**Everyday life of slaves in Northern Dahomey: the process of remembering** *

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the social act of remembering among the Gannunkee in northern Bénin, predominantly descendants of slaves of the Fulé. It raises methodological issues concerning the possibility of gaining access to memories of the daily life experiences of a community whose members possess their own factual history but one which – unlike the ‘things-worth-remembering’ history of their masters – offers little scope for the creation of traditions of collective identity. Hence the slaves’ descendants often remain silent, negating their own stories. In consequence the everyday experience of slaves is transmitted not so much in verbal as in corporeal remembering. This process of embodying memories is the main subject of the article.

Although the circumstances transmitted by slaves’ descendants cannot always be traced directly to colonial influences, the colonial authorities do often feature in the fragments of remembered history. The Gannunkee paint an ambivalent picture of the colonial period: on the one hand, the authorities are depicted as welcomed strangers, associated with the end of slavery; on the other, they represent military service and forced labour, under which slaves were the worst hit, frequently being sent as substitutes for their masters to colonial recruitment. Even if French colonialism at the beginning of the twentieth century punished slave raiding and the slave trade, it did not challenge the master-slave relationship at the core of the Fulé community. Orally transmitted knowledge shows that slaves were not passive victims but actively constructed their daily life as social agents, albeit subject to their masters’ power to determine whose labour was placed at the disposal of the colonial administration.

How does one gain access to an everyday perspective based not so much on the special and outstanding, but on the commonplace, on daily routine, on daily life itself, the ‘apparently unconscious and ahistorical routine’ (Vorländer 1990: 12), which is more easily forgotten or not considered worth talking about? This question arises in all socio-historical explanations of everyday behaviour but especially, as I wish to show in the case of the Gannunkee in present-day Northern Bénin, when dealing with the background to the experiences of slaves.

Individual and collective memories of men and women descended from slaves are rarely spoken about in public. Nor are gatherings, where residents of individual farmsteads or settlements meet each evening, suitable for a discussion of the everyday lives of slaves, although they represent venues for communal cultural dialogue. There are of course exceptions, individuals who need the stimulus of a larger audience to speak

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about conditions under slavery. But discussions on this topic usually require a distinct framework and arise in moments where a dialogue or a small circle allow a different form of familiarity. For this reason, the focus of this article will not be on the ‘public sphere’, but on the ‘private sphere’.

1. Emancipation and military service

In the hinterland of Dahomey, as has already been shown for colonial territories in Western Africa (e.g. Klute 1995; Weiss 1998; Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1993), although colonial officers acted against slave trading and slave abduction, they ignored so-called domestic slavery. This they tolerated completely until the decree of 1905,1 fearing unrest among the slave owners and the collapse of various economic systems which relied upon slave labour; afterwards there continued to be a large degree of tolerance. Despite social change, which slaves used in many ways for their own purposes, private conventions of communal living with their masters remained unaltered to a great extent in the first decades of this century, as is shown today by the collective and individual memories of the maccoube, the Fulɓe slaves2 and their descendants, the Gannunkeeɓe.

Nevertheless, for the descendants of slaves, the arrival of the annasaaraaɓe, the white man, as the Gannunkeeɓe call all non-Blacks or non-Arabs, was an historical turning point. It separated the time in which ‘people were black’ (wakkati deegem na bowli), by which the Gannunkeeɓe did not mean the physical appearance of a person, but his menacing inner self, his evil, dark intentions, which they saw directly embodied in slave hunters) from the time after which the maccoube were free to decide what to do and how to do it, in other words, ‘doing for their own head’ (maccuɗ wadaɗ hoorum).

The Gannunkeeɓe call the colonial occupation of their country ‘when the white man came in’ (no annasaaraaɓe naatii). That the Gannunkeeɓe, who otherwise have a distinct vocabulary to characterize moments of subjugation, frequently use the verb naatuggo when talking about colonial conquest, implies that they regarded their colonial masters as welcome strangers.

But the image of the annasaaraaɓe, the ‘white men’, is certainly not only positive. The annasaaraaɓe are the very ones who, before the inhabitants of the slave communities fled into the bush, forced the men to work on the roads and build the railways.3 Above all, it was they who came to recruit young men for the colonial army. The Second World War still lives on in the accounts of the sooje (anciens combattants), who, unlike relatives and friends from neighbouring villages who did not return home, survived the war and for a year after their return, washed themselves daily with special essences to banish the ‘wickedness’ (yoonki) they had seen and experienced. The sooje still talk of the cruelty of this war and how some of the soldiers, the annasaaraaɓe, went

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1 Archives Nationales de la France Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter: ANFOM), Circulaire aux Lieutenants-Gouverneurs transmissives d’un décret portant répression de la traite en Afrique Occidentale Française et au Congo, Gorée, le 20 février 1906, K24, Doc 89. This report referred to the decree of 12.12.1905 on the prosecution of slave dealing within French West Africa.
2 The Fulɓe live as agro-pastoralists in northern Bénin forming an ethnic minority. Unlike the hegemony of the Fulɓe groups in Cameroon or Nigeria, the Fulɓe in pre-colonial Borgu, divided between French Dahomey and British Nigeria in 1898, took a marginal position: cf. Bierschenk (1993: 224); Guichard (1998: 186); Lombard (1965: 395). Even today, the Fulɓe seem to be only on the edge of socio-political activity in Bénin.
3 Construction of the first railway in southern Dahomey began in 1900. The section from Cotonou to Parakou, linking the north with the south, was completed between 1929 and 1936: Anignikin et al. (1992: 382).
mad and, on the journey back to their own countries, had to be tied to the masts of their ships, to prevent them from jumping into the water.

Like many former slave-owning communities in French colonies, the Fulɓe sent the sons of the maccùɓe to war, instead of their own. When the head of the village had to deliver a contingent and left it to each individual household to supply a young man for military service, it was easy for the head of the family to choose a maccuɗo from those in the household. But if commanders visited the farmstead and their choice fell on a young Pullo, under certain circumstances, the young man’s father was able to exchange him, as one elder from a laamiɓe household related:

They chose a Pullo, they chose a Gannunkeejo. If [the white men] took away a Pullo, the Fulɓe brought along a Gannunkeejo, so they could get back the boy who had been taken away. That’s how the Gannunkeejo ended up here. He brought along a Gannunkeejo, so they could get back the boy who had been taken away. That’s how the Gannunkeejo ended up here.

Many former masters no longer had any direct power over their former slaves. But the recruitment officers decided about ownership to the benefit of the maccùɓe, who at the time, unlike the Fulɓe, did not own enough cattle or have enough influence to give a ‘present’ of another person instead of one of their own to those responsible for raising a contingent of soldiers, mostly chiefs of the villages.

Where ties between Fulɓe masters (jooniraɓe) and their former slaves (maccùɓe) had not really been broken, the recruitment drives of the annasaaraɓe and their assistants meant a double act of submission. The Pullo decided which of his maccùɓe he would send for military service, and those families who could not evade the authority of their former jooniraɓe were obliged to obey the orders of their new masters instead of their own. Some of the sooje still living know exactly which young Fulɓe man, now elderly, they were forced to replace in the war imposed on them by the annasaaraɓe.

Thus the annasaaraɓe represent forced labour, war and death, as well as the end of slavery. For the Gannunkeeɓe these two pictures exist side by side and not in opposition. Nor do they consider it a contradiction that their own experiences of slavery extended into the twentieth century and did not end with the arrival of the French. The ‘arrival of the white man’ has become just a metaphor for the longed-for freedom and independence from the Fulɓe. It accentuates the former slaves’ concept of time and does not necessarily correspond to the actual moment of historical events.

When investigating the range of memory in the Gannunkeeɓe community, it becomes clear that genealogical knowledge normally extends only as far as the grandparents’ generation. Historical knowledge of working conditions and community rules that determined the life of a slave likewise applies to this period. Such fragments of memory indicate that there was an everyday slave life in Northern Dahomey under French colonial administration. In fact, it was part of colonial daily life, with its obligations to carry out forced labour or act as porter or soldier.

2. The colonial records

But what can be found in colonial records about the everyday life of a slave? In December 1903, the Governor General sent a questionnaire to all district officers in

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4 For the Fulɓe of Guinea see Derman (1973: 56).
5 Pullo, pl. Fulɓe.
6 Laamiɓo, pl. laamiɓe, Fulɓe chief.
7 Gannunkeejo, pl. Gannunkeeɓe.
French West Africa, which was intended to show to what extent forms of slavery still existed in the colonies. The Governor of Dahomey received questionnaires from all districts in the country and added a long commentary, giving his own evaluation of the slave problem for the Governor General in Dakar. This document is unusual in its completeness, in that it demonstrates the various responses of colonial officers to the same questionnaire and at the same time gives a picture from a colonial perspective of internal African slavery in Dahomey at the beginning of this century.

One of the sections in the extensive questionnaire dealt with the working and living conditions of the slaves. It is not surprising that here replies from district officers appeared less differentiated. After all, local officers, who were often unable to distinguish the slaves from their masters, would have had very limited access to the slaves’ daily life. In their proclamation of the independence of former slaves, they used freedom of movement as a measure of the transition from slave status. The administrators made a note of escapes, the separating of slave households from those of their masters and the setting up by former slaves of their own villages. But they frequently did not mention the dependence that linked the separate settlements spatially though not socially, the continued working duties, the internal social differences among the slaves, the emotional ties between them and their masters, and the fundamental differentiation which characterized in the ways in which both communities continue to see themselves. Only the testimonies of the slaves and the freed slaves themselves can speak about this.

3. Narrative space
Everyday life is remembered in an associative manner. Whereas knowledge of genealogical or historical events can be sought by making an appointment for an interview, research on everyday life requires a framework that allows recall of the unspectacular. If the focus of research is upon the daily life of a slave or on the extent to which fundamental features of the colonial period have survived, the question of the right moment when an individual shows a readiness to narrate is of particular importance. Everyone needs their own narrative space and time to relate their story, and it is necessary to discover when this is.

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9 With regard to the questionnaire, whose relatively detailed questions and lengthy replies give the impression of being representative, there remains a question of the situation in which the data were collected. It is likely that those questioned were intimidated by the presence of the commander and probably their masters, so that they may have wished to give replies which would, in the first place, serve to please the authorities. In any case the contacts for several questions, as one of the questionnaires returned by a district commander directly indicated, would mostly have been the chiefs, who would have been a group of people from which the slaves owners had recruited. If the perspective of those questioned, those who were actually involved, had already gone through a double process of perception, then the slaves were viewed from the perspective of the slave owners and these, in turn, were viewed through the perspective of the colonial administrators. And as far as the female slaves were concerned, their views are likely to have been third hand, because all of the questioners, and almost all of those questioned were men. Nevertheless, the material is rich in information, because it supplements colonial correspondence as a source indicating what was known and not known in colonial circles about the social complexity of the phenomenon of slavery in Northern Dahomey.
For the oldest woman in the house in which I stayed,\textsuperscript{10} this time was the early hours of the morning at the time of the harmattan, when everyone was still sleeping and she brought my fire. She would often begin to speak to herself, almost in a monologue, about what was bothering her at the moment – the dried-up water holes, her grandchildren and her daughters-in-law. Her complaints about the young women going away from home suddenly led her to talk about earlier times. As a woman, she could not afford to stay far from home on her own account. After all, the \textit{horbe}, the female slaves (here she changed naturally to the language of a slave culture and simultaneously reverted to that time) had to work from morning until late at night. Sometimes, fragments of memory would suddenly appear, individual and collective everyday knowledge that I missed, not really quite awake so early in the morning, but nevertheless tried to follow up at another time. Yet my plan to talk later in the day about what had been said in the morning was unrealistic: if I tried to start a discussion, I received bored, monosyllabic replies. The readiness of the old woman to give free rein to her thoughts and answer questions about her experience and memories of the days of slavery was restricted to daybreak in the cold, dry season.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet the timing of the conversation was not always the only factor affecting an informant’s willingness to talk. If the Gannunkee\textsuperscript{e} did not reply to questions with an historical content, this might also be due to fear that such questions might somehow lead back to sensitive topics; for the identity of a former slave is often hidden, denied, relegated to oblivion, or concealed by the claim to belong to another ethnic group, making access to the historical experiences and knowledge of these groups more difficult.

Researchers dealing with former slave groups in West Africa have frequently referred to the resultant methodological problems. They speak of questions about the slaves’ past leading to a breakdown in conversation, so that little or nothing was learned about the specific living conditions of slaves from those questioned.\textsuperscript{12}

Unlike inquiries into origin that were connected with the family biography of individuals and – apart from my close confidants – would not have been appropriate, it was possible to ask questions about experiences handed down from the time of slavery as long as I left them in the collective and did not attempt to interpret them as individual fates. This was already clear from the manner in which the Gannunkee\textsuperscript{e} reflected upon their ‘story’. They relate their experiences of daily life as slaves in a depersonalized way. The Gannunkee\textsuperscript{e} also speak of \textit{pulillo} or of \textit{macucedo}, or dispense with such classifications completely, leaving it as a vague \textit{be} ‘they’.

Impersonal narration is completely usual in African storytelling cultures, and as such, has nothing particularly to do with the narrative content of the time of slavery, when people ‘saw badness’ (\textit{tagaad\textsuperscript{o y\textsuperscript{i b\textsuperscript{one}}}), as the Gannunkee\textsuperscript{e} say, a past which is difficult for the descendants of slaves to identify with and which offers forms of narrative

\textsuperscript{10} The fieldwork on which this article is based covers a period of 18 months (1992/93) and another of three months (1994/95) to investigate the social importance of work and slavery for the Gannunkee\textsuperscript{e} in Northern Benin. The study was financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft under SFB Program 214 in Bayreuth.

\textsuperscript{11} Here the question arises as to whether such narrative space can nevertheless be standardized and systematized by researchers, and how far gender-specific differences play a role.

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Clark (1992: 18); Klein (1989: 212ff); Lovejoy and Hogendorn (1993: xv). However, it is not completely possible to generalize about conclusions drawn from the behaviour of the descendants of slaves with the past of their slave forebears. They must be viewed in the light of the background to prevailing socio-political conditions from which such groups are descended. Klein (1989: 212) attributed this problem less to the silence of the descendants of slaves than to the nature of slavery: ‘Slaves are essentially people without history.’
expression only to a limited extent. However, one thing which showed me that impersonal speech is based on past realities in the experience of ‘suffered history’ (Vorländer 1990: 8) was the uneasiness clearly signalled in certain circumstances by those from whom I tried, through questioning and making links to local or family history, to elicit a more closely determinable framework for such vague generalizations. The classification of time, which the Gannunkee themselves made in connection with other subjects – for example, when they pointed to a boy and talked about an occurrence that happened when their father ‘would have been as old as this one here’ – cannot often be obtained by such questioning. Nor was it possible if the person telling the story presented his knowledge of slave life as common historical property, with an introductory remark about the free status of his own forebears, in order to prevent any possible connection with the background of his own family history. Even those not making such a disassociation, who had no reason to deny their background as slaves, rarely associated remembered events with their own life history, or did so only in a local historical connection. On the whole, they made no connection, not even when it could be indirectly established that the experiences they were relating, based on the daily life of a slave, must have been their own. Whereas the Koma, formerly slaves in the Sudan (Theis 1995: 35ff), passed on individual stories about their own forebears to younger members of the family, memories about the days of slavery were not consciously kept alive among the Gannunkee.

This means that here the narrative situation is paradoxical, in that the handed-down and the individual experience become, by way of a dynamic process of listening and retelling, a kind of ‘communicative text’ (Röttgers 1992: 160f). This does not serve the purpose of forming an experience to be shared by all and of establishing continuity, but rather favours discontinuity and a break with the past.

Here a break with the past means omitting to transmit personal experiences of slavery in contrast to other forms of accumulated knowledge passed on to descendants. This does not mean that the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaves do not have a fund of recollections specific to slavery. What they have in particular takes the form of collective ‘memory patterns’ in which they have compressed the everyday experiences of their enslaved ancestors into almost archetypal pictures. By contrast, the narrative ‘framework’ of such pictures is defined by situation and taken from the living conditions they represent, so that, for example, a pastoralist, when describing the work assigned to a slave, would tend to talk about one involved with cattle raising, whereas a peasant would tell stories about detailed conditions of slave work in the fields; he would of course talk of men’s work, while women reported almost exclusively about the living conditions of female slaves.

What the former slaves recount, therefore, is firmly embedded in personal living conditions, yet in depersonalized everyday experiences. In other places it is still possible to follow up individual life histories and to reconstruct, at least partially, the daily life of a slave in late precolonial and early precolonial times. But where the individual remains undefined, as it were, this is seldom possible. An example of nature of the oral sources available follows in the next section, in which it will be demonstrated that the process of verbalization as such – the articulation of collective knowledge – can suddenly activate

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13 I borrow this expression from an article by Mihran Dabag (1995: 83) on forms of remembering and forgetting in the Armenian diaspora.

14 Cf. Alpers (1983); Romero (1988); Ruf (1999); Wright (1993).
an individual memory that has been hidden or concealed through speech, and that narration not only verbalizes the memory but is a primary prerequisite of remembering.

4. On remembering

In conversation with a woman from a former slave-owning household about her view of the living conditions of slaves, another woman joined in, constantly making more precise comments about the other woman’s statements, occasionally correcting her and, in the end, taking over almost all of the discussion. When describing the internal differences of status among slaves, she used vocabulary that once had meaning for the slave community, but not for their masters. Descendants of slaves barely knew more than their masters, apart from those who must have grown up with vocabulary used by slaves, for whom these words had vivid associations. Such incidental remarks are of particular significance, because they are equivalent to what Nassehi has called ‘indexical markers’ (1992: 168). These consist of signs spontaneously interwoven into speech that elude the intention of the narration: they are tied directly to the presence of remembered experiences and, through the ‘perspective integration’ of the speaker, refer to the fact that what is being described is not second-hand experience. Such indexical markers, which research into life histories in spoken and written language seeks to investigate, are also found in body language, that is, in posture and gestures. This can be shown clearly in this woman, as she talks about the duties of a kordo, a slave of the Fulɓe:

She went to the water hole, came back, drew the water, took it into the hut, picked up earth and cleaned her mistress’s (joomiraawo) bangles. [...] When the mistress had a child and it reached the age at which it moved into the husband’s hut, she took the slave’s child to go and work for her daughter. [...] It meant that if they had enough slaves, there were some who would keep a slave girl. If it was a small child and the mistress wanted to rest, the child crouched down, like this.

Here the woman stopped talking, kneeled on the mat with some difficulty and remained briefly in a crouching position, pointing to her back and saying: ‘The mistress lay down and put her feet up on the child’s back.’ The old woman straightened up again, but remained sitting on the mat and continued:

It also meant that the child was there to fetch water. It drew water, brought it back to the farmstead, took some of it into the house, and made the bangles very clean.

Such descriptions of work and non-work, which reflect former power relationships, present narrative sequences which are almost identical, even in the choice of words, to the reports of others, the majority of which are related in handed-down patterns of reminiscences. In contrast, collective memories and biographical reliving seem to be mixed in the tale of the child.

The kneeling child must have been the woman telling the story – or at least, she would have had direct experience of the situation. We know nothing of the circumstances that would lead a Fulɓe mistress to rest her feet on the back of a child. There is some likelihood that this must have been an unusual case and, for this reason, has not been forgotten. However, the memory was expressed not in speech, but in movement. The indexical element for the lived experience was not in words, but in taking up a position. Such non-verbal forms of memory are of especial importance when, as with former

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15 For comparison Nassehi mainly uses ‘positioning in time and space’ as an indicator of indexicality.

16 Conversation with F.S. on 29 September 1993 (Borgou Province), my own translation from Fulfulde. Persons who spoke about slavery or are descended from slave families are not named by me because of the sensitivity of the topic.
slaves, collective or individual history is not infrequently presented under the cover of another identity and the actual self-concept cannot be openly spoken about. Here, the remembered humiliation is expressed by bending the back, and at the moment of its reliving, demands a position of kneeling and bending forward, even though this was very difficult for the old woman. The physical memory carried here by the marker of a spontaneous and necessary movement belongs to those forms of thought that, in my view, refute the notion that memory is solely determined by the here and now, in which the past shows itself as a purely mental event. As with the recounting of the text of one of the songs by a former slave weaver, accompanied by instinctive hand movements miming the rhythmic throwing of a shuttle, or the hands of the slave held out as she cleaned the bangles, a gesture captured when talking about the behaviour of her mistress, the habitual memory of any conscious or unconscious manipulation of the substance of the recollection is not subject to verbal censorship. Rather, they can be counted as ‘involuntary memories’ (Niethammer 1995: 34), which generally do not deny the social construction of feats of memory, but in a sense precede the latter.

But what distinguishes habitual recall from the more or less conscious use of gesture as a means of description during narration? When encountering the narrator speaking normally outside the chosen moment of narration, it is possible to detect nuances. Unlike some other women who, when narrating normal daily experiences, frequently dramatize their narration through gesture and mime, the woman described here – apart from when she was reliving situations – was usually very reserved in her non-verbal communications.

Later, I discovered that the relationship between the former masters and the inhabitants of the settlement where the storytellers came from – a former slave settlement near a Fulɓe farmstead – remained particularly close. So it is very likely that this old woman, now well over seventy, was recounting fragments of recollections which dated back to the time when she was a child and young adult. But in her accounts she employed the descriptions used in connection with a particular group of slaves not directly owned by the Fulɓe, so that it was unclear whether she was talking from the point of view of master or of slave. This narrative situation, which, although moulded by a background of personal experience was not named as such, and which, because of the subject, did not allow direct questioning, was frequently employed by older members of the Gannunkee. The Gannunkee talked about other people and, in doing so, talked about themselves, as indeed did this woman. By changing the terms and there (for a moment) her identity, or so it seemed to me, she was able to remember, and by standing outside herself and her ancestors, was able to recount her experiences via another group of slaves. Only by distancing herself from her own history was she able to approach it.

5. Conclusion
This article has been mainly concerned with the conditions framing the remembering of the past in a society of former slaves. These factors have to be taken in account if the actual content of the narrative is to be properly understood. They need to be integrated

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17 Hölscher (1995: 165ff) deals with the question of the relationship between memory and expectation, between historical events being something real and being something in the mind.

18 For memories of habit and movement see Bergson (1982) and Halbwachs (1925: 26ff). The latter’s concept of the social construction of memory contrasts with Bergson’s presentation of the content of memory in ‘souvenirs-habitudes ou souvenirs-mouvements’ and ‘souvenirs-images’. Connerton (1989: 72ff) attaches considerable importance to habitual memory in his distinction between ‘incorporating practices’ and ‘inscribing practices’. See also Stoller (1995).
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into a wider context; for the attempt to glean the remembered history of everyday life in the colonial period will constantly lead back to the present, and be accompanied by further question: In which social acts are historical experiences revived and interpreted anew? How can the past be communicated, and what meaning does this have for the self-esteem of the individual and the community? Remembering secures individual and collective identity. It has an inherent dynamic moment that can only be perceived as such if we take into account the present social reality together with the conditions of life of those remembering.

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