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STUDYING THE HISTORY OF THOSE WHO WOULD RATHER FORGET: ORAL HISTORY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SLAVERY[1]

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Research on oral history tends to be concerned with two very different types of sources. I would refer to them as oral traditions and oral data. Oral traditions are formally preserved, not always as narratives, but in some fixed form.[2] They can, for example, be passed on as songs, as drum names, or as proverbs. They are part of the collective memory of the group and get passed on from generation to generation. They serve a legitimating function and must of necessity be analyzed in terms of who and what they legitimate. There is also a large body of data at any time which individuals hold in memory, data about individual experience, data that consist essentially of things that people have seen and experienced. It is not preserved in any formal way because it is not deliberately structured for legitimation or communication. Popular writers in western countries have tapped this rather rich treasure trove in recent years to write about the Depression, two World Wars, and the Spanish Civil War among other things.[3] Oral tradition is limited in what it passes on, and once the transition from generation to generation is made, the amount of data is forever circumscribed.

Oral data are largely concerned with people describing things they experienced. They are valid primarily during the lifetime of those being interrogated. They are absolutely essential for the reconstruction of the history of peoples without history, those low down in any social order who have little to legitimate. To be sure, even lower-class families preserve traditions which serve some kind of legitimating function. This would be especially true of immigrant families or of families whose sense of who or what they are is defined by the accomplishments of a hard-working early immigrant or by their sense of being different.[4] Even here, when the first generation dies, what we have is the encapsulation of a large fund of oral data into a kind of family tradition. Furthermore, in North America this family tradition is often preserved because

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the culture honors those who have risen from modest origins. A major difference between studying slavery in North America and in Africa is that in North America those who have risen from modest origins tend to be proud of it. It is those modest origins that magnify our accomplishments or those of our fathers and mothers. Achieved status is more important than ascribed status.

There are also lower-class traditions. Thus, working-class history in Europe and North America has its heroes, its songs, and its stories. Much of the quest for a "people's history" involves the search for these traditions.[5] In a similar way, caste groups within Africa often preserve distinct traditions.[6] Though often looked down on by others, these caste groups have traditions that affirm their roles in society and afford them a certain status and dignity. Blacksmiths and leatherworkers have a pride in vocation, and *griots* in the importance of their role. Most groups have their traditions. Individuals have memories. The two must be treated differently.

The major problem in dealing with individual oral data is the problem of memory.[7] Memory is highly selective in that none of us is capable of perceiving or preserving the fullness of any event, even an event that took place shortly before the description. Any two persons asked to describe an event that both experienced would give different responses. Furthermore, memory can often select the most trivial things. We often remember what we were eating at a given meal, but not what was said, what we were wearing, but not what happened.[8] However rich the informant's memories seem, they inevitably represent only a part of reality, and sometimes ignore the things we want to know.

There is an even greater problem. Memory also distorts. The mind is never a *tabula rasa*. It perceives and holds in memory selectively, and that selection reflects the values and psychic makeup of the perceiver. Older people often select and rework memory, sometimes incorporating events that never took place. These memories are often shaped by subsequent events or by subsequent concerns. In 1984, when the fortieth anniversary of D-Day was being celebrated, Ronald Reagan reminisced about a postwar visit to Europe, which apparently had never taken place. He seems to have believed he had visited Europe at the time, and perhaps had in some movie role he played.

Distortion often involves a subconscious effort either to suppress some event we are ashamed of or to increase our own importance. Both on the individual level and on the collective level, there are perceptions of the past which are linked to ideology and which become more important than the reality of history as it may actually have happened. All of this means that memory must be tapped with caution. One piece of data does not a generalization make. This does not mean we should write off such data. For many questions they are indispensable. It simply means that we should interview numerous informants and we should evaluate any interview data sceptically.

For over fifteen years my major research project has been a study of slavery and French colonial rule in west Africa. This has developed into a study which seeks to look at slavery from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century. As part of this project I have interviewed in the Kaymor re-

gion of Saalum in Senegal and I have had some interviews done for me by an assistant, Aly Kampo, in Masina in Mali.[9] Graduate students working under my direction have also interviewed in Kajoor (Senegal)[10] and among the Maraka (Mali).[11] The information on slavery in these collections have come more from memories of life experiences than from formal traditions. Slaves are present in oral traditions of the larger community, but only in passing. They are mentioned as followers, companions, or victims. Traditions are concerned with the deeds of leaders, rulers, and founding heroes. Oral traditions give us little evidence about slavery; slaves have few traditions of their own.

Perhaps the most striking conclusion from these interviews is that in these societies those of slave descent do not like to recognize their slave origins even where the person's origins are well-known. This contrasts to the Afro-American quest for "roots." In the Kaymor interviews only two of my informants spoke of slavery in the first person. Both were persons who had some status in spite of slave origins. The first was my oldest informant, a man who claimed to be 103 years old and who was not at all servile.[12] The second was a man whose status depended on exploiting his servile origins. He organized work parties and celebrations, served as a spokesman for the more powerful, and enjoyed some of the license former slaves still have. Still, even he indicated servile origins only in referring to a grandparent who had been pawned. In other cases, informants of slave origin tended to be very reticent. Villages of former slaves tried to hide their humble origins, in at least one case making up a fictional list of chiefs. In another case, an informant who had been suggested to me as a "good" informant, clammed up when a young man who had attached himself to my entourage blurted out unexpectedly: "Who is your master?" Our strategy had been to interview on a range of questions and never confront the informant with our awareness of his status. In fact, as time went on I became more and more reticent about invading the privacy of people who found some of my questions difficult.[13]

In the Masina interviews Kampo interviewed two informants of slave descent. Neither gave much information. One was interviewed as part of a large collective interview. Most of his answers were a single sentence. He claimed not to know the origin of his parents or the name of his "master." Though he had served in forced labor camps, he spoke of neither death nor flights common to tales of forced labor. He was almost the only informant who said he knew nothing about pawning.[14] He had no idea whether most of the slaves left their masters or stayed at the time of emancipation. The second informant was somewhat more forthcoming, but still went beyond his own experience only when talking about Aguibou Tall, the one-time chief of Bandiagara, a subject on which he added nothing to what others had told us. He was a weaver who lived in and worked with a tailor. He knew that his parents came from Djenné and was interesting while talking about relationships. His master was present and may well have shaped the interview by his presence. Many of the responses talked about their being "brothers" and about faithfulness. Speaking about his parents, he said

> They were treated like children of their master. Even after emancipation, my father lived with his master. They then came together to Konn where I was born. Like my father, I am also faithful to my masters.... [After emancipation] many slaves went back to their native villages. My father did not go back to Djenné. He remained faithful to his master.

It is clear that the relationship was a relatively benign one. The man was a former French soldier who had returned voluntarily to the "master's" household. Good questioning by Kampo also brought out the nature of the man's subordination, but it was not easy. It came out in references to praising his master, to his obligation to respect all nobles, and in discussions of marriage.

Richard Roberts did seventy interviews among the Maraka in 1976/77, but only two were with slaves. Neither of these had much information on the slave community. Both were fairly short interviews, valuable mostly for a description of slavery and of the slave's experience. Bernard Moitt found only one informant of slave origin in Kajoor, and this person never openly admitted it. Other scholars using interviews have often discovered only after numerous interviews that an informant was of slave origin.[15] If I do it again, I will focus more on biographies, on getting informants of slave descent to talk about themselves, and on multiple visits.[16]

The problem of the servile informant is not simply reticence. Slaves have little history. They often cannot give much of a genealogy. Many can tell you where their fathers came from, but some cannot or will not tell even that. They will sometimes give a general picture of the hegemonic ideology. In a sense, servile informants can say a lot about "the world the masters made." They tend to say very little about "the world the slaves made."[17] Their involvement in the traditions of the larger community is marginal, but their involvement in a tradition of their own community, if they have a community, is even more limited. This is in striking contrast to other low-status groups, who can be jealous of their rights and status. *Griots* will chat informally about great *griots* of the past. Blackmsmiths can tell you where they came from and how they got where they are. Slaves cannot. I am not clear that slaves can or will talk about events that happened within the slave community.[18] Only once, early in my career, did I have a former slave talk about a slave revolt.[19]

The reason for this failure lies in the nature of slavery itself. Slaves are essentially people without history. This flows from a characteristic of slaves. "Among slaves," Paul Riesman writes, "marriage does not confer fatherhood."[20] Meillassoux elaborates:

> The non-paternity of the slave proceeds...from his economic use.... Placed outside social relations, he acquires, *ipso facto*, the characteristics of a non-relative.... The right of a slave to live with a woman, to create around himself what seems to be a family, to act like a free man, is a revocable privilege, which distinguishes this slave from others and attaches him more strongly to his master.[21]

Slaves could neither bequeath to their children nor control them. The master had the right to claim the slave child as soon as he or she was old enough to work. Children were to be the most important subject of conflict when slaves left their masters during the Banamba exodus of 1906 and after.[22] This kept the slave family atomized and dependent. The slave was an isolated individual. The child did not look for the parent for an inheritance or for bridewealth. The parent could not look to the child for security in old age. The slave *ménage's* best hope of finding such security lay in buying a slave for themselves or taking a second wife.[23]

The only alternative was to depend on the goodwill and generosity of the master's family. This was the essence of slavery. That atomization of the slave community reinforced the control of the master. Family existed for slaves, but it lacked much of the meaning it had for all others. This aspect of slavery was linked to other institutions designed to prevent the emergence of a self-conscious servile community and to keep the slave as a dependent part of the master's community. Naming traditions, the possibility of manumission or improved status within slavery, and dependence on the master's generosity all operated to prevent the emergence of a self-conscious community. Such efforts were not completely successful. Where slaves were numerous, they formed separate communities which had their own traditions.[24] These traditions do not, however, seem to be very elaborate or reliable.

One result of the limited development of slave traditions is that slaves are often invisible in the oral historical record. Students of oral traditions have written extensively about feedback, which is the way in which the written tradition comes to shape the oral.[25] Little has been written about the reverse, the way in which the reluctance of humble people to confront what is seen as shameful can shape the written record. I would like to deal here with such a case. It is a case where the reluctance of informants is reinforced by a reluctance of the French administration to put on paper information that would be embarrassing to it. This involves the hinterland of Dakar, the area that before the First World War was the major producer of peanuts in Senegal.

This is the area which has today and had in 1900 the highest population density in Senegal.[26] The high density area is not where we expect it, at the center of an established kingdom, but rather in a frontier area, straddling the borders of the precolonial kingdoms of Kajoor, Siin, and Bawol, an area of conflict not only among those three kingdoms, but also between them and small resilient islands of earlier peoples. It is quite possible that some of this modern population density comes from free peasant migration. In this thesis Mamadou Diouf describes the movement of peasants into areas under French sovereignty around Dakar and St. Louis during the 1870s and 1880s.[27] There are, however, other population movements that have left rather faint but visible tracks in the historic record.

The 1870s and 1880s were a period of massive enslavement in the interior of west Africa. Aided by newer and more efficient weapons, the forces of ᶜUmar,

Tieba, Samori, and other conquerors swept clear large areas on a scale not known even during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. These slaves were sold for the guns and horses that these armies needed.[28] Clearly, someone was willing to pay, although prices were sometimes low. For slaves to be sold, there had to be a market; that is to say, someone had to be willing to pay for the slaves. During the early years of French rule in the Soudan, slaves were taxed. There are a limited number of commercial reports available for this period, but they indicate that for much of the Soudan, slaves were far and away the most important item of trade, often up to 70% or 80% of the value taxed. Furthermore, one set of reports suggests a massive movement of slaves into Senegal. It is for Medine in the upper Senegal river, and it contains eight monthly reports during a period from December 1888 to July 1889. These eight reports show that 10,130 slaves moved into Senegal.[29] Projected over a year, they would give us a figure of somewhere between 12,000 and 14,000 slaves moving through--four or five times the number purchased in the upper Senegal river at the peak of the Atlantic slave trade.

Where could all these slaves go? Who had the money and the incentive to buy these massive numbers? The only place that could absorb them was the Peanut Basin. Particularly important was the development of the areas along the line of rail after the completion of the Dakar-St. Louis railroad in 1885. Labor was in short supply and Piedmontese laborers had been brought in for the construction of the railroad. This was also a period when between 1,000 and 2,000 slaves a year were being freed in St. Louis.[30] The laws on emancipation were being enforced reluctantly and under pressure from French public opinion. Along the line of rail, few slaves were being freed. The administration avoided the obligation to free slaves by placing Kajoor and other areas under protectorate. Then it signed treaties with the chiefs providing for an end to the slave trade and regulating the treatment of slaves. The administration had to hide the extent of slavery in territories under French authority. This means that there are few references to slavery and the slave trade during this period, just enough to know that it was large, that it continued into the twentieth century, and that it went largely to Kajoor and western Bawol. Thus, in 1904 an administrator in Dagana described the movement of slaves downriver to Dagana: "The river crossed, the wretched having been sold, are immediately taken into the interior by the juula, who sell them principally in Kajoor, Bawol and the outskirts of St. Louis."[31] During the same period, reports from Kaedi on the Mauritanian side of the river suggest that almost all slave sales there were to merchants from Kajoor: "Moors coming from the desert sell large numbers of slaves to *juula* coming from all parts of the colony, particularly from Cayor. Some of them buy such large numbers that they can only be trading."[32] Moitt's informants confirmed this when they referred to slave imports as Bambara and described as the major route as from Dagana down through Njambur into Kajoor.[33]

What happened to these slaves when slavery began to break down after 1900? It is possible that significant numbers returned to the Soudan, though

there is no evidence of anything like the Banamba exodus. It is probable that most either stayed where they were or joined the Mouride migration to the frontier of agricultural settlement in the Senegalese interior. Some entered the nascent working class in the port cities and along the line of rail. What is important to us here is that they left behind rather faint tracks. Senegalese oral tradition remembers Lat Joor's heroic last battle against the French, but not his letters to the French about his slaves. Oral tradition remembers vividly an encounter between Lat Joor and the Mouride leader Amadou Bamba, but it says little about where most of Amadou Bamba's disciples came from.[34] The problem is compounded by the fact that there is so little slave tradition to put into the mix.

Can we still tap oral data for information about slavery? Is there a significant amount of oral data out there? I am not sure. My best slave informants are now dead. There are few former slaves alive who can describe anything that happened before 1905. We should be collecting biographies, but even biographies will be of little help for understanding the crucial period between 1890 and 1910, although they might be useful in describing processes of transition to freedom, but mostly for the war and interwar periods. In dealing with them, we have to recognize that certain changes—for example, the creation of a stable family life—were rapid. Two other kinds of tradition would be useful. The first would be traditions of resistance. Memories of slave revolt would be interesting, and might still exist, especially where the revolt ended with slaves forming autonomous communities in place or near the site of enslavement, that is, in communities that still take pride in having asserted themselves. The second would be traditions of migration. There was in the early twentieth century a vast movement of groups of people—for example, the return to Wassoulou in southern Mali of large populations taken prisoner by Samori. Many returned in groups. Many had been enslaved for short periods of time. Do they, or similar groups elsewhere in Africa, remember and have they passed on traditions of that migration? I have some doubts, but it would be worth the effort to try.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Joseph Miller, Richard Roberts, and Bogumil Jewsiewicki for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am also indebted for years of support to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and to the Woodrow Wilson Center for a fruitful stay, where some of these ideas germinated.

2. The different kinds of tradition are most fully explored in Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985).

3. See, for example, two popular practitioners, Studs Terkel, *Hard Times. An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1970) or Barry Broadfoot, *Years of Sorrow. TheStory of Japanese Canadians in World War II* (Toronto, 1977).

4. A lot of excellent work is being done now in the field of immigrant studies, where

even the study of the ethnic press cannot pick up the richness of the data that lie in memory. My thoughts on this subject have profited from conversations with Robert Harney of Toronto's Multicultural History Society and with some of his students.

5. See the journal *History Workshop*, and Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Scoialist Theory* (London, 1981); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, 1978).

6. See, for example, Patrick McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power and Art in West Africa* (Bloomington, 1985), esp. ch. 1 and 5, and Judith Irvine, "Caste and Communication in a Wolof Village," Ph.D., 1973.

7. On memory see Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, ch. 1. "It is in a way amazing," Vansina writes, "that the relation of a memory to what actually happened can be so close." Vansina, "Memory and Oral Tradition" in Joseph Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks* (Folkestone, 1980), 275.

8. A number of years ago, when I was trying to date the decline of the leatherworkers' caste, I decided to see if people could remember their first pair of shoes. I was quite startled when the first person I asked gave me a precise answer: It was in 1937. In fact an event that seemed trivial to me may well have been more important to this man than the events I normally study.

9. My Senegalese interviews are available at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University and at the Archives Culturelles in Dakar. The Malian interviews are available at the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako.

10. Bernard Moitt, "Peanut Production and Social Change in the Dakar Hinterland: Kajoor and Bawol, 1840-1940," Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1983.

11. Richard Roberts, "Maraka Historical Texts: Transcripts of Oral Data Collected in the Middle Niger Valley of the Republic of Mali," 3 vols., unpublished texts, 1976-84. See also his *Warriors, Merchants and Slaves* (Stanford, 1987).

12. The former slave was justly proud of his accomplishments. By accident we also interviewed a number of the man's "master's" family. The old man had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. By tradition, freed men are not supposed to make the pilgrimage until they have bought their freedom under traditional law. The former master complained that the old man did not ask the "master" to set a price. He simply put on the table what he thought was the right price and announced that he was going. At the same time, it is striking that a man who had founded a hamlet and accumulated enough cattle to pay for such a trip was till so bound by custom.

13. At one point I became convinced that a young man who had helped us a lot and had become a friend was a slave origin. I thought it might be interesting to talk to him about the meaning of servile origins today, but the issue is one that younger and better-educated Senegalese want to set behind them. My assistant refused either to confirm or dispel my suspicions. As I became aware that the proposed interview would be unpleasant for both my assistant and our friend, I dropped the idea.

14. Pawning was widespread in the region and increased dramatically during the depressions. See Richard Roberts and Martin Klein, "The Resurgence of Pawning in French West Africa During the Depression of the 1930's," *African Economic History* 16 (1987), 23-38. In general, informants talked much more freely about the resurgence of pawning than about the persistence of slavery.

15. Claire Robertson, "Post-Proclamation Slavery in Accra: A Female Affair?" in M.A. Klein and C. Robertson, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983), 230; Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn, "Oral Data Collection and the Economic History of the Central Sudan," *Savanna*, 8 (1978).

16. The continuing work of Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn on northern Nigeria should be interesting in this regard. See their article in Richard Roberts and Suzanne Miers, eds., *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1988).

17. These terms come from the brilliant works of Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York, 1969) and *Roll Jordan Roll. The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972).

18. One successful exploration of slave tradition is Jean Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Quand nos pères étaient captifs. Récits paysans du Niger* (Paris, 1976). Olivier de Sardan's success may have been that it was an old slave village, where a sense of community had coalesced. Then too, he clearly worked a long time in a single community.

19. The case was an interesting one. I was not yet researching slavery, and in fact was just beginning to experiment with oral sources. Soon after I started asking questions in a Mandinka village in the Gambia, two men started arguing. It turned out one was a descendant of the leader of a slave revolt, essentially a refusal of slaves to continue working, in the last years before conquest. The other descended from the chief at that period. The case was interesting because it indicated how servile communities could function as corporate entities. I never did get a full history of the revolt, though I later found references to it in the archives.

20. *Freedom in Fulani Social Life.* (Chicago, 1977); Original French edition published in 1974.

21. *Anthropologie de l'esclavage. Le ventre de fer et d'argent* (Paris, 1986), 173-74.

22. Richard Roberts and Martin Klein, "The Banamba Slave Exodus of 1905 and the Decline of Slavery in the Western Sudan, *JAH*, 22 (1981), 375-94.

23. Roberts, *Warriors*, 127; Martin Klein, "Women and Slavery in the Western Soudan" in Klein/Robertson, *Women and Slavery in Africa*, 80-84.

24. See here again Olivier de Sardan, *Quand nos pères.*

25. David Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition* (Oxford, 1974), 95-120; idem., "The Problem of Feedback in Oral Tradition: Four Examples from the Fante Coastlands," *JAH*, 14 (1973), 223-35.

26. See *Atlas National du Sénégal* (Dakar, 1977), 76-79.

27. Mamadou Diouf, "Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle," (Thèse du 3e cycle, Université de Paris I, 1980), 391-97.

28. Klein, "The Slave Trade in the Western Sudan During the 19th Century," paper presented to the Workshop on the Long-Distance trade in Slaves across the Sahara and the Black Sea in the 19th Century, Bellaggio, Italy, December 1988.

29. Commercial repots, Medine, Archives Nationales du Mali, 1 Q 70.

30. François Renault, *L'abolition de l'esclavage au Sénégal. L'attitude de l'administration française, 1848-1905* (Paris, 1972). See also Archives Nationales. Section Outre-Mer (France), 15 c, 15 d, 17, and Archives du Sénégal, K 11.

31. Report on slavery, Dagana, by R. Manetche (1904), ARS, K 18. See also Comm. Medine to Comm. Kayes, 14 Aug. 1898, ARS 15 G 116 and Political Report, Kayes, 2 March 1899, ANM 1 E 44.

32. Comm. Kaedi to Dir. Affaires Indigènes, 30 Dec. 1889, ARS, Fonds Sénégal, 2 D 136. At this time, it was legal to import slaves into Senegal for use, but not for sale.

33. Moitt, "Peanut Production."

34. Most Senegalese will tell you that most of the Mouride converts were of servile origin.