diya*⁹ and the rules about weddings and heritage with their neighbors. In both cases, colonial recognition guaranteed some political protection and the common Muslim background facilitated interactions with the neighboring groups. However, the connection of these labels with slavery is still remembered and, even though it is rarely explicitly tackled, it may emerge in local political life. In Faya-Largeau, despite the urbanization and the increased economic activities that in the 1980s benefitted many Kamaya, some issues related to the status associated with this label are emerging. In the case of the Yalnas, their rejection of the label came together with its use by some political opponents to contest their rights over land. Hence, to understand the meaning of these labels and their connections with slavery we need to frame them as a political issue rather than an historical legacy. A focus on some contemporary dynamics affecting both the two groups can better clarify these points.

V. Reproducing Slave-Descendants' Status: Land Conflicts in Faya-Largeau and Guéra

A crucial point of this article is that the status of “slave descendant” is not just an acquired descent, but a social construction and, as for all social constructions, its reproduction over the time is crucial. If labels such as “Yalnas” and “Kamaya” are widely used it is because some political actors had an

interest in using them and giving them a specific meaning. Although the people indicated by them accepted some of the ambiguities the labels embody as it was the best strategy to protect their rights, there are elements of contradiction – both in the relationships between Kamaya and Anakazza as well as between Yalnas and Hadjiray – that were never resolved and may emerge in some specific issues.

Access to local resources is a favorable arena in which to explore these contradictions, as despite the formal recognition of their cantons, the rights of both Kamaya and Yalnas to access resources may be problematic. Authorities at both the state and customary level are more likely to be part of the former aristocracies, hence less inclined to believe presumed slave-descendants in controversies for resources. In Chad, the customary authorities created by the colonial governments kept an important role in all postcolonial regimes, representing the more resilient forms of local governance during the various turmoil of the country; and acquired an important role in supporting the capacity of Deby's regime to act locally since the 1990s, when the government officially recognized their role in the national constitution and increased the amount of customary chiefdoms by creating new cantons and sultanates (Ladiba 2013). Moreover, the colonial administration never drafted clear borders between the different cantons or fully clarified the power of the canton chief. In many Hadjiray villages, "land chiefs" exist alongside canton chief, although the state officially recognizes only the canton chief as the "customary authority". The existence of these two different layers of governance has left some ambiguities about the role of the canton chief as landowner which are nowadays becoming more problematic. In Faya-Largeau there are no groups that recognize the authority of the land chiefs differently from the canton chiefs, but the status of the vast plot of unused land was never clarified. In all these potential struggles, the status of descendants of slaves may be used as a tool. Brachet and Scheele (2016, 124) describe a controversy over land between Kamaya and Anakazza in 2006:

"A group of Anakazza had occupied several gardens owned by Kamaya, claiming a share of the harvest. The army intervened, and two Anakazza were killed and fifteen wounded. The

same day, a group of Anakazza youth (or women – stories diverge on this point) killed a Kamaya in retaliation. After the Anakazza’s funeral, fighting broke out between mourners and Kamaya in Tchang-Souss, the district of Faya where most Kamaya live.”

The relationship between the Kamaya and Anakazza is framed by the idea of complementarity between farmers (Kamaya) and herders (Anakazza). Following urbanization and the increased demand for agricultural products, the Kamaya expanded their farming activities using some land that they considered vacant, but the Anakazza claim it is their property. The Anakazza occupied the land and demanded a share of the harvest, triggering violence between the two groups. At the end of the clashes, six Anakazza and one Kamaya had been killed. A government mission went to Faya-Largeau to settle the issue. The question of the ownership of the land was judged in favor of the Anakazza: the Kamaya apologized and their canton chief was removed. Moreover, the Anakazza refused *diya* from the Kamaya, as *diya* is paid by groups who recognize each other as equals. They had their *diya* paid by the state, and the compensation they paid to the Kamaya for the victims was called *ridah*, a form of compensation that does not imply such equality (Brachet, Scheele 2019, 126). Brachet and Scheele (2019, 137) relate the outcome of this struggle to the Anakazza’s broader social network outside Faya-Largeau rather than to a fully recognized higher status or control over land on the ground. Even though international organizations’ focus on developing land contributed to strengthening Kamaya claims over unused farming land, the predominance of points of view closer to former slaveowner elites in Chad’s institutions gives important leverage to Anakazza traditional authorities, more effective in their interactions with central state actors. At the end of the struggle, they prevented the Kamaya gaining control of local resources and managed to reproduce their social inferiority publicly.

There are two points here to explore more in depth. First, the use of slavery in political debate as a “trope” (Brachet, Scheele 2019, 134), and therefore more connected to contemporary issues than to the events of the past. Second, the meaning and use of the “Kamaya” label is connected to changes

in the mode of production and needs to be assessed through this lens (Brachet, Scheele 2016, 123). Brachet and Scheele (2016, 138) argue that “the category ‘Kamaya’ seems to stand for a particular mode of production – agricultural and dependent, based on ‘labor’ and ‘property’ – of probably limited historicity, and with an uncertain future”. This conclusion challenges the capacity of a category like “Kamaya” to explain the status of the people indicated by it in Faya-Largeau: the presumed slave ancestry is less important than their role in the agricultural production and slavery is a political tool in the struggles over these economic goods. However, this should not overplay the importance of the label, as “even if the notion of the ‘Kamaya sedentary agricultural laborer of slave descent’ was a colonial invention, it was an invention that ‘stuck’ and still informs contemporary quarrels” (Brachet, Scheele 2016, 137).

There are no reports of major issues related to the label “Yalnas” in Guéra until the 1980s. Duault (1938) mentioned a variety of controversies among the newly created groups due to the struggle for the control of territories that were mainly uninhabited in precolonial times, while De Bruijn and Van Dijk (2007) explains how most Guéra villages were displaced during the conflict related to the rebellions against the central government (1965 – 1982), leading to the killing of many local leaders, especially among the animist groups forced to convert to Islam. The situation calmed down during the 1980s and, similarly to Faya-Largeau, Guéra has been experiencing increasing pressure on farming land and resources. As the livelihood of the various Hadjiray groups is based on farming (the only herders are the nomadic Arabs who seasonally move across Guéra), the growing demand for agricultural products had an impact on them. In a recent research study, Moussa Alladjaba and Hervé Tcheckote (2018) explain how access to land and management of resources are becoming more complicated in Guéra for an array of reasons, including climate change, demographic growth, urbanization of the country and growing commercialization of agricultural products. These changes increased the pressure on rural households and the competition between different local groups. In the stories I collected during my fieldwork, the status of the Yalnas became problematic in the 1980s,

when they had the first controversy over land with their neighbors, another Hadjiray group called Bidio. Indeed, Guéra was massively affected by the armed rebellions against the central government in the 1960s and 1970s, while since the 1980s the situation became calmer and the resettlement of previously displaced villages together with harsh droughts in 1984 – 1985 set the condition for a growing competition for resources (De Bruijn, Van Dijk 2007). I heard about violent clashes sometime between 1982 and 1984¹⁰, when both groups tried to expand their fields into some plots at the border between the two cantons and some farmers were killed on both sides. However, while in the case of the Kamaya the problem is the ownership of previously unused land, in Guéra it is the very status of the Yalnas' land which is problematic. Although the creation of a 'Yalnas canton' is confirmed by colonial reports and, therefore, the legitimacy of their title to the land should not formally be questioned, the local understanding of 'property' is different and occasionally raises issue. The case of a small village called Tamar – in the former Yalnas canton – may clarify this point.

In 2003, a mobile phone company built an antenna in Tamar, one of the villages under the authority of Jujube, with the authorization of the Jujube canton chief. The Bidio canton chief claimed the financial compensation given by the company for his canton, rather than for Jujube. Indeed, despite Tamar being under the authority of Jujube, the chief considered that all the land of the canton belonged to the Bidio. His claim was based on the argument that a group called 'Yalnas' cannot own land. In Kepato, a Bidio village near Tamar, I heard the following explanation for the name 'Jujube':

"Jujube is a Bidio word meaning "foreigner looking for land"; they were looking for a place and were allowed to settle there. They could settle, together with their families, and we made alliances and also marriages with them, after they asked for authorisation to farm our land." (Kepato village chief, Kepato, May 2015)

Both Jujube and Tamar elders argue that the name of their village comes from a variety of tree they found there, and that is why the name is not in Arabic, but in a local language. They do not

recognize at all the above explanation of their village's name. However, the idea that Yalnas are 'foreigners' with an unclear origin and, therefore, do not own land in Guéra, is widespread not only among the Bidio, but also among other Hadjiray. Interestingly, the counterargument of Tamar and Jujube's inhabitants recognize the theoretical legitimacy of this point. They accept that non-indigenous people cannot own land, but, as a reaction, state that when the founder of their village arrived from Waddaï at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he married the daughter of a local king. This marriage between a Muslim aristocrat coming from the east and the member of an indigenous group owning the land according to local rules gave the group both the belonging to a Muslim genealogy and the legitimate ownership of the land they live on. This form of alliance follows a quite common pact among contemporary Guéra cantons, which since the 1970s progressively emphasized more the Muslim belonging (Fuchs 1997, 213 - 241). The 'strategic label' which the Yalnas created to hide their story erased both the original migration and this marriage, as during the war between the French and Waddaï their genealogy might have been problematic. Nowadays, on the one hand, the inhabitants of Kepato claim that story is baseless and people named as "Yalnas" cannot own lands in Guéra, as they are not from a clear lineage and do not have a connection with the local land; on the other hands, Tamar and of all the villages considered to be Yalnas are trying to publicly reassert what they claim to be their real and previously hidden story to locally legitimize their rights as a group with a clear origin and integrated through a wedding in the Guéra region as legitimate landowners.

As in Faya-Largeau, this controversy triggered the intervention of a mission from the central government. In the end, Tamar's rights were recognized. I could not access minutes of the meetings that settled the issue as the archives of the town were destroyed in 2008. All the local actors I interviewed agreed that the element forming the basis of this decision was a colonial document recognizing Tamar as part of the then Yalnas canton. In the eyes of the central state, the existence of official paperwork stating who oversees a specific village is stronger than local oral memories.

However, among the inhabitants of Guéra the idea that “slave-descendants” may have “cheated the French” to be recognized as an independent canton when the administrative system was created are widespread, and in these controversies local people tend to mistrust official documents. In Chad, as stated by Brachet and Scheele (2019, 283 – 285), the state looks like a political actor among others rather than over the others. Therefore, local ideas about ownership and entitlement impact on official decisions. In the controversy between the Kamaya and the Anakazza, the final agreement was drafted according to local actors’ proposals, as the government officials had no decisive documents or uncontested authority to impose their decision. In the case of Tamar, the existence of documents proving the legitimacy of the village hints at greater state authority. Nevertheless, I experienced other situations where there was not such a document and the final solution proposed by the state was an effort to appease the local actors, rather than to apply an uncontested rule. In 2016, Tamar and the other villages in the canton had to give up a development project they were involved in because of unproven allegations of corruption made by their neighbors. In this case the decision by the authority – coming after a year of discussions with the local actors involved to settle on an agreement – to suspend the project was clearly aimed at preventing conflicts, rather than at assessing the case. I also experienced similar struggles in the process to decide on an area to create stone-bunds: despite the favorable conditions, the Bidio would not accept to work together with Jujube people, as working together would imply recognition of the legitimacy of their presence there.

Having an ambiguous label matters, as the rights of the people carrying this stigma may potentially be attacked. Although the ecologic situations of the two regions are quite different, as in Guéra land constitute the main source of livelihood and is becoming scarcer, while in Faya the value of land is mainly related to political prestige, a common issue in Yalnas' and Kamaya stories is the control of land. Their status as descendants of liberated or runaway slaves does not allow them the same rights over local resources as the dominant group of the Anakazza, or the indigenous group of the Bidio. Hence, although the labels “Kamaya” and “Yalnas” enabled their recognition by the colonial

government and, therefore, access to some land until the economic transformations started nationwide in the 1990s, nowadays it has become a tool that can be used against their rights to either expand their land (Kamaya) or enjoy financial and political gain as landowners (Yalnas). The Kamaya reacted by stressing the relationship of complementarity and not subalternity embodied by their label, which recognizes them as agricultural laborers and, therefore, legitimate owners of land. The Yalnas reframed their label as a temporary strategic strategy to hide their aristocratic origin, presenting their group, like every other Hadjiray group, as the result of an alliance between migrant Muslims coming from the east and indigenous landowners living in the Guéra mountains. The renaming of the canton is an effort to make this version of their origin official.

Another important element is that Kamaya and the Yalnas are claiming a long-term belonging to Islam as a marker of their identity. The impact of Islamic institutions does not seem unequivocal. On one hand, the refusal of the Anakazza to accept *diya* from the Kamaya suggests that Islamic institutions may be used to assert new hierarchies or confirm existing ones. On the other hand, in the Guéra region intermarriages on the common grounds of Islam and the institution of *diya* all contribute to the creation of a homogenous Guéra political arena, and to the integration of the Yalnas within it. While Tamar protected its rights thanks to a colonial document, the main argument they use to assert that right is one man's marriage with a member of another recognized local group, and the fact that they arrived as Muslims and based their interactions with other social actors on this. Nowadays, for the Yalnas the Muslim identity is both a way to claim a higher social status, as people who contributed to the conversion of the animist indigenous people, and to access political roles and alliances that are recognized by the whole community. For the Kamaya too, belonging to Islam and being connected by reciprocal duties with the other inhabitants of the area is a way to deny the lower status the Anakazza want to confer on them.

The Yalnas and Kamaya are nowadays formally recognized as Chadian citizens and belong to Islam, the main religious community of their regions. However, the labels indicating them reproduce

some ambiguous meanings that make their social position problematic. In contemporary Guéra, a label like “Yalnas” impacts on people’s rights to own land. In Faya-Largeau, land rights are represented as being connected with the subaltern or complementary political status of the Kamaya in relation to the people claiming a sort of patronage over them, the Anakazza. These labels emerged in a variety of interactions triggered by colonization and initially enabled some forms of integration in the local society and recognition in the political arena; however, their connection with a presumed past as a slave and the local modality to access rights and resources make them potential tools to contest some rights of the communities designated by it. The socio-economic changes that have affected Chad since the 1980s make these categories increasingly more problematic, and the land conflicts described in this chapter show how they can be manipulated in the struggle for resources, explaining why it is important for the people of Jujube to get rid of the label “Yalnas” in order to become fully legitimate political actors.

VI. Conclusions

This article started with a quotation about the importance for a group labelled as “Yalnas” to rename their own canton, as that name may imply slave ancestry, and all over the Sahel groups labelled as slave descendants are often marginalized. I argued that to explain this phenomenon the focus should be on the reproduction of these labels as political categories. I then explored the reproduction of precolonial hierarchical structures that shape contemporary Chadian society and make labels related to slavery problematic. In Chad, both colonial and postcolonial governments avoided public discussions about issues related to slavery and nowadays there are not local groups claiming a past as slaves as a tool to unite politically, like in other Sahelian contexts. However, discourses related to enslavement are entangled with a variety of social issues and dynamics, as well as embodied in a variety of labels and often emerge in social conflicts.

The article analyzed the labels “Yalnas” and “Kamaya” and argued that the contemporary importance of labels related to slavery is mainly connected to their reproduction and use by powerful political actors through two main arguments. The first is that slave-ancestry nowadays is not a lineage, but a political construction. The second is that the institutional framework created by the colonial and post-colonial state had a decisive role in the reproduction of these labels. In both colonial and post-colonial systems of governance, local actors had an interest in keeping memories of slavery alive, even though the groups indicated by them share a common religious and cultural background with their neighbors. Reproduction and contestation of these labels may overlap, and land tenure is the arena where these dynamics are more evident. In Faya-Largeau, the Kamaya tried to use their “complementary” role as rural workers to claim ownership over unused land, triggering the reaction of the Anakazza, who reminded them of their ‘subaltern’ status. In Guéra, the people labelled as Yalnas tried to protect the rights originally granted by their label: the renaming of the canton “Yalnas” is a tool intended to reinforce these rights and it is contested by their neighbors, whose claim on the land is based on the fact that a “Yalnas” cannot own land. In Faya-Largeau, there are two contradictory narratives about the Kamaya, while in Guéra there are various versions about what the origin of Yalnas is. A political system built on a strong connection between identities and rights and on the recognition of existing hierarchies, rather than on a shared idea of citizenship, has contributed to the reproduction of these categories and narratives.

Colonial abolition of slavery in Chad did not challenge existing social hierarchies but reframed them. The contemporary Chadian state has not the strength to impose its order and narratives but needs to negotiate with powerful local actors, contributing to the reproduction of the existing inequalities. Indeed, there is not in Chad a radical critique of existing ideologies and hierarchies, as in other Sahelian contexts where slave-descendants embraced their origin as a political tool (Hahonou, Pelckmans 2011). The Kamaya tried to take advantage of the presumed ‘complementarity’ they have with the Anakazza, while the Yalnas never embraced their label, but produced a narrative

consistent with the locally dominant ideologies. The ambiguities left by the colonial state keep being reproduced and used in the contemporary political arena for different political purposes. In this framework, the rights of groups like Yalnas or Anakazza need to be continually fought for and reasserted. In the cases described in the article, new dynamics related to land control led to a challenge of the local rights of both Kamaya and Yalnas. In the cases described in the article, new dynamics related to land control have led to a challenge to the local rights of both Kamaya and Yalnas. In these cases, the political struggle to be recognized as legitimate owners of the land emerged through a struggle about the very meaning of these two labels and the story of the people described by them. In both cases there was no decisive settlement, but a continuous re-assertion of different narratives to claim rights. Ancestry – especially if connected with a slave past – is a powerful political tool and may prevail over both local ideas of integration or emancipation stemming from Islam and the universal equal access to rights that the Chadian state is legally bound – but unable – to provide for all its citizens.

Notes:

¹ I changed the name of villages and persons to protect the anonymity of the local persons involved in the stories.

² Local people explained the origin of the word to me. I am writing it according to Julien de Pommerol, *Dictionnaire Arabe Tchadien-français*, (Paris, 1999).

³ Although all my sources agreed on the Abbassid origin of the village, I heard different explanations for the original migration, some people claiming that the founder migrated because of a fight with his brothers, others claiming that he was sent there as a local representative of Waddaï in the Guéra region.

⁴ I spent a total of nine months in the Guéra region: four in Jujube and five in the regional capital, Mongo. During this time, I observed the interactions between different local groups and collected the oral stories of 27 different villages through meetings with around elders of those villages

⁵ For more information see: <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/descent-based-slavery/> (visited 27 October 2019).

⁶ I met with representatives of the *Ligue Tchadienne des Droits de l'Homme*, *Association Tchadienne des Eleveurs* and the forum *Justice et Paix* in January 2014. During the same mission, I also met with some Catholic missionaries and state officials to discuss these topics.

⁷ Under the *indigénat*, the *chef de canton* was the crucial customary authority, ruling over some local villages and in charge of the land around those villages.

⁸ The French recognized two Yalnas cantons in 1923 but both managed to get new names, even though the label 'Yalnas' remains widely used.

⁹ This word literally means 'the price of blood' and indicates the amount of money required to compensate the family of victims of murder and restore peace between the people involved.

¹⁰ I heard these stories from different local sources; although they all confirmed the deadly clashes, there were divergences about the dates and the fatalities.

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