*PROPOSITION FOR A SPECIAL ISSUE ENTITLED:*

## The Question of Slavery in Africa:

## Politicisation and Mobilisation

Guest editors:

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The analysis of political life in a large number of African countries is incomplete if we do not take into account the claims made about the thorny question of slavery and its legacies. With the emergence of recent emancipation movements, political parties, and organisations initiated by groups with slave status, the fight against slavery and its consequences is currently politicised on local, national, and even international levels. This sometimes also goes hand in hand with increased mediatisation. Using different discourses and collective forms of action according to different contexts and regions, the fight for the recognition and the identity (re-)construction of groups with slave origins can no longer be ignored.

The current collective mobilisations co-exist with contestations at the individual and family level which have remained relatively invisible on the national political scene. Simultaneously, important ruptures can be traced. These collective mobilisations have allowed for a critique and, in some cases, even a reversal of social hierarchies by breaking the silence surrounding the sensitive question of slave status in local and (inter-)national public spaces. Does the thesis of the existence of a taboo on this topic still hold true in view of the recent, empirically observed developments?

In several African public spaces, the legacy of slavery, as well as the historical dimension of the slave trade, has without doubt for a long time been the object of an auto-censorship by African populations themselves. The negation of these sensitive questions is reflected also in research, which has often been marked by an "anaesthesia of reflection" (Thioub, 2013: 12).

For more than a decade now, the attitude of rejection vis-à-vis the topic of slavery, a rejection largely prevalent in the past, has begun to give way to a growing interest in research on slavery and its legacies in Africa. A number of articles and texts bear witness to the diversity of slaveries in Africa, their histories, and their impact on contemporary societies.[1] To date, groups with servile status have endured real exclusions, which can be reflected not only in their access to authority and positions of responsibility in the political

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[1] To cite but a few edited volumes that have appeared recently: Leservoisier and Trabelsi 2014; Médard et al. 2013; Bellagamba, Green and Klein 2013; Botte and Stella 2012; Lane and MacDonald 2011; Beswick and Spaulding 2010; Ciarcia and Noret 2008.

domain, but also in the everyday organisation of social life (endogamy), in the spatial hierarchies which allocate the most advantageous land for cultivation according to social status, and in the application of religious legislation.

Some people of slave descent attempt to better their daily lives in pragmatic ways—for example, by manifesting their loyalty vis-à-vis their former masters, or by trying to make their slave origin part of a forgotten past by concealing it. For others, openly proclaiming their slave origins and reclaiming civil rights has become an existential option.

From the 1990s onwards, various associations and political parties of slave descendants have been claiming through collective interventions that their citizenship should be respected, especially in the Sahara-Sahel.[2] Their struggles are most often embedded in the dynamic processes of decentralisation and democratic transition in sub-Saharan Africa.

The organisations of groups with slave origins which have emerged recently—for example, *IRA (initiative for the resurgence of the abolitionist movement)*, created in 2008 in Mauritania; *Peeral Fajiri (Light of dawn)*, created in 2010 in Senegal; the *ORDH (organisation for the restoration of human dignity),* created in 2011 in Niger; and *MBJEN (Bella Movement for justice et equality in Northern Mali)*, created in August 2012 in Mali—have each been formed in different contexts. Some movements emerged from the unequal implementation of political reforms, inevitably frustrating some sections of the population more than others. Other movements find their origins in opportunity-seeking during geopolitical crises (Libya, Sudan, Sahel). Yet others find their roots in the context of national politicisation (and sometimes radicalisation) of religious identities.

In view of such fundamental political changes, which have taken place since the publication of collective volumes on the actuality of internal slavery and its legacies in the 1990s,[3] this special issue proposes to focus on the changing forms of collective mobilisation of slave descendants in a climate of growing politicisation. The politicisation of identity claims by actors of slave origin will be analysed from various comparative angles: through time (historical *longue durée*), in spatial terms (geographic diversity throughout the continent), and between the disciplines.

The above-mentioned militant organisations have an anti-slavery (or neo-abolitionist) agenda, and they fight against the stigma and current social hierarchies that result from the internal African slave trade. At the same time, they are the product of the contemporary political landscape. Their strategic actions are rather diverse, ranging from armed rebellion, to networking with lawyers of human rights organisation, to the taking up of positions of authority in local, national, or international politics.

What, therefore, are the continuities and discontinuities that these movements display, when compared with the militantism of groups with servile origins in the 1990s and earlier? We can observe the following significant changes:

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[2] See special issue *Politique Africaine* by Brachet and Bonnecasse 2013.
[3] See for example Botte 2000, 2005; Villasante-De Beauvais 2000; Rossi 2009.

- an international transborder militantism for the defence and survival of groups with slave status
- the use of (new) media as tools for mobilisation
- the high involvement of an ever-growing group of youth
- the increased international valorisation of the issue of slavery and slave identities[4]
- the "Islamic renewal" (Ould Ahmed Salem, 2013)
- factionalism and, in some contexts, a progressive militarisation for the defence and/or survival of the slave identity.

How does this growing diversity of strategies for political struggle influence the reconfiguration of relations and identities of groups with slave status in Africa? We suggest that this shift in decisions to mobilise in a collective rather than mere individual fashion can be attributed to institutional changes in national juridical approaches, to different customary value systems, to the role of religious discourse, and to the racialisation of statutory categories.

The efforts made by individuals who are categorised as slaves (*de jure* or *de facto*) to overcome the stigma attached to their slave status are manifested in an ambiguous and divergent fashion. We propose an explicitly comparative approach to better understand the specific parameters of both political mobilisation and its absence. This will allow us to gain an overview of the social and political conditions in which some slave descendants choose to make themselves heard in public space while others renounce collective action to defend their interests.

Bearing in mind the academic interest in the question of slavery in Africa—and, more specifically, the interest of anthropologists and historians[5]—this special issue envisages broadening the existing spectrum of academic studies on slavery and post-slavery in Africa beyond anthropology and history in a trans- and/or even multidisciplinary fashion. The defining elements for the identity of a large number of African populations, and the hierarchies and social statuses resulting from a slave past, seem to us indispensable for the political analysis of a wide array of economic, social, and political conflicts in Africa.

We invite case studies based on recent fieldwork in order to make a comparative analysis that addresses this phenomenon and its importance for the understanding of contemporary political dynamics in Africa or beyond. This chosen focus on the politicisation of the question of slavery will allow us to accentuate the diversity among the voices of slave descendents who do more than whisper—those who are mobilising politics and politicising collective mobilisation.

The contributions for this special issue could focus on the following issues:

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[4] Consider for example the popular movies that have appeared in the past two years: *Django Unchained* (2012); *Lincoln* (2012); *12 Years A Slave* (2013); *Belle* (2013).

[5] See for example the edited volumes by Campbell, Gwyn, Miers, Suzanne and Joseph C. Miller 2007; Médard and Doyle 2007; Coquery-Vidrovitch and Mesnard 2013.

**Geopolitical crises, religious ideologies, and innovative opportunities.** How is the militantism of groups with slave status influenced by recent geopolitical crises (such as the Arab Spring) or the threat of civil war in regions like the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and Southern Sudan? Also, in what ways are claims to overcome the stigma of slave status reframed in shifting choices for new (reformist) religious and/or racialised ideologies?

**Mediatisation, legal pluralism, and transnational communication.** To what extent does the mediatisation of claims (in social media, in international media) by these stigmatised groups invest them with new forms of authority and power? In what ways is the diaspora included in the actions and politicised discourses of internal slavery in Africa? In view of the history of the internationalisation of the abolition of slavery in the past, where to situate the dynamics of professionalism by NGOs (Siméant, 2012), including NGOs created by those with slave ancestors? Where to situate the role of legal pluralism, allowing citizens to navigate between customary, religious, postcolonial, and international legislation?

**Lines of discordance and the role of youth in protest movements.** In what ways is protest marked by different aspects of social identities (former slave status, generation, age, gender, and religion)? Does the politicisation of identity claims lead to the creation of alternative hierarchies and statutory categories among the claimants with slave status themselves; and, if so, how? What is the role of youth in the current militantism of former slave groups? In view of their sharing the same status position as social minors *(cadets sociaux)*, what are the possible overlaps in strategies deployed and claims made by youth (whether of slave status or not) compared with the claims made by slave descendants?

**Comparative window.** To what extent do these anti-slavery movements echo other human rights movements that fight against human trafficking, forced labour, inequalities, and injustices based on racial discrimination? To what extent do they echo movements working against social hierarchies resulting from caste systems in Africa and beyond (Latin America, India). What are the differences among these different organisations in their ideological approaches, practical strategies, and ambitions to become visible? What are the marked discontinuities and continuities with initiatives and mobilisations in the colonial and early postcolonial past?

CALENDAR

28 February 2015: Article proposal (1 page maximum). Please send to Christine Hardung (christine.hardung@uni-kassel.de) and Lotte Pelckmans (lpel@diis.dk).

15 March 2015: Authors whose proposals have been accepted are informed.

1 July 2015: Deadline for receipt of first-draft articles (max. 50,000 characters, spaces and footnotes included).

30 October 2015: Deadline for final version of articles.

December 2015: Publication of special issue.

The contributions and abstracts may be sent in either English and French. The final publication will be in French.

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