SLAVERY, EMANCIPATION AND LABOUR MIGRATION IN WEST AFRICA: THE CASE OF THE SONINKE

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It has been almost fifteen years now since A. G. Hopkins wrote in his Economic History of West Africa that the ‘improvement of geographical mobility associated with the rise of a “free labour force” was certain to become one of the central themes of the as yet untold labour history of Africa’. This judgement seems reasonable: in the Sudanic regions especially, areas where half of the population was in bondage were not rare. In spite of Hopkins’ admonition, however, we are still far from understanding the impact of emancipation on the creation of a free labour force in West Africa. Colonial scholars and their successors were content with the rather vague affirmation that West African slavery withered away under the influence of urbanization and the modern economy. In contrast, more recent studies have revealed that emancipation was followed by an exodus of slaves from many regions, especially those which most depended on the slave trade (where first-generation slaves, who had not been raised in captivity, were the most numerous). It is assumed that, while many of the escaped slaves went back to their villages of origin, many others went to the colonial cities and export-crop areas, thereby contributing to the formation of West Africa’s modern labour force.

From the point of view of a West African labour history, this view is still unsatisfactory. The immediate effect of a slave exodus would have been a permanent migration, to other regions of West Africa, or to West African cities. Most of Africa’s labour force, however, was until recently composed of temporary migrants, who shifted periodically between their villages and places of employment. In 1965, half of West Africa’s labourers were such labour migrants. In order to study the effect of slave emancipation on the mobility of labour in West Africa, we must study its effect on temporary migration.

The present study is based on the work of a number of French sociologists who focused on a region today divided between the republics of Senegal, Mauretania and Mali. This region is inhabited by the Soninke, an ethnic group which is a member of the Mande linguistic family.

1 This paper is a revised version of a presentation (made at the 1985 Annual Meeting of the U.S. African Studies Association) based on my Ph.D. dissertation: ‘Origins of Black African Emigration to France: the Labor Migrations of the Soninke, 1948–1987’ (University of California, Santa Barbara, 1987). I wish to thank Professors Martin Klein, Charles Stewart, David Robinson and my adviser Professor G. Wesley Johnson for their comments on earlier drafts of the relevant chapters of the dissertation.


6 See Eric Pollet and Grace Winter, La société soninké (Diahuna, Mali) (Brussels, 1971).
What makes the Soninke so interesting from our point of view is their very high contemporary rates of labour migration, coupled with a very important precolonial involvement in slavery and the slave trade. The Soninke today have some of the highest rates of labour migration in West Africa. In the Soninke homeland, villages with nearly sixty per cent of the male adult male population absent at all times are not uncommon. In addition, the Soninke were until recently the only African group to migrate to Europe in significant numbers. In 1962, some seventy-two per cent of the so-called ‘Senegalese’ who worked in France (mainly in Paris) as automobile plant labourers, city sanitation workers, etc. were Soninke. Almost all of these workers were temporary migrants.

Although slavery was a fundamental institution of traditional Sudanic society, its incidence among the pre-colonial Soninke was remarkable. Soninke slaves at the end of the nineteenth century never seem to have numbered less than thirty per cent of the population, and they were in some regions well over fifty per cent. Moreover, although the Soninke were not the only ones to trade in slaves in the Senegambia, they were so involved in this traffic that nineteenth-century European observers almost assumed that all slave traders in the area were Soninke. The Soninke traded in slaves all over the Western Sudan, and were among the main suppliers of the Senegambian Atlantic slave trade through the Senegal and Gambia river valleys.

Why were the Soninke so involved in slavery and the slave trade? The answer lies in the particular geographic location of their homeland. The Soninke inhabit a long belt of territory, stretching from the valley of the Senegal above Matam, to Sokolo in Mali, almost to the Niger bend. This region is situated immediately below the desert. It screens the relatively densely populated Bambara and Malinke homelands from direct contact with the desert populations. The wealth of the Soninke during the precolonial period derived from the proximity of the desert, since the Soninke obtained

from their nomad neighbours (in exchange for cereals) two priceless commodities in the West African environment: salt and cattle.

Every year, during the dry season, the Soninke formed large trading expeditions which went further south in order to sell salt, cattle and also cotton cloth, woven by their slaves, which was in great demand in the Sudan. Most expeditions went towards the well-populated Middle and Upper Niger river valley, but an important destination for the Soninke on the Upper Senegal river valley was the Gambia valley. The majority of the participants in these expeditions were young farmers’ sons, who took advantage of the dry season period of inactivity to make additional gains for their families, although there were also professional traders (the diulas), who were mostly members of the clerical families. Whatever the traders’ social origins, the commodity most sought after further south was slaves. Most of these slaves were kept by the Soninke and put to work on their fields in order to produce more cereals to be sold to the desert nomads. This form of investment was extremely profitable. Professor Claude Meillassoux calculated, and the point was confirmed by anthropologists Eric Pollet and Grace Winter for a different Soninke region, that the commercial production of a single slave in a span of three years in the nineteenth century was equivalent to the minimum value of one new slave. Thus, among the Soninke, trade led to a continuous accumulation of slaves.

At some point, however, the situation changed radically, a change ascribed by anthropologists Pollet and Winter to slave emancipation. Looking at the question from the point of view of temporary labour migration, they considered that the French ‘emancipation’ of 1905–08 was the true cause for the high contemporary rates of migration among the Soninke: overnight, the Soninke were deprived of their main source of ‘surplus value’, as Pollet and Winter put it, and the former masters were forced to migrate to look for work. This argument has an important corollary. For Pollet and Winter, the destruction of traditional African slavery by the French also destroyed the traditional patriarchal family among the Soninke. Traditional Soninke families, as among all Senegambian groups, were also economic units with strongly hierarchized labour duties. Children worked for their parents, younger brothers worked for their elder brothers, etc. The younger members of the family units (which were very large in the precolonial period) resented their inferior status but were obliged to accept it because it was the family head who controlled the family slaves. But once slaves were freed, younger members of the families themselves sought ‘emancipation’, and obtained it by migrating abroad in search of wage employment.

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11 Most of this section is drawn from Meillassoux, ‘Commerce’.
12 Pollet and Winter, Société, 239, and Meillassoux, ‘Commerce’, 193, give similar figures for different Soninke regions.
14 Ibid. 371, 377–405. Contrary to what Pollet and Winter wrote, individual family members in Soninke families could own slaves independently although family heads firmly controlled the family slaves; A.N.S. K 14, Capitaine Mazillier, Rapport sur la captivité dans le cercle de Kayes, 8 July 1894. Contemporary documents, in fact, reveal that the first Soninke labour migrants hoped to buy enough slaves in order to constitute family units of their own; see Manchuelle, ‘Background’, 170–5.
My first comment on Pollet and Winter’s argument is that labour migration among the Soninke began in fact fifty years before slave emancipation. For the seasonal agricultural migrants known as navétanes, who worked on the peanut fields of Senegal and the Gambia, the beginnings of the migration can be dated back to 1848 (see below p. 93). For the long-term migration of the laptots, or indigenous sailors on the French Senegal river fleet, the origins of the movement can be traced even earlier, since we have evidence of free Soninke laptots for the eighteenth century. By 1885, labour migration was well established among the Soninke.15 If, therefore, the beginnings of this migration among the Soninke were unrelated to slave emancipation, they did however coincide with measures taken by the Europeans against the slave trade rather than against slavery itself.

From the Slave Trade on the Gambia to Labour Migration

The seasonal migration of the navétanes, the agricultural labourers who came every year during the rainy season to work on the peanut fields of the central and coastal Senegambia, was one of the most important currents of seasonal labour migration in the modern history of West Africa. Although the practice of navétanat later spread to the whole of Senegal’s central plain, it apparently began in the Gambia valley, a traditional destination of Soninke traditional precolonial migrations.16 The Gambia, which is only two weeks away on foot from the Upper Senegal region, was part of the trade network of the Upper Senegal Soninke (but not, apparently, of Soninke situated further inland, in the regions of Nioro and Goumbou). The migrants were attracted by the prospect of trading in maritime salt, found along the Gambia river valley. The Soninke carried large amounts of this salt to the region of Bambuk, where they exchanged it for locally produced gold.17

15 The earliest reference to Soninke laptots dates from the 1790s: Saugnier, Relation de plusieurs voyages à la Côte d’Afrique... (Paris, 1791), 215; further reference to Soninke laptots on p. 228. In 1885, during the religious rebellion of Mamadou Lamine in the Upper Senegal region, the French estimated that 1,200 to 1,500 of those in revolt were former laptots or people who had been employed by the French. This figure probably corresponds to about 10% of the adult male population of the Upper Senegal (Gadiaga and Guidimakha) Soninke regions, a considerable figure; Frey, Campagne, 14; and Capitaine Brosselard, ‘Rapport sur la situation dans la vallée du Sénégal en 1886’, quoted in Abdoulaye Bathily, ‘Impérialisme et colonisation en Sénégal au XIXe siècle, avec particulier référence à... le royaume de Gadiaga’ (Ph.D. thesis, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1975), 458. Census references: A.N.S. 13 G [Bakel] 189, Nov. 1888, Rapport du Capitaine Darr commandant le cercle de Bakel sur la perception de l’impôt pour l’année 1889; 13 G 191, 1894; 13 G 199, Rôle de l’impôt, année 1896; 1 G 310, Renseignements historiques, géographiques et économiques sur le cercle de Kayes [1902].


17 On the secondary trade network of the Upper Senegal Soninke to the Gambia, see Curtin, Economic Change, 75; Bathily, ‘Impérialisme’, 75; Anne Raffenel, Voyage dans l’Afrique occidentale... exécuté en 1843 et 1844 (Paris, 1846), 449.
Trade networks based on the salt trade, and probably on some slave trade as well, were thus in action when British traders came in the Gambia in the seventeenth century. Through their commercial network, Soninke traders supplied the British in slaves throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with important consequences. Philip Curtin has described how slave merchants in eighteenth-century Gambia rented plots from Gambian farmers where they put their slaves to work, in order to offset the ‘storage cost’ of this peculiar commodity, i.e. the cost of feeding slaves while they awaited shipment. The land rented by the Soninke *diulas* was used to grow millet, which served to feed the slaves awaiting shipment, but also to provision the ships of the slave trade, and probably to feed the European settlements on the Senegambian coast as well.\(^{18}\) Slaves, however, were not the only workers involved in this early commercial millet production in the Gambia. By the 1780s, young men came from inland regions such as Bundu and probably Gadiaga in the Upper Senegal to grow millet near the salt pans. The aim of these young migrants was to earn enough to buy trade goods such as salt but especially European manufactured goods, which they later sold inland at several times their initial cost.\(^{19}\)

The slave trade itself thus created a basis for commercial agriculture, which was still in place in the nineteenth century. In 1831, for example, the trading post of Albréda, a French enclave in the Gambia (where slaves continued to be exported well into the 1840s) was said to export most of the rice consumed in Bathurst, Gorée and even St Louis (a clearly exaggerated statement in the latter case). Similar commercial exports of cereals (rice and millet) to the growing European coastal trading cities were made at the time by other places along the Gambia.\(^{20}\) This made easier the transition to an agricultural export economy, which followed the adoption of the ‘legitimate trade’ policy by the British and the French at the beginnings of the nineteenth century. Thus Soninke migrants who had been involved at an early date in sales of millet to Europeans were among the first to convert to peanut production, which eventually became the mainstay of the coastal Senegambian economy. In 1848, in a now well-known statement, Governor MacDonnell of the Gambia reported that peanuts along the valley were mostly grown by migrant workers, the Sera Woolies (Sarakole = Soninke), and Tillibunkas (men of the east = probably Mandinka).\(^{21}\)

Why did this Gambian agricultural development in the nineteenth century


\(^{19}\) Curtin, *Economic Change*, 171.


take place with the help of free rather than slave labour.\textsuperscript{22} The simple explanation is that the presence of the British and their commitment to the end of the slave trade made it increasingly difficult to import slaves into the Gambia. Already in 1828, slave traders avoided the vicinity of the British posts in the Gambia for fear their 'merchandise' would escape. When such flights occurred, the British (contrary to the French until the end of the nineteenth century) gave asylum to the escaped slaves.\textsuperscript{23} The result was a progressive drying up of the traditional currents of the slave trade towards the Gambia in the nineteenth century, which were replaced by free labour migration.

For the sake of comparison, a similar story of replacement of slave with free labour can be detected in the history of the Soninke homeland at the end of the nineteenth century. Around 1886, the French took measures for the annexation of Guidimakha, on the northern bank of the Upper Senegal river valley, an area which had been giving them a lot of trouble during the religious revolt of Mamadou Lamine in 1885–6. The French wanted to annex the region without a military campaign, which would have annoyed the French Parliament at the time. They pressured Guidimakha's chiefs into demanding their own annexation, by freeing all the Guidimakha slaves who asked for it. It took about four years for Guidimakha to give in; when it did so, however, in an area where there had been no previous mention of labour migration, we hear for the first time in 1892 of a wave of seasonal migrants who came from other Soninke regions further east (from the cercle of Nioro) to grow cereals in Guidimakha, which were mostly sold to the French troops.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Slave traders and labour migration}

How were free labour migrants made aware of the opportunities made available as a result of the demise of the slave trade? In both the Gambian and Guidimakha cases, there were century-old contacts between the labour-exporting and labour-receiving regions, as a result in particular of traditional trade migrations. Yet the emergence of labour migration in the Gambia was probably not as spontaneous as it appears at first sight.

Soninke slave traders naturally were hurt by the measures taken by the British against slavery and the slave trade in the Gambia. They had, however,

\textsuperscript{22} In truth, an increase in the internal slave trade, boosted by the demands of the expanding peanut growing, did take place at first. But free labour migration soon prevailed. See Martin A. Klein, 'Servitude among the Wolof and Sereer of Senegal', in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds), \textit{Slavery in Africa} (Madison, 1977), 350; Peter M. Weil, 'Slavery, groundnuts, and European capitalism in the Wuli Kingdom of Senegambia, 1820–1930', \textit{Research in Economic Anthropology}, vi (1984), 74–119.

\textsuperscript{23} See Curtin, \textit{Economic Change}, 191–38, on the 'twilight of the Atlantic Slave trade'.

an opportunity to convert to ‘legitimate’ peanut production, thanks in large measure to the pool of labour provided for them by the *talibes* or students of Koranic schools. Professional traders in West Africa, as is well-known, were generally from clerical families: religious networks were also commercial networks. But they were also *labor* networks. According to Senegambian custom, students in religious (Koranic) schools were obliged to perform manual labour on their teacher’s farm. This was what freed members of clerical families from farm labour and enabled them to engage in full-time commercial activities. Religious schools were, so to speak, pools of labour tied to a commercial network, a point that can be illustrated once again from the Upper Senegal region.

In the 1890s, the French became concerned about a series of unauthorized recruitments of labourers carried out by local traders in Senegal on behalf of the Independent State of the Congo. Most of the men recruited were Soninke or Tukulor from the Senegal river valley. In spite of careful enquiries in coastal towns and in the river valley, the French were never able to discover how the recruitment effort had been so successful.

According to oral informants from the clerical village of Koungany, in the Upper Senegal Region, where the memory of the origins of this migration is still kept today, Soninke migration to the Congo basin began the day when Babintu Tandjigora or Diakho (the two names are interchangeable), a member of one of the two most prominent clerical families in the region, returned from the Congo where he had been a *tirailleur* (indigenous soldier). According to the Koungany tradition, Babintu came back from his journey with a large sum in gold. With such money in hand, he was greeted with enthusiasm by the villagers in Koungany. There was at the time in the village a well-known religious teacher; as a result, the Koungany Koranic school was attended by students coming from as far as the Gambia and today’s Mali. The *talibes* or senior students were required by Senegambian custom to make a gift of the minimum value of one slave to their teacher at the end of their studies. So, after seeing the people who had come back from the Congo, and ‘encouraged by the people of the village’ [my emphasis], the young *talibes* decided to migrate to the Congo in order to earn the sum necessary to make their graduation gift. Later, when the *talibes* returned to their villages, they spread

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28 Fodé Diamou Tandjigora, or Diakho, popularly known as Cheikh Diamou, who had been one of the closest companions of the religious reformer Mamadou Lamine Drame; see Paul Marty, ‘L’Islam en Mauritanie et au Sénégal’, *Revue du monde musulman*, xxxi (1915–16), 322–3. Babintu Tandjigora, the first migrant to the Congo in the Koungany tradition, was a member of Cheikh Diamou’s family.
29 This gift undoubtedly was meant to redeem the value of the *talibe’s* labour. Similar data in Sanneh, *Jakhanke*, 160.
the word there, and their example incited more people to go. Thus migration spread to the entire Soninke homeland.

This information, which is confirmed by other data, contains details which allows us to say that an active recruitment effort was carried out in the Koungany Koranic school. The fact that Babintu Tandjigora, the original migrant in the Koungany tradition, was said by informants to have come back from the Congo with large sums in gold is one such indication. We know from contemporary French police enquiries that one of the Belgian recruiters’ main propaganda weapons was to give such sums in gold to trusted former employees who acted as their recruiting agents.

No such story of labour recruitment has yet been reported in the literature about labour migration, but the role of Islamic networks in the emergence of a modern, ‘capitalistic’ society in West Africa is in itself nothing new to the specialists of this region of the world. In the Gambian case, moreover, there are indications that recruitment through the Islamic networks of the Soninke did occur in the 1840s when the diula saw their slave-trading activities challenged by the British. Thus the French explorer Raffenel, who travelled on the well-frequented commercial road from the Soninke region of Gadiaga to the Gambia in the 1840s, noted a large number of talibes, recognizable by their characteristic head-dress, walking towards the Gambia. Such talibes may well have been part of a still wider recruitment. Writing at a later date (1856), E. Bertrand-Bocandé noted that the end of the slave trade and the emergence of ‘legitimate trade’ had incited former slave traders to develop the cultivation of peanuts. Merchants or chiefs in the interior assembled groups of both free and slave workers, and led them into the cultivating areas of southern Senegal or the Gambia. The terms on which such labourers worked provide a further indication of the role of slave traders in the emergence of the navetane migration current. Today Gambian farmers reward their navétanes by giving them a plot of land in exchange for so many days of labour a week on their farms. Philip Curtin and Ken Swindell noted that such arrangements are similar to those existing between slave masters and emancipated slaves in pre-colonial Senegambia. They are, moreover, similar to the agreements under which Soninke slave-traders in eighteenth-century Gambia rented land from local landlords, where they put their slaves to work while

30 The French enquiry into the Congo recruitments produced a list of migrants for the year 1894, which listed the names, village of origin, and occupation of some 300 would-be migrants in Dakar and Gorée. The Soninke villages named in this list correspond to Cheikh Diamou’s (see above, note 28) network, as recorded by Marty; references in my dissertation, ‘Background’, 210–17.

31 See A.N.S. K 397 (132), pièce 31, Administrator Superville to Governor General French West Africa, Rapport de mission, 4 August 1896; see also pièce 29, confidential, Délegué de l’Intérieur Guy du Laurens, no. 1115, 2 August 1896.


33 See Anne Raffenel, Nouveau voyage dans le pays des nègres (Paris, 1856), 449–83.

they awaited shipment, as described earlier. The coincidence is unlikely to be accidental.

SLAVE EMANCIPATION AND LABOUR MIGRATION

Although it is clear that labour migration among the Soninke was not a consequence of slave emancipation as Pollet and Winter hypothesized, we still need to know what were the consequences, if any, of slave emancipation on migration among the Soninke and their neighbours. This forces us to look in detail at the process of emancipation in the Soninke homeland.

The emancipation of 1904–08 and its consequences

The end of slavery in French West Africa has traditionally been ascribed in the literature to the effect of a 1905 French decree outlawing the slave trade, but Martin Klein has shown that by 1904 slaves in certain parts of French West Africa had taken the matter in their own hands. The movement of emancipation began in the Marka cities of the Niger bend, where existed the largest concentrations of slaves in French West Africa. From the Marka cities, the movement spread to the entire French Soudan.36

Slave emancipation among the Marka was bound to have consequences among the Soninke, who are ethnically related to the Marka and who are also close geographical neighbours in some areas, such as the region of Gounbou in today’s Mali. Yet the impact of self-emancipation was quite different among the Soninke and the Marka. Among the Marka, slave emancipation resulted in a spectacular flight of slaves. In most Soninke regions, on the contrary, slave runaways were the exception rather than the rule. In the Upper Senegal region of Guidimakha (now in Mauretania) they amounted to some six percent of the total population and in the cercle of Nioro to no more than two and a half per cent. This probably corresponds to between five and twenty per cent of the total slave population, probably around thirteen per cent on average for these regions.37 The highest percentages of runaways

35 See above p. 93; Swindell, ‘Serawoolies’, 90–104, esp. 100–101; These arrangements were themselves similar to those regulating the life of junior members of family groups among the Soninke (see above, p. 91), as among most Senegambian ethnic groups. This no doubt must have facilitated the transition from slave to free labour in the Gambia.
37 Numerical references on slave runaways in A.N.M. IE-44 [Kayes], Rapport de l’administrateur adjoint Dubosc, à M. l’administrateur commandant le cercle de Kayes, sur la tournée effectuée dans la province du Guidimakha du 10 avril au 21 mai 1907; and periodic reports, March, April, 1908; see also March 1909; A.N.M. IE-61 [Nioro], yearly report, 1908 (total population figure for the cercle in Commandant de Lartigue, ‘Notice géographique sur le Sahel’, L’Afrique française, renseignements coloniaux, 5 (1898), 123); also Rapport sur la politique générale, 1910; and Commissaire des Affaires indigènes Passant à M. l’administrateur commandant le cercle de Nioro, 20 April 1909. References to Soninke slave populations, above, note 9.
were from Goumbou, where as much as half of the slave population may have departed.38

Why were slave runaways comparatively so few among the Soninke, and so many among the Marka? The answer lies in the existence of a traditional intermediary condition between slave and free among the Soninke, which did not exist among the Marka. The Marka of Beledugu ran a plantation economy based on slave villages, which had no equivalent among the Soninke. Marka slaves worked for their masters five days a week, the rest of their time being allocated in principle to small personal plots; but in fact the Marka often demanded and obtained more work from their slaves. Again, Marka custom enjoined slave owners to feed and clothe their slaves, but slaves most often had to feed themselves with the product of their own labour (their personal plots apparently were allocated to them for the purpose). These features of Marka slavery were applied even to second-generation slaves.39 In sharp contrast to this harsh condition of slaves in Marka society, the Soninke wuroso, who were generally (but not always) second-generation slaves, were either sharecroppers as in Goumbou, or owed their masters a rent in labour (a comparatively low four half-days of work a week in Bakel).40 This condition, admittedly, was only a limited form of freedom, but it could and did constitute the basis of a compromise between the interests of slaves and their former owners at emancipation.

The historiography of emancipation in West Africa has traditionally asserted that slaves who escaped at emancipation were first-generation slaves, whose treatment was the harshest, and who hoped to return to their regions of origin. This view ignores the fact that many, perhaps most, first-generation slaves had been taken in captivity too young to remember their place of birth. More importantly, even first-generation slaves who still remembered their native land had formed sufficiently strong connections with the land of their captivity to remain there, provided a suitable compromise could be worked out with their former masters. Pollet and Winter quoted this fascinating declaration of an old Marka slave acting as a spokesman for other slaves at the time of the Beledugu exodus in 1904, which was recorded in a contemporary French archival document:

We would be only too happy if we could stay in this land, if we could work in peace and be spared the worst humiliations and the bad treatment which the Marka are constantly inflicting on us. Our wives and our children make up the homes which we have created for ourselves here, and in spite of the burning desire which we have of returning to the land of our forefathers, we know that our interest is to stay here, because we realize how difficult it would be to reconstitute our homes in our native villages.41

38 Meillassoux, 'Etat', 225 and 246.
39 Roberts and Klein noted that Marka slavery 'lacked the progressive integration that Miers and Kopytoff have attributed to other African slave systems', 'Banamba', 379; description of Marka slavery, 379–82.
41 Quote from the archival file on the Banamba incidents kept at the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako, Mali, in Pollet and Winter, Société, 254. The distinction traditionally drawn in the literature between the conditions of first and second generation slaves was never absolute: there were second generation slaves who were chattel slaves,
This kind of reaction was not unique: West African slaves who refused the hollow freedom which was offered to them by the French colonial authorities were numerous. The problem for the Marka slaves was that their owners were not willing to give them true economic independence and access to the land. This left the slaves little choice, and explains the high proportion of runaways among the Marka. Among the Soninke, on the other hand, the reverse was true. Soninke slave masters retained their social dominance and much of their economic power. But Soninke slaves gained a measure of independence and access to opportunities previously closed to them: these were access to the land, and labour migration. The most important effect of slave liberation in the Soninke homeland was by no means the kind of economic and social breakdown indicated by Pollet and Winter. The question is rather the extent to which these opportunities were seized, when, and why.

The entry of slaves into labour migration

There had been in the nineteenth century isolated cases of Soninke slaves migrating as navétanes. Such cases multiplied enormously after emancipation to the point of suggesting a general movement of slaves. The yearly report for French West Africa in 1910 reported that slaves from the western part of the Sudan colony departed and later returned from the ‘Lower Senegal’ (i.e. coastal Senegal, where peanuts were grown as a cash crop) ‘in numerous groups and brought back without spending any part of it, a sum of between 200 and 500 francs together with a few pieces of clothing and jewelry’. The same report also noted that: ‘In 1910–11, we saw the former slaves of the Sahel go down in groups into Senegal where they covered the surroundings of the new railway line between Thies and Kayes with cultivated fields; once the growing season was over, they regained their villages, announcing their intention to return more numerous.


42 See, for example, the curious story of the slaves of a certain Samba N’Diaye near Bakel who refused to work for their master yet refused to be freed by the French administrator; A.N.S. 13 G 200, Bakel, Copie du registre des réclamations pour le mois de Novembre 1897. Such behaviour had its rationale: ‘Nine tenths of the captives [slaves] who request our protection do so only in order for us to exert an effective pressure on their masters who deny them the possibility of buying themselves back, or who grant it on unacceptable conditions’, A.N.S. K 25, ‘L’esclavage en A.O.F., étude critique et positive par. M. Deherme’, 1906. See also A.N.M. IE-44, Kayes, Administrator to Governor French Soudan, [report] 4th quarter 1908; and March 1909. For similar material on other regions of West Africa Denise Bouche, Les villages de liberté en Afrique noire française, 1887–1910 (Paris, 1968), 166; Anthony Hopkins, ‘The Lagos strike of 1897: an exploration in Nigerian labour history’, Past and Present, no. 35 (December 1966), 133–55.

43 Likewise, in Goumbou, where the proximity of the Marka cities had encouraged the development of an exploitative system of plantation slavery, slave runaways were numerous (see above p. 97). Slaves in Goumbou reportedly left insulting their masters because they refused to give them land’. Meillassoux, ‘Etat’, 246.
next year. These quotations show beyond doubt that the most important phenomenon following slave emancipation in West Africa was not a definitive exodus of slaves away from their regions of captivity, but their entry into periodic migration as a means to economic and social advancement.

These developments had been foreseeable in truth since the beginning of Soninke labour migrations in the 1840s. In 1879, for example, two men from the village of Balou in the Upper Senegal region came to see the French administrator in Bakel ‘to complain that the people of Balou want them absolutely to be slaves [sic], because they possess numerous slaves, and a fine herd. They [the villagers] want to take everything away from them. One of these men has lived fifteen years in the Gambia, where he obtained his fortune.’ The ambiguity of the wording suggests that the two plaintiffs were actually slaves. Trusted slaves were sometimes allowed to migrate, but their earnings belonged to their masters, although these often allowed their slaves to keep part of the profit. Such speculations were of course risky, because the slaves sent abroad sometimes never returned. This may or may not have been the case of the men in Balou, but the implications of their story were clear: slaves were as willing as free men in Soninke society to participate in the profits of labour migration. On the other hand, free men resisted such a tendency which questioned their social dominance.

Resistance to slave migration was strong among the Soninke. Although it is difficult to document, it was a factor of some importance. In the region of Guidimakha, for example, it was apparently not until 1960, the date of the independence of Mauretania, of which Guidimakha is now a part, that slaves were allowed to migrate. This happened after considerable disturbances, which saw pitched battles between ‘slaves’ and ‘free men’, although slavery had supposedly disappeared from the area since 1905. For specific reasons, the case of Guidimakha appears extreme, but archival and other data suggest that despite the notable entry of slaves into labour migration before 1914, for most Soninke slaves, true emancipation did not occur in the years 1905-10, but immediately after the First World War.

Before we draw this conclusion, a fundamental observation must be made: slave emancipation did not create labour migration in regions where it did not exist previously. This was notably the case in Goumbou where labour migrations began only in 1916, in spite of the very high percentage of slave runaways in this region in 1908. The region of Goumbou did not traditionally send migrants to the Gambia, although it was gradually introduced into the navétane migration current through its contacts with the Upper Senegal

44 Quoted in David, Navétanes, 123-4; 34.
45 See A.N.S. 13 G 175, Bakel, Copie du registre [du] journal [de poste] du ler and 3 juin 1879, [June 6]; see also 9 July, 1 October, 2 October [n.d., probably 29 December]; and 13 G 175, Directeur des Affaires politiques Gallieni to Governor Senegal, no. 2, Médine, 14 September 1879 and no. 5, 3, 17 October 1879.
47 See Emile Le Bris, Pierre-Philippe Rey, Michel Samuel, Capitalisme négrier, la marche des paysans vers le prolétariat (Paris, 1976), 110-11.
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Soninke.48 This example underlines the importance of existing networks in the development of labour migration, slave and free. Historically, the first of these networks were the traditional trade migration networks of precolonial Africa, out of which the whole phenomenon of migrant labour had grown and continued to grow.

The effect of the First World War

It is well known that the French drafted important numbers of Africans during the First World War, either for service in France or in other French colonies. In many areas of West African, most of the recruits were actually slaves, because recruitments were made by chiefs who wanted to avoid drafting relatives or simply free men in general. But when these slaves returned from the war, with the prestige of veterans of the Great War, most refused to acknowledge the authority of their former masters.49 The Soninke homeland, where most of the recruits had been slaves, was especially affected.50 The return of the veterans did more to destroy slavery among the Soninke than any other previous developments.51

The great post-war rebellion of former slaves against their masters had a direct effect on labour migration, when many decided to ignore Soninke custom as well as threats from their former owners, and seek their fortunes abroad through the established channels. But it was followed in turn by a second rebellion, of younger Soninke against their elders, to the same effect. On this point, Pollet and Winter, who proposed a connexion between slave emancipation and an increase in the migration of young Soninke, were correct, for each measure of emancipation among the Soninke did indeed lead to complaints from elders about the young who were entering the cycle of labour migration without their consent. Such was the case in Bakel after an abortive emancipation attempt in 1895, and in the cercle of Nioro at the beginning of

48 The local administrator in Goumbou noted in 1916 the numerous military recruitments of ‘young people from the cercle made either in Senegal or in neighboring districts notably in Nioro’ [my emphasis], A.N.M. IE-38, Goumbou, January 1916. This was the first report of this kind for Goumbou, while reports of migrants from the neighbouring region of Nioro had been numerous for the period preceding the First World War. The mention of Goumbou migrants in Nioro indicates that migrants probably first sought employment in Nioro before being made aware of opportunities further afield in Senegal and the Gambia. On the beginning of seasonal agricultural migration from Nioro to the Upper Senegal region, see above p. 94


50 See A.N.S. 2 G 20/22, Bakel, monthly report, January 1920.

51 An important witness for the interwar period, Chief Ibrahima Diaman Bathily, who governed a small Soninke district in the Upper Senegal region from 1944 to 1947, thus recorded that slaves had ceased to be pawned after 1920; Ibrahima Diaman Bathily, ‘Notices socio-historiques sur l’ancien royaume du Gadiaga. Présentées, annotées et publiées par Abdoulaye Bathily’, Bulletin de l’I.F.A.N., xxxi, Série B (1969), 86. The after-war period was also the time when rebellious slave veterans obtained fields from the Bakel administrator, who confiscated them from aristocratic families; see A.N.S. 2 G 20/22, Bakel, monthly report, January 1920.
the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{52} Events following the First World War, however, were on a different scale.

Documents in fact suggest that the First World War was followed by a veritable social upheaval among the Soninke.\textsuperscript{53} Characteristic testimonies for the inter-war period indicate that young migrants now generally left their families secretly.\textsuperscript{54} Philippe David, a former official in the navetane service of the French West African federation, even believes, on the basis of testimonies by former migrants, that departures were always kept secret from the migrants' parents at the time.\textsuperscript{55} Although there may have been some exaggeration in the matter by M. David's informants, I have personally gathered testimonies which leave no doubt as to the reality of the conflict between elders and younger Soninke over the question of migration at this time.\textsuperscript{56} However this may be, the result was quite clear, a dramatic increase in labour migration. Whereas labour migration rates among the Soninke before the First World War had never been higher than twenty-five per cent of the male population, they rose as high as forty per cent in the inter-war years. In many areas, villages were left almost entirely in the care of old men, women and children, a situation resembling that of the present time.\textsuperscript{57}

**CONCLUSION**

The idea that an 'improvement of geographical mobility' in West Africa was associated with the demise of slavery is correct, but it should not imply that geographical mobility was rare during the pre-colonial period. On the contrary, it was rather common, not only in the form of slave trading, but also in the form of seasonal trade migrations, which were common to most West

\textsuperscript{52} See A.N.S. 13 G 200, Bakel, Copie du journal de cercle pour le mois de Février 1897, [February] 6, [1897]; A.N.M. IE-61, Cercle de Nioro, Rapport annuel, 1911. On the 1895–6 incidents in Bakel see Denise Bouche. Villages, 94–6; for a fuller account, see my dissertation, 'Background', ch. 4.

\textsuperscript{53} The traditional Soninke family was clearly thrown out of balance, see, for example, the characteristic 1923 report of the subdivision of Yélimané (cercle of Nioro) in French Soudan, which commented on the 'incredible' number of divorces in that year; see A.N.M. IE-61, 3rd quarter 1923.

\textsuperscript{54} This was a recurrent complaint of Soninke elders to the French administrators; see A.N.S. 4 G 163, Rapport d'inspection, Bakel, January 1922; A.N.M. IE-66, Nioro, Report, 3rd quarter 1920.

\textsuperscript{55} David, Navétanes, 122.

\textsuperscript{56} For example, Soninke parents reported runaway youths who intended to find employment on merchant ships in Dakar to the local French administrator in Bakel, so that they would be sent back home by port authorities. Lassana Ndao, information communicated to me following an interview in Dakar, by M. Mamadou Djimera, Dakar, 21 January 1979.

\textsuperscript{57} See, for example, A.N.M. IE-36, Nioro, Subdivision de Yélimané, Rapport politique, September 1924. Numerical estimates for the Bakel region: see A.N.S. Fonds Sénégal, 2 D 4–9 [these documents may be reclassified under a different series number], Rapport de l'Administrateur Adjoint Gaillardon – tournée effectuée dans le Goye inférieur en février et mars 1912; 2 D 4–8 (5), Bakel, Recensement par village de la population du cercle, 1909 [census]; 2 G 36–78, Bakel, Rapport annuel, 1936; 2 G 38–78, Bakel, Rapport annuel 1938. For Mali, see A.N.M. IE-61 (Rapports politiques for Nioro, 1891–1920) and IE-36 (Rapports politiques, Nioro, 1920–49); David, Navétanes, 132–3.
African peoples in the pre-colonial period. Peoples living along the edge of the desert, such as the Soninke, were particularly well represented in this form of trade, because they lived on the frontier of two complementary ecological regions, and because the long dry season period of agricultural inactivity encouraged seasonal mobility; but even forest dwellers such as the Dida conducted periodic trading expeditions.

These seasonal migrations of farmers must not be confused with the movements of professional traders such as the diulas. But there is no doubt that the pre-colonial seasonal migrations of West African farmers were at the origin of the most important West African trading currents, and that it was among peoples involved in seasonal migrations that trading as a specialized occupation first arose. (The overwhelming dominance of Soninke family names among the diulas of the Western Sudan bears testimony to this.) From the beginning, moreover, one of the most important commodities exchanged by professional traders was slaves. These slaves were in turn used by farmers to increase the volume of their commercial production, and thus eventually to increase the volume of their seasonal trade. In this way seasonal trade, professional trade, and slave trading were linked, and followed the same age-old routes.

This connexion between the various forms of trade explains the apparent ease of the transition from slave to free labour in West Africa, which has been noted by most observers. When the slave trade ended, young men from ethnic groups who had for centuries been participants in seasonal migrations were ready to enter the West African labour market. Professional traders, who were heavily involved in the slave trade, and who were also involved in speculative agriculture based on slave labour, were equally ready to channel these migrants into the new forms of employment.

This argument is based on the case of the Soninke, but a similar story can be detected in other regions of West Africa. An obvious candidate for further study is the Asante–Akan region of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. This region was in pre-colonial times one of the most important destinations of the slave trade in West Africa as well as (especially in the nineteenth century) an important area of agricultural export, based on the labour of slaves (the kola nut trade). Later, as is well known, this region became the world leader in the production of cocoa for export. This agricultural success was achieved with the help of seasonal agricultural migrants from Sahelian regions such as the Mossi or the Zambrama (Songhai). There is plenty of evidence to show that these peoples were involved in both slave trading and seasonal trade migrations to this region in the pre-colonial period. As in the case of the Senegambian

58 Claude Meillassoux was the first to call attention to this type of trade; Meillassoux, ‘Commerce’.
62 Ibid. esp. 163–70.
63 On the importance of slave-trading by the Mossi and the Zabrame among the Akan-Asante, see Emmanuel Terray, ‘La captivité dans le royaume Abron du Gyaman’, in
navetanes, the arrangements between the modern migrants and their employers in Asanteland and the Ivory Coast may have been patterned after traditional arrangements between slave masters and emancipated (so-called 'second-generation') slaves in this region. Such cases point to the general conclusion that the most important event in the transition from slave to free labour in West Africa was probably the demise of the slave trade, not slave emancipation. It was at the time when the slave trade became no longer viable that needs for labour, which had traditionally been filled by slaves, were filled by the free labour of seasonal migrants who had traditionally followed the same routes as the slave trade. This conclusion is underlined by the fact that migration did not necessarily occur in the regions where the consequences of emancipation were most extreme. Slave emancipation did in theory liberate labour for entry into the wage or agricultural export sector. But emancipation in itself did not provide the channels through which the emancipated slaves were made aware of opportunities in employment.

The conclusion itself underscores in this way the importance of traditional trade migrations in the emergence of a modern labour force in West Africa. In this, the West African experience has not been so different from that of Europe or the rest of the world. In nineteenth-century France, for example, most of the farm labourers in the richer agricultural regions, or of building workers in the cities, were temporary migrants. The main regions from which these migrants came, Auvergne and Savoie, also had a long history of trading migration. As in the case of the Soninke, this history of trading migration originated in a peculiar environment: Auvergne and Savoie are mountain regions which produce specific commodities such as cheese, cattle, or wood products which are not as easily found in other French regions. The long mountain winters, moreover, meant long periods of agricultural inactivity which were used for craft production, and for trading migration. In turn, such channels could also be created artificially: navetanes were mostly Soninke until the 1930s when the French began actively to recruit migrants in other regions; see David, Navetanes, 59-74, 94-137ff., and Manchuelle 'Background', chs 8, 6. See the description of pre-modern Auvergne migrants by Françoise Raison-Jourde, La colonie auvergnate de Paris au XIXe siècle (Paris, 1976), 67-71. For France in general, see the outstanding reference work by Abel Chatelain, Les migrants temporaires en France de 1800 à 1914 (Lille, 1976), esp. vol. 1, 386-95, 434-53.
this migration gave rise to more modern forms of employment: it is a mistake to believe that pre-modern populations were self-contained and generally opposed to migrating away from their villages.67

To return, therefore, to the problem posed by Pollet and Winter, we may in the end agree that emancipation did indeed have an important effect on the mobility of labour in West Africa, but with the important caveat, that there had first to be channels for the employment of emancipated slaves in the 'modern' sectors of the economy. In ethnic groups which were already introduced to labour migration, slaves sought social promotion and personal wealth in employment abroad. Their migration weakened the traditional West African patriarchal family, making it easier for other dependent segments of the family, such as young men or women, to migrate also. In this way, the long-standing mobility of labour became a thoroughgoing mobilization.

SUMMARY

The study of the consequences of the emancipation of the slave population is of great importance for the history of labour in West Africa. As for many Sahelian peoples in the precolonial period, the social system of the Soninke of the upper valley of the Senegal was largely based on slavery. The appearance of labour migration among the Soninke, however, is far less explicable by the abolition of slavery than by the previous, gradual disappearance of the slave trade in Senegambia in the nineteenth century. It was then that the seasonal migration of young Soninke took the place of the internal traffic in slaves. This migration, traditionally oriented towards trade in Gambia, was diverted into the production of groundnuts in the same region, probably under the influence of Soninke slave traders. As for emancipation, it did not in any way provoke an exodus of newly freed slaves, but it did allow their entry into the current of seasonal migration. In this sense, the abolition of slavery was an important event in West African labour history, and still more because it provoked changes in the organisation of family labour among the Soninke, changes which in turn produced yet further migrants. Above all, however, the history of the Soninke illustrates the importance of the study of traditional patterns of migration in West Africa for any understanding of modern patterns. In this matter, West Africa may be compared to Europe, where a similar history of long-standing traditional migration lies behind the more recent appearance of workers on the modern labour market.

RÉSUMÉ

L'étude des conséquences de l'émancation des esclaves est d'une grande importance pour la compréhension de l'histoire du travail en Afrique occidentale. Le système social des Soninke de la haute vallée du Sénégal, comme pour beaucoup de peuples sahéliens à l'époque précoloniale, reposait largement sur l'esclavage. L'apparition des migrations de travail chez les Soninke, cependant, s'explique beaucoup moins par l'abolition de l'esclavage que par la disparition progressive du commerce esclavagiste en Sénégal au dix-neuvième siècle. En effet, c'est alors que furent substituées à la traite intérieure les migrations

saisonnières des jeunes Soninké. Ces migrations, traditionnellement orientées vers le commerce en Gambie, furent détournées vers la production d'arachide dans cette même région, probablement sous l'influence des trafiquants d'esclaves Soninké. Quant à l'émancipation, elle ne créa nullement un exode chez les esclaves nouvellement libérés mais elle permit leur entrée dans la courant des migrations saisonnières. Dans ce sens, l'abolition de l'esclavage fut un phénomène important dans l'histoire du travail en Afrique occidentale. De plus, elle suscita des transformations dans l'organisation du travail familial chez les Soninké, qui résultèrent en un surcroît de migrants.

En conclusion, l'histoire des Soninké illustre l'importance de la question des migrations traditionnelles pour la compréhension des migrations modernes en Afrique occidentale, rappelant en cela l'histoire des migrations de travail en Europe, qui furent elles aussi les héritières de courants plus anciens de mobilité géographique.