

**REPRESENTATIONS OF SLAVERY AND THE
SLAVE TRADE IN THE
FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICAN NOVEL**

Sotonye Omuku

University College London

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I, Sotonye Omuku confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

Representations of domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan and transatlantic systems of the slave trade in Francophone West African literature incorporate remembering and forgetting through oral, corporeal and spatial narratives. With respect to the oral epic and the postcolonial novel, this thesis approaches the paucity of literature on slavery and the slave trade from the perspective of cultural memory and trauma theory.

Through the presence of the slave voice in the West African oral epics of Segou, Macina, and the Songhay Empire and the use of this genre in the novels of Aminata Sow Fall and Yambo Ouologuem, this thesis explores the notion of the manipulation of oral memory through omission, invention, and fictionalisation, and examines the marginalisation of the slave past and the reclaiming of this record via an alternative slave narrative within the novel.

Corporeal narratives of slavery and the slave trade in the novels of Timité Bassori, Ibrahima Ly, Yambo Ouologuem and Ali Zada depict the body both as a site and a memory of slavery. Through the body, slavery is re-enacted by the repetition of the corporeal wound as a manifestation of the physiological and psychological trauma of slavery, and the transmission of that memory through the reproductive capacity of the female body.

The novels of M'Barek Ould Beyrouk and Ahmed Yedaly interrogate the concept of ex-slavery in the Sahara with reference to Mauritania, whilst Kangni Alem and Tierno Monénembo navigate transatlantic notions of departure and return within the context of Brazil, specifically Salvador de Bahia. By examining

slavery from a geographical perspective, these authors highlight the significance of spatial remembering within a trans-Saharan and transatlantic memory of slavery and the slave trade.

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Introduction

The institution of slavery and the practice of the slave trade in Africa have been the subject of increasing debate over the past few decades with historians and anthropologists alike considering the relationship between domestic slavery, and the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades, as well as the impact of these external trades on the traffic of slaves within Africa. Whilst domestic enslavement, ever-evolving definitions of servitude, modes of capture and forced migration patterns across the Sahara and the Atlantic form the majority of the discourse on slavery in both historical and anthropological studies on West Africa, literary representations of slavery and the slave trade in Francophone sub-Saharan are characterised as much by the intermittence of their production across the sub-region as they are by the narrative gaps that exist in between and alongside such work. In particular, the paucity of narratives of the external slave trades in the Francophone sub-Saharan novel is conspicuous, especially when compared with its Caribbean and African American counterparts where the pain and shame of the transatlantic trade and the experience of slavery in the New World succeed in finding expression in the novel.

Yet a distinct silence exists between the literary narrative of the memory of transatlantic slavery by those who were transported from Africa to the Americas and the African account of this phenomenon. This observation becomes even more glaring when compared with the intensity with which the theme of colonisation is treated in the French sub-Saharan novel. From the late 1960s, African nations experienced an explosion in literary production that, in particular,

decried the woes of colonisation, and valorised indigenous culture. The immediacy of the colonial experience combined with a recent history of anti-colonial struggle as well as the fresh taste of independence largely relegated previous ills such as the trans-Saharan and transatlantic traffic in slaves to the background. In addition, as the French speaking world could not boast of an Equiano or a Cugoano, the absence of such published autobiographical contributions on transatlantic slavery, albeit in the West, already created a conspicuous vacuum in the rendering of the slave voice within the Francophone West African novel. But do these two factors sufficiently explain the paucity of Francophone West African narratives on slavery and the slave trade?

Achille Mbembe's assertion that 'there is, properly speaking, no African memory of slavery' refers not to the absence of a memory of slavery and the slave trade within African society, but to the non-existence of a uniform collective memory of slavery that is characterised by a singularity of experience.¹ He instead suggests that if a memory of slavery does exist, it is defined by its diffraction.² The African writer is confronted with the multiplicity of the memories of slavery in which Africans were both practitioners and victims of domestic slavery, a system which still bears its own stigma in the form of continued discrimination against slave descendants. Similarly the victimhood and agency of Africans in the export slave trades as operated over centuries first by Arabs and then Europeans constitute legitimate yet controversial memories of the slave trade. This

¹ Achille Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing', trans. by Steven Randall in *Public Culture*, 14 (2002), 239-73 (p.259).

² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

diffraction of memory exposes the multiple and diverse experiences of domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades, and the resulting divergent and often conflicting memories pose an obstacle to the writing of the African past.

To examine the memory of slavery and the slave trade in the Francophone West African novel therefore, one must address the nuances of the varied slaveries and slave trades that exist within the domestic, trans-Saharan and transatlantic contexts across time both within and outside Africa. The tripartite nature of the system of slavery on the African continent, in which domestic slavery pre-dated, co-existed with and outlives both the trans-Saharan and the transatlantic export trades makes it impossible to narrow the practices of slavery and the export slave trades down to a singular historical moment, and this poses a challenge to the recollection of an African memory. So do the different arenas upon which the export trades had an impact in terms of the forced migration of the enslaved both within Africa and from Africa to various continents, namely North America, South America, Europe and Asia via the trans-Saharan and transatlantic routes. These slaveries are linked through a complex relay system that is characterised by social, cultural and geographical diversity, thus engendering the multiple fragmented voices of the memory of slavery and the slave trade.

To approach the diffracted nature of the memory of slavery and the slave trade in Francophone sub-Saharan literature, this work takes into consideration the few explicit and sustained narratives of slavery and the slave trade that exist in the form of the postcolonial novel, as well as the oral epic, to a limited extent. As the

primary focus of this work is the Francophone West African novel, since this is the dominant genre in the literature of the sub-region, this analysis will not extend to other literary genres such as poetry, theatre or the short story. Among the novels, I have chosen to study in detail those in which memory and forgetting are most prominent. I hope to examine these novels with respect to individual and cultural memory, whilst also considering the role of trauma in a literary culture of repression and forgetting. The first question I address is the manner in which domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade are represented in the few existing accounts found in both the oral epic and the Francophone postcolonial novel. Secondly, and directly related to this question, what may be the reasons for which after nearly two centuries since the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, only one francophone African author has directly confronted the experience of transatlantic slavery in his work? I will begin this introduction with a brief summary of the existing literature and literary commentary on slavery and the slave trade in Francophone West Africa. I will then consider the nature of memory with specific reference to cultural memory, before concluding with a look at the relevance of trauma theory to representations of slavery and the slave trade in the novel.

The first Francophone West-African novel to deal predominantly with the subject of slavery was Felix Couchoro's *L'Esclave* (1929), in which the author depicts the human sacrifice and slave-trading practices of the kingdom of Dahomey. This was followed almost a decade later by a fellow Dahomean, Paul Hazoumé's

Doguiçimi (1938) about domestic slavery. Over three decades later, the first postcolonial novel on slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade, Yambo Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* (1968), was published. This and subsequent novels on slavery limit their subject matter to domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan trade in slaves, and their geographical scope is notably restricted to Africa. Fictional representations of slavery thus oscillate between domestic slavery and the traffic of slaves across Africa via the Sahara. There is a marked reluctance to depart from the African continent, and to directly tackle the trauma that is particularly associated with the transatlantic traffic in slaves.

Consequently, transatlantic slavery is only alluded to, either as a threat, a distant memory, or a reality that has been narrowly escaped. Thus, although the few novels that exist on slavery discuss both descent-based domestic slavery and the internal traffic in slaves by trans-Saharan traders, the memory of departure, specifically with respect to actual export by trans-Saharan traders into the Mediterranean, and the journey across the Atlantic into the New World, is repressed within literary culture. This means that until 2009, in all the fiction, excluding vague references to transatlantic slavery by Ousmane Sembène (*Le Docker noir*), Tierno Monénembo (*Pelourinho*), and Boubacar Boris Diop (*Le temps de Tamango*), the narrative was that of the slaves who remained in Africa. It is for this reason that the publication of Kagni Alem's novel, *Esclaves*, is enormously significant as he succeeds in creating a definitive rupture in the literary silence on the memory of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery.

Oral tradition often plays a predominant role in African literature, and the novels on slavery are no different in this respect. The influence of oral culture on the novels is seen in the use of the oral epic as a stylistic source in Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* and Aminata Sow-Fall's *Le jujubier du patriarce*.

Considering the use of the oral epic as both a historical and stylistic source in both these novels that deal with slavery, it is important to examine the ways in which the oral epic itself represents or indeed fails to represent the history of slavery and the slave trade in Africa. Within the oral epic tradition of French sub-Saharan, there are rare instances of explicit or sustained narratives of domestic slavery and the slave trade in the oral epic. Although slaves do appear as characters in this literature, they are often only given a very marginal role as the epic narrative tends to celebrate the achievements of heroes such as political or religious rulers. For this reason, only a few epics - specifically the epic traditions of the Songhay Empire, the slave-trading Bambara state of Segou, and the nomadic Fulbe (Fulani) of Macina - treat slavery as their principal subject matter, or a slave as a dominant character.

In her work on Sufism in Africa, *Les voies du soufisme au sud du Sahara*, Adriana Piga devotes a small section to the socialisation of domestic slavery, highlighting the immutability of slave status through the epic of the Fulani of Macina and the foundation myth of the Serer.³ Significant representations of

³ Adriana Piga, *Les voies du soufisme au sud du Sahara* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), pp. 133-146.

slavery are present in the Macina epic of Silamaka and Poullôri, as well as the Songhay epic of Askia Mohammed and the epic of Segou. In his introduction to the collaborative work on the UNESCO Slave Route Project, *Tradition orale et archives de la traite négrière*, Djibril Tsamir Niane underlines the existence of a memory of the transatlantic slave trade within the popular oral culture of coastal populations, as found in proverbs, songs, adages and tales. He states that these accounts give an insight into the system of the transatlantic trade in slaves and its impact on coastal societies.⁴ However such accounts of the transatlantic trade and even the trans-Saharan trade are not present in the oral epics, even though the ancient kingdoms from which these epics originate were participants in and/or victims of the traffic in slaves.

The nature of the memory of slavery and the slave trade in Francophone West Africa is reflected in its sparse literary representation. In her article 'La littérature romanesque d'Afrique noire et l'esclavage', Madeleine Borgomano highlights the near absence of fiction on the subject of slavery and the slave trade. In an analysis of the existing literary accounts of slavery and the slave trade, she describes the memory of slavery as a memory of oblivion (an expression borrowed from Marguerite Duras), literally a memory of forgetting or of omission.⁵ The notion of oblivion highlights the unavailability through absence of both a memory and a narrative of slavery and the slave trade in Francophone sub-

⁴ Djibril Tsamir Niane, 'Introduction: La tradition orale, source de connaissance des relations entre Europe-Afrique à partir de la Côte', in *Tradition orale et archives de la traite négrière*, ed. by Djibril Tsamir Niane (Paris: UNESCO, 2001), pp. 7-13.

⁵ Madeleine Borgomano, 'La littérature romanesque d'Afrique noire et l'esclavage', in *Esclavage et abolitions: mémoires et systèmes de représentation*, ed. by Marie-Christine Rochmann (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2000), pp. 99-112 (p. 99).

Saharan literature. Similarly, in his recent pioneering work, *The French Atlantic Triangle*, prior to which there was no full length study on transatlantic slavery in Francophone sub-Saharan literature, Christopher Miller equates silence with the notion of forgetting.⁶ He acknowledges the nonexistence of a consistent narrative of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade within the Francophone African novel as a half-caste silence (*un silence métis*), which is only broken by the occasional novel.

In the section on African literature, Miller focuses first on Ousmane Sembène's *Le Docker noir*, a novel in which slavery is only present by its conspicuous absence within the plot, and if anything, only by vague allusion and metafiction. Works such as Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* and Ibrahima Ly's *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes* which make reference to transatlantic slavery are briefly mentioned in a couple of paragraphs, and disqualified from further discussion because they do not broach the topic of the Middle Passage. With this brief analysis, Miller moves on to examine the role of silence in the representation of slavery within Francophone African film. Significantly, his work on Africa is heavily outweighed by the other two sides of the triangle, and his interest in African film tends to overshadow the already sparse core of African literature on slavery.

Controversially, his work isolates the Middle Passage as the defining feature of transatlantic slavery, whilst for novels such as Ibrahima Ly's *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes* and Monénembo's *Pelourinho* the Atlantic is

⁶ Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 364.

omnipresent as a threat or a memory, respectively, but never navigated.

Realistically, since the export of slaves begins not at the coast, but at the point of capture, the journey into the Atlantic commences much earlier than the Middle Passage, with capture within the African continent for the purpose of export. This enslavement on the soil of Africa must equally be considered, like slavery in the New World, as part of the symmetry of the French transatlantic triangle, thus reflecting Mbembe's concept of diffracted memory as representative of the multiplicity of the phenomenon of slavery in the domestic, trans-Saharan and transatlantic contexts.

The theoretical framework for my analysis will be based on the work of various theorists on memory, and will explore in particular the relationship between cultural memory and trauma theory, and the ways in which these impact literary representations of slavery and the slave trade. In his phenomenological study of memory, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Ricoeur distinguishes between *mnemne*, 'le souvenir comme apparaissant, passivement à la limite, au point de caractériser comme affection – *pathos* – sa venue à l'esprit' and *amnemnesis*, 'comme objet d'une quête ordinairement dénommée rappel, recollection.'⁷ He makes the distinction between recollection, as the deliberate search for a memory, and evocation, as an involuntary feeling that is inspired through association with the present. Similarly, it is Halbwach's belief that the present has an influence not just on remembering but also on rethinking and reconfiguring the past. In questioning

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), p. 4.

the truth claim of memory, he states that memories that are accessed often and are subject to reflection are less likely to be reproduced accurately, as they are altered by the interpretation of the present.

When reflection begins to operate, when instead of letting the past recur, we construct it through an effort of reasoning, what happens is that we distort that past because we wish to introduce greater coherence. It is then reason or intelligence that chooses among the store of recollections, eliminates some of them, and arranges the others according to an order conforming with our ideas of the moment.⁸

The re-ordering, distortion and omission of past events is a conscious act by the intellect to suppress a memory that does not fit in perfectly with the present. It is therefore reasoning that threatens the authenticity of memory, and it is the intrusion of what we now know that distorts the way in which we remember the past.

In addition to the influence of the intellect on memory, the recollection of the past can also be subject to manipulation through its transfer within a social and material space. In his book, *How societies remember*, Connerton extends the notion of an individual verbal narrative to that of communication and the act of transferring a collective memory within a social or material space. He sees remembering as more than evocation and recall, but as equally dependent on the reproduction of the image as part of the process of memory, stating that to remember 'is precisely not to recall events as isolated; it is to become capable of

⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. by Ed Coser (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 183.

forming meaningful narrative sequences.’⁹ Within the context of collective memory, in which members of a group are implicated in each other’s experiences, the use of ritual practices and commemorative ceremonies is seen as a means by which memory is narrated. Like ritual practices, commemorative ceremonies are marked by their formalism and performativity, but unlike ritual practices, they ‘explicitly refer to prototypical persons and events.’¹⁰ Here one thinks of the oral epic tradition by which such commemorative practices are a reconstruction and representation of the past through performance. However, they are problematic because by transposing the narrative of memory to a public space, recollection and representation become subject to socio-political influence. Thus memory can be manipulated to represent an officially sanctioned common identity and socio-political ideology.

Beyond the distortion of memory by the intellect and its use for socio-political agendas, remembering is also associated with the imagination, and the latter’s ability to invent a fictive memory by repopulating the empty spaces created by erasure and misplacement. This association of memory with the imagination, and the distortion presented by reason, place historical fiction in a privileged position as an imagined reconstruction of a past that is no longer present. Without necessarily subscribing to the truth claim of history, memory provides an entry point into the past through which these stories of slavery are narrated. Although they are based on historical events, such as the occurrence of the various slave trades, and the existence of slavery in the societies from which they originate,

⁹ Paul Connerton, *How societies remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

these narratives do not claim to faithfully represent a copy of the past. They can only aim to situate their characters and plot in a physical and temporal space that is believable for the reader, so that the fictional historical narrative becomes a means by which we interpret our past.

Inextricably linked to the nature of memory is the problem of forgetting. Within the context of trauma, Freud views forgetting as the mind's defensive mechanism against reliving a past that is too painful to be remembered. In *Beyond the pleasure principle*, he 'describes as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield.'¹¹ The breaking of this barrier and the entrance of excessive amounts of stimuli activate the mental process to bind up such excitation in order to prevent them from flooding the mind. In the absence of such preparedness, the mind experiences fright beyond its capacity to retain and manage such a stimulus, hence the memory of the event is repressed beyond the immediate reach of consciousness. Freud attributes this response to trauma not so much to violence done to the body, but to fright and the threat to life.

In a similar vein, Cathy Caruth highlights the unexpectedness and the belated realisation of original trauma, stating that the first trauma is 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the pleasure principle*, trans. by James Strachey (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), p. 23.

repetitive actions of the survivor.¹² Although Caruth refers here to the escape from the attack on the body as outlined by Freud, this principle can be applied to the memory of omission with respect to slavery and the slave trade in the Francophone sub-Saharan novel. The relevance of Freudian trauma theory to a non-European context, and in particular to the African postcolonial novel, can be questioned here. However most of the critiques of the application of Freudian theory to non-European societies focus on the Oedipus complex rather than trauma theory.¹³ Within these novels it would seem that the violence of colonisation and post-independence oppression by ruthless leaders serves as a trigger for the memory of slavery and the slave trade. The notion of a belated realisation that is often reactivated by the present can therefore be seen in the use of the present in narrating the past trauma of slavery.

In the third chapter of *Beyond the pleasure principle* Freud cites the example of Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*) as an illustration of the unexpectedness and repetitiveness of trauma. Trauma is represented belatedly in the re-enactment of the initial event in which Clorinda is unwittingly killed in battle by her lover Tancred. The trauma is two-fold: the fatal wound that is inflicted on Clorinda, and Tancred's injury at losing his beloved; there is thus a dual memory in the story of Tancred and Clorinda – the memory of the one who inflicts the trauma and the one who is wounded. Both characters experience the trauma, and express their own memory of the original event,

¹² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

¹³ See Celia Britton, *Race and the Unconscious: Freudianism in French Caribbean Thought* (Oxford: Legenda, 2002), pp. 76-99.

Tancred through compulsive repetition as he strikes the tree which embodies Clorinda's spirit upon entering the magic forest, and Clorinda through language and the bleeding wound when the tree is struck by her lover.

Tancred's story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know.¹⁴

Of equal importance is Marianne Hirsch's argument on postmemory with respect to trauma that is transmitted across generations. She describes the transmission of cultural trauma horizontally and across generations in various contexts, ranging from the individual and familial to the collective and official. In her article on the transfer of memory to the descendants of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch highlights the role of the family as the forum for the transmission of trauma. Describing the passing down of traumatic memory across generations, she underlines the belated realisation of the initial trauma, stating that 'postmemory is not identical to memory: it is "post", but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force.'¹⁵ This is not a memory that is abreacted as a result of its temporal distantiating and its hand-me-down quality. It is instead one that is fully and inexplicably vested with the emotions of the initial event. Hirsch asserts however that 'postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.'¹⁶ Thus it is possible to say that historical fiction on slavery and the slave trade constitutes a

¹⁴ Caruth, p. 3.

¹⁵ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29:1(2008), 103-28 (p. 109).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

postmemory in itself, a retelling of a past that has usually not been experienced personally by any of these novelists, but one that has been received through both informal and formal avenues of transmission.

In his inquiry into the phenomenology of memory, Ricoeur approaches remembering from the perspective of *what* is remembered, *by whom*, and *how* it is being remembered.¹⁷ The tripartite geographical divisions of slavery are overlaid by differences in modes of remembering and forgetting, and it these differences that govern the organisation of this thesis into oral narratives of remembering, the corporeality of memory and the significance of social and geographical spaces in staging memory. The subject of the oral narrative forms the first section of this thesis, with specific reference to representing the slave voice in the oral epic accounts from the Songhay kingdom, the city-state of Segou, and the Fulani of Macina in chapter one, and in the second chapter, the use of the epic form by Yambo Ouologuem and Aminata Sow Fall in their novels, *Le Devoir de Violence* and *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, in which both authors employ the epic's tools of invention, manipulation and fiction.

The second section examines the corporeality of memory with respect to the ways in which the past, and in particular the trauma of slavery, is remembered. Returning to Tasso's myth of *Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*) and both Freud and Caruth's treatment of trauma, although Clorinda's body is not present, corporeally, she is represented by the tree since her bodily trauma is

¹⁷ Ricoeur, p. 4.

expressed through the bleeding wound as a re-enactment of the fatal event in which she is stabbed by her lover. The body, in particular the slave body, is the focus of the third chapter, especially with regard to the body as bearing the marks of slavery, and the narration of the trauma of that experience through the exhibition of these marks, specifically in the form of the weeping wound. This notion of the wound as trauma also extends to the wounded, diseased slave body as well as to nakedness and dismemberment in Ibrahima Ly's *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes*, and the theme of zombification in Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence*. As the individual memory of slavery is usually portrayed through the female slave, the fourth chapter considers the way in which the female body relives the trauma of slavery, and thus in itself constitutes a memory of slavery through the themes of paralysis and its association with marriage in Timité Bassori's *Grelots d'Or*, as well as Ouologuem's use of sexual violence as characteristic of the experience of female slaves in *Le devoir de violence*, and the transmission of the trauma narrative of slavery across generations through the reproductive capacity of the female body in *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes* and Ali Zada's *La marche de l'esclave*.

My final chapters approach the memory of slavery and the slave trade from a geographical perspective, concentrating on the trans-Saharan and transatlantic traffic in slaves with a focus on spatial remembering within the context of the Sahara and the Atlantic. With specific reference to two Mauritanian novels – *Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir* (Mbarek Ould Beyrouk) and *Yessar: De l'esclavage à la citoyenneté* (Ahmed Yedaly) – the fifth chapter explores the master's camp as a

metaphor for spatial remembering, a socio-geographical space that is inscribed with the social codes, and therefore the constant reminders of slavery within the contemporary practice of descent-based slavery in the Sahara and north of the Sahel. Finally, the chapter on the Atlantic takes into consideration notions of departure and return especially with reference to displacement and the re-imagining of Africa in Brazil in Tierno Monénembo's *Pelourinho*, as well as the significance of physical sites of the slave trade in Ouidah (Benin) and the remembering of Brazil upon return to Africa in Kangni Alem's *Esclaves*. Here too the texts show evidence of traumatic repression of memory.

The narrative of the memory of slavery and the slave trade is central to these chapters whether it is verbally through a return to oral tradition, or by corporeal re-enactments of trauma, and spatial means of representation through social and geographical sites. I propose here that oral tradition and the historical novel emerge as social constructs of the individual and/or collective memories of slavery and the slave trade, and specifically, the way in which Africans remember or forget their victimhood and indeed their active involvement in the practice of slavery and the slave trade. Excluding the oral epics which predate colonisation, these novels emerge from a postcolonial context. Yet their temporality ranges from portrayals of domestic slavery that precede and outlive colonisation to depictions of both the trans-Saharan and transatlantic trade in slaves and the present-day legacies of these historical events on the African socio-cultural landscape. These accounts portray the agency of memory as diverse within their various contexts of domestic slavery and the export trades, and pluralistic as even

within the collective memory, the dominant narrative is challenged in favour of the representation of the multiple voices of the experience of slavery.

SPEAKING OF SLAVERY

Chapter 1: Slave voices in the West African Oral Epic

Introduction

The epic as a form of social memory is distinct in its subject matter as well as its performance. Straddling history and myth, the oral epic is a sustained verbal narrative of a social memory that is also shaped by contemporary concerns. By accessing the past through royal lineages, and through geography, epic accounts of foundation myths explain origins, migrations and the current geographical location of a people, and by repeating accounts of prototypical, and often, historical personalities and events, the epic perpetuates social identity and hierarchical structures across generations. Whether in the context of the myth of origin, or socio-political accounts of historical events, the epic serves as a reaffirmation of identity through a recall of the past. This literary form however indicates a bias towards the socio-political centre and a neglect of society's marginal peoples. Thus we note that the epic form is predominantly characterised by the presence of larger-than-life heroes, legendary rulers of vast empires, and mythological figures with supernatural powers. Rarely do we encounter the slave as a principal character in the epic, for the form idealises historical and mythical symbols and ideologies of the socio-political centre, of which the slave is seldom a part.

Although the oral epic is usually linked to specific historical events and/or geographical locations, the question is not so much the historicity of these accounts of a community's past, but what these social memories represent for the societies from which they originate. Why are they repeatedly brought to the fore of public consciousness, and what is their function within African society, and

specifically, within the African novel which will be our focus in the following two chapters? In a study on social memory, Fentress and Wickham state that:

Social memory is a source of knowledge. This means that it does more than provide a set of categories through which, in an unselfconscious way, a group experiences its surroundings; it also provides the group with material for conscious reflection. This means that we must situate groups in relation to their own traditions by asking how they interpret their own ghosts, and how they use them as a source of knowledge.¹

Thus the performance of the epic within society, and indeed within the novel, invites *conscious reflection* upon the events and ideals that define a society's past.

It is therefore not so much the historicity of the epic's supernatural heroes and their glorious feats that is paramount, but its authenticity which lies in the fact that as a social memory it is accepted by its audience and serves its purpose as a reflection on the past and the reaffirmation of identity.

The poetic, linguistic and even the musical value of the epic have been researched extensively by such scholars as Thomas Hale, Stephen Belcher, Lilyan Kesteloot, and Christiane Seydou, and this will not be our concern here. Instead we will consider the significance of the epic as memory, and indeed as historical fiction. Although the epic's social role is to establish and reaffirm the identity of a community through the recalling and repetition of traditions of origin, myths of creation and historical events, it is clear that politically-motivated epics often serve as a way to access memory through the tracing of family genealogy, especially that of kings, although the chronology of such king lists can be controversial. The epic thus poses some major problems, the first of which is the

¹ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 26.

question of memory. Is the oral epic an accurate rendition of a corporate social memory, or is it simply an account of the past according to a particular griot? As oral tradition is not a crystallised form, and can to a certain extent be created with each performance by a bard with the licence to adapt, modify and invent, to what extent is the epic historical fiction? As it privileges specific historical moments and/or personalities, the epic is a selective remembering and thus retelling of history. The motive for the creation of the epic, whether this is political or social, often influences its content. Where military victories of a particular group are celebrated over weaker neighbouring groups, and historical and mythical personalities who have accomplished great feats are celebrated, it would seem that the narrative of memory is incomplete in its privileging of the self over the other, victor over vanquished, and master over slave. Thus, any epic in which the slave is not merely a secondary figure, and emerges as a voice that is heard by other dominant characters, is of great importance to an understanding of the memory of slavery in such an oral culture. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on epics in which slavery is a dominant theme, the slave voice is dominant, and s/he is a major character, namely, the Songhay epic of Askia Mohammed, the epic of the slave-raiding state of Segou and the Fulani epic of Silamaka and his slave Poullôri.²

² The orthography of place and person names may vary depending on the version of the epic.

The epic of Askia Mohammed

The Songhay Empire traces its origins to the 7th century when Aliman Dia migrated from Libya, and settled along the River Niger, conquering its indigenous peoples, and establishing the Dia dynasty.³ Songhay existed as a state from the 11th century, and was a vassal of the Ghana empire, and then of the Mali empire under the reign of Sundiata Keita, only asserting its independence in 1340. Named after its predominant ethnic group, Songhay eventually spanned an extensive geographical area covering parts of present-day Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Senegal. By about 1464, Sonni Ali Ber, of the Sonni or Si dynasty, came to power and led Songhay in an aggressive conquest of its neighbouring states, defeating the majority of the old Mali Empire, and establishing Songhay's supremacy as the largest empire ever in Africa. The Timbuktu chronicles, the *Tarikh el Fettach* (Chronicle of the Truth seeker) and the *Tarikh es Sudan* (Chronicle of Africa), describe Sonni Ali Ber as a persecutor of Islamic clerics because of his looting and burning of the city of Timbuktu in 1468, despite his own claims to be a Muslim. Upon his death whilst returning from a successful military campaign against the Fulani in 1492, his son Sonni Baru succeeded him. Having inherited his father's legacy of syncretism in which both Islam and magic co-existed, Sonni Baru refused to pursue a more orthodox observance of Islam, and was deposed by Askia Mohammed Touré, one of his father's generals in 1493. Unlike Sonni Ali Ber, Askia Mohammed promoted Muslim scholarship and was responsible for the commissioning of the

³ Paul Stoller, 'Social interaction and the management of Songhay socio-political change', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 51 (1981), 765-80 (p. 766).

aforementioned historical chronicles. Askia Mohammed, after whom the Songhay epic is named, continued the expansion of the geographical and political reach of Songhay, and, at its apogee under his reign, the empire stretched from the Atlantic coast of Senegambia all the way to present-day central Nigeria.

The epic of Askia Mohammed, as recounted by the Nigerien griot Nouhou Malio in the Zarma dialect of Songhay, was recorded by Thomas Hale between 1980 and 1981. Structurally the epic is made up of three sections – the birth and rise of Askia Mohammed, the genealogy of the Askia dynasty, and the final episode which attributes the fall of Gao to the slave-prince Amar Zoumbani. The narrative consists of proverbs, genealogy, panegyric, and etiological stories about the different groups in Songhay, in particular the *jeseré* (griots), *sohanci* (sorcerers) and *sorko* (fishermen or praise singers of river spirits). The political motivation of the epic is to situate Askia Mohammed and his dynasty centrally in Songhay history and to legitimise his political and religious rule. His religious piety is shown in the conquering of neighbouring states in the name of jihad, his pilgrimage to Mecca, and his visit to the tomb of the prophet Mohammed. The discrepancies between historic events and the accounts found in the epic have been examined by Thomas Hale in his book *Scribe, Griot and Novelist* in which he tackles the varied representations of the account of Askia Mohammed in the Timbuktu chronicles, the *Tarikh el Fettach* and the *Tarikh es Sudan*, as well as the epic of Askia Mohammed, and Yambo Ouologuem's 1968 novel *Le devoir de violence* which will be discussed later. Here I will consider the portrayal of the historical and socio-cultural implications of slavery through the lives of two predominant characters in the epic, namely Askia Mohammed and Amar

Zoumbani, with reference to the political context in which this account is situated. First I will analyse Nouhou Malio's portrayal of Askia Mohammed's ascension to the throne of Songhay whilst examining the significance of such binary distinctions as Songhay/non Songhay, noble/non-noble, and slave/free. Secondly, I will present evidence of the position of the slave within the epic with respect to master/slave relationships, ownership and processes of incorporation. Finally I will address the issue of the irreversibility of slave status in the case of Amar Zoumbani and the importance of the distinction between slave and free and its perceived role in the maintenance of Songhay's socio-cultural stability.

The oral epic serves two principal purposes, both of which seem to enable and counteract each other. First and foremost is the recording of the past through the selection of significant events and personalities that have shaped socio-cultural, political and religious life. Second, is the creation and consistent affirmation of an image that both encapsulates and preserves the identity of the group from which the epic originates. Thus in the selection of significant and primarily positive events, and important personalities, and the implied omission of negative events, the griot creates an image that is aimed inward at the people and helps to establish and maintain the notion of identity and supremacy over other kingdoms. In addition, because of the oral nature of the epic, the text is open to variations that may arise during performance based on the nature of, and interaction with, the audience, such as the presence of a noble figure, or questions to and from listeners. Whilst the retelling of the past requires both completeness and truth in order to ensure its authenticity, the duty to self and society, and indeed to patrons,

bestows the griot with a license to select, embellish and indeed invent. In comparing the historical accounts of Askia Mohammed in the Arab chronicles with Nouhou Malio's rendition of the epic, it would appear in the first instance, based on the discrepancies between the two sets, that Malio creates a parallel fictional account of Askia Mohammed and his descendants, one that occurs simultaneously with and borrows from real events, as highlighted by the chronicles. I have therefore chosen to approach the epic of Askia Mohammed as a support to and a representation of the past, one that wraps itself around and draws from certain points in the historical account to create a narrative that is both fictional and historical.

This approach takes into account the griot Nouhou Malio's own treatment of time in the epic, alongside the embellishments and invention in his retelling of the life of Askia Mohammed. In Malio's version of the epic, time and history are not uni-directional. He approaches time with great flexibility, extending poetic license to the manipulation of memory through the contraction, distortion, and convolution of time. To recount the story, he does not merely recall and retell the past. It seems that he turns time back on itself, and thus returns to the past, situating himself and his readers within a story that dates back hundreds of years with phrases like: 'Did you see him! When I saw him I thought that it was the little captive of Si'.⁴ Malio's use of an archaic form of the Soninke language of the Old Ghana Empire in parts of the epic, especially in the recitation of the genealogy of the Askia dynasty, is instructive in this respect. This is possibly linked to Askia Mohammed's own Soninke origins, and the migration of Soninke

⁴*The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, ed. by Thomas Hale and Nouhou Malio (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 22.

griots to Songhay upon his ascension to the throne, following the decline of the Old Ghana Empire four centuries earlier in the 1100s. However by the time of the recording of this epic, this archaic form of Soninke was almost obsolete and was only used as the occult language of griots, traditional healers and sorcerers.⁵ Although the rest of the epic is in Zarma, there are significant portions in Soninke that are either indecipherable or cannot be translated by Hale and his Nigerian colleagues. It would seem that by returning to the past through the narrative and the use of the Soninke language, parts of the account of the past have been lost, and therefore forgotten, because of the amount of time that separates the occurrence of the past from its retelling. This is the first problem encountered as a result of Malio's perception of time.

The second is the inaccuracy that is a product of what I have earlier described as the manipulation of time. The epic draws from three significant accounts that are contained in the Arab chronicles – Askia Mohammed's ascension to the throne of Songhay, the genealogy of the Askia dynasty, and the fall of Gao. We have earlier discussed the circumstances of Sonni Ali Ber's death by drowning, and Askia Mohammed's usurpation of the throne from Sonni Baru. Within the epic however, Askia's ascension to the throne is seen in one symbolic event in which he kills Sonni Ali Ber on his return from the mosque, whilst on the same occasion gaining the services of his son, Sonni Baru, as his personal griot (*jeseré*). The contraction of history thus extends to the account of the deposition of Sonni Baru by Askia Mohammed. Instead of the two month war during which Askia Mohammed defeats the last Sonni, Malio describes a situation that serves

⁵ Hale, p. 4.

both as an etiological tale of the origin of griots, and as the fictionalising of a historical event. Sonni Baru says:

‘Me, I sing his praises.
I follow him, I become a jeseré, I follow him.’
That is why we are jeserey,
He said ‘Me, I am a jeseré and I follow him.
I put my share in his share throughout the Songhay area, and
I’ll take whatever I am given.’ (Hale, p. 23)

Another significant example of the contraction of time and the resulting distortion of events can be found in the account of the fall of Gao. In Malio’s account both the Moroccan siege of the city of Gao in 1591 and the Songhay rebellion against the Moroccans which occurred generations later, are conflated into one event. The slave-prince Amar Zoumbani’s drinking of waste millet water and his disregard for Songhay’s social rules are given as part of the reason for the fall of Gao and the decline of the empire, even though this occurred generations later as a result of Morocco’s failure to establish stable governance of the region.

As well as using the manipulation of time as a tool for the fictionalising of the memory of Songhay’s past, Malio also tackles the complex and contentious issue of Askia Mohammed’s legitimacy. He approaches this at three different levels. Firstly, as both the epic and the Arab chronicles view Askia Mohammed as the true founder of Songhay, his origins are questioned. Who is Askia Mohammed? Where does he come from, and is he a real Songhay? Secondly, and linked to the first question, is the issue of Askia’s legitimacy. Who are his parents and is he a member of the nobility? If not, what right does Askia Mohammed, a non-noble, have to claim the throne of Songhay? Third, and this is a theme that will

reverberate later on in the Amar Zoumbani episode, is the issue of slave status. To answer the first question it is essential to address the distinction between Songhay and non-Songhay. The Songhay proverb ‘*Kwara banda daarey, hal a gakano yeow s’a gar*’ which translates as ‘the stranger (no matter how long he/she has lived in a town) will never possess the choicest fruit of the daarey tree’ is illustrative of the exclusivity of Songhay notions of belonging, not merely through residence in Songhay, but by the ability to quote one’s origins in the empire through genealogy.⁶ The proverb indicates that it is impossible for a non-Songhay to access and indeed fully possess the socio-cultural knowledge and understanding of codes of behaviour that are the privilege of the Songhay. This proverb gives a clear sense of the foreigner as the outsider. However there is a distinction between ideology and the reality of daily living within the context of transformations in Songhay society, as a result of the influx of slaves and other foreigners.

Regarding his parenthood, Askia Mohammed is known to have had a Soninke father; however there is a reluctance to refer to this in the epic. Switched at birth with the child of his mother’s slave to prevent the jealous Sonni Ali Ber (Si) from killing him, Askia Mohammed is brought up as a slave, tending Sonni Baru’s horses. Seemingly fatherless, he is taunted by children in the street. The issue of slavery is raised in conjunction with illegitimacy. If Askia Mohammed cannot quote his genealogy on his father’s side up to the seventh generation, and if he is unable to prove that he is truly a Songhay, and not a slave, then he will be branded an outsider.

The children in the compound,

⁶ Stoller, p. 766.

They are the ones who insult him by saying that they don't know his father.

Also they call him the little slave of Si [...]

Then he came home to his mother's house and told her that the children in the compound were really bothering him.

They say to him, 'Who is your father?' (Hale, p. 20)

This is a challenge to his parentage, identity and status as freeborn, in which he must prove first that he is not an illegitimate child and that he can quote his ancestors sufficiently to prove his lineage, and second that he is not the son of a slave, and can prove his status as freeborn. By questioning his real mother, Kassaye, about his father's identity, Askia Mohammed is able to discover and reveal his free status. With respect to his legitimacy, Malio conjures up a fictional character to match the expectations of the genealogy of such a great ruler. In his reconfiguration of the past, he presents Askia Mohammed with a father who is an all-powerful magician, but also, and this is significant for Askia Mohammed's own reputation for a strict observance of orthodox Islam, a devout Muslim. In addition to this, Askia Mohammed's father is also a water genie. As the spiritual world is beyond the understanding of the temporal, the question of belonging to Songhay becomes irrelevant. The water genie not only gives legitimacy to Askia Mohammed's existence, he also endows him with the necessary powers he needs to defeat Sonni Ali Ber. The challenge by the children is the catalyst for revealing Askia Mohammed as the hero of the epic. Once he overcomes the stigma of slave status and the duties associated with it by proving not only that he is freeborn, but that he is of noble birth, the only other reminder of his association with his unnamed adoptive slave mother comes when in his Islamic conquest of heathen

lands he is unable to attack his adoptive slave mother's native land and has to flee with the aid of magic.

Within Songhay society, the distinction between nobility and the rest of society is just as significant as the distinction between slaves and freeborn. The throne is the exclusive right of the noble.

The Songhay believe that only the noble had the predisposition to govern. Chosen from among the noble families in a district, the Songhay chief became the *bankwano* [...]. Once in *bankwano* it was believed that the chief became imbued with the sacred capacities of *fula* (inner determination and strength of will) and *lakkal* (the wisdom of governance).⁷

The term *bankwano* also refers to the chief and the chieftaincy, and connotes sacredness as well as a link to Mohammed the prophet.⁸ In light of the status of sainthood that is bestowed upon Askia Mohammed on his ascension to the throne, and because of his religious devotion, it is essential for the griot both to create and maintain the ideal of the ruler of Songhay across generations. This therefore puts into perspective the different attempts by Malio to establish a link between Askia Mohammed and Sonni Ali Ber through the claim that Askia Mohammed was of royal lineage, being Sonni Ali Ber's nephew via his mother Kassaye. Historically Sonni Ali Ber is listed as one of Askia Mohammed's predecessors on the throne of Songhay. However despite claims by Malio in the epic, there is no proof that he was Askia Mohammed's uncle. There is also no link established between the Sonni or Si dynasty and that of the Askias. The griot's final attempt is therefore to state that as well as being a powerful magician, a water genie, and a devout Muslim, Askia Mohammed's newly-discovered father is also the chief of the

⁷ Stoller, p. 767.

⁸ Ibid., p. 767.

entire underwater world. By using a magic ring given to him by his mother, Askia Mohammed gains access to a vast underwater world in which his father, a water spirit, is the sovereign.

Under the water there are so many cities, so many cities, so many cities, so many villages, and so many people.
It is his father who is the chief.
They too get themselves ready, they go out to go to the prayer ground. (Hale, p. 21)

Thus it would seem that through the manipulation of the account by the griot, Askia Mohammed conveniently qualifies for the throne on both his mother and father's sides, eliminating any question about his status as a freeborn and a noble.

Having examined the representation of Askia Mohammed in the epic with respect to slave status and foreign origins, we will now consider Songhay's role in domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan trade, whilst addressing the question of acquisition, ownership, and incorporation. As Songhay's political reach expanded, its commercial powers were maximised through ownership of three major trading posts along the trans-Saharan trade route – Gao, the capital city, Timbuktu and Djenne which had earlier been conquered by Sonni Ali Ber. In addition to this, Songhay's strategic position along the Niger River facilitated the empire's role in the trans-Saharan trade, thus exercising a monopoly over the trade in salt, gold and slaves, and posing a major threat to Moroccan traders. Sonni Ali Ber captured slaves from predominantly Muslim areas in spite of Islamic law against enslaving fellow Muslims. Historically, and in the epic, however, Askia Mohammed seems to uphold Sharia law in his approach to acquiring slaves, in that he does not

capture believers, and he gives pagans the opportunity to convert to Islam. With each conquest in the epic, Askia Mohammed (Mammar Kassaye) is seen to give the enemy a chance to embrace Islam and build a mosque. It is apparently only on failure to comply with this forced conversion that the village is sacked and slaves are taken.

The cavalier who goes there,
 He traces on the ground for the people the plan of the mosque.
 Once the plan for the foundation is traced,
 The people build the mosque.
 It is at that time,
 Mamar Kassaye comes to dismount from his horse [...]
 They teach them prayers from the Koran.
 Any villages that refuse, he destroys the village, burns it and moves on. (Hale, p. 26)

By waging war on neighbouring states in the name of jihad, Askia Mohammed provides Songhay with captives that would subsequently be used as soldiers, concubines, domestic slaves to aristocratic families, and slaves in the royal courts. Some of these slaves would also be used in the production of trade goods such as cloth, grain and cotton, and as agricultural labour to provide food for the aristocracy and the army, whilst others were traded in exchange for luxury goods such as salt, gold, cola, cloth and horses.

We have already made reference to the influx of foreign captives into the empire as a result of wars, and their destination either as slaves within Songhay, or their onward sale into trans-Saharan trade routes. However, there is also evidence in the juridical writings of al Maghīlī and in the *Tarikh el Fettach* of the existence of servile Songhay tribes. These castes were considered the property of the ruler of Songhay, and were inherited from the Mali Empire, and passed down

from one Songhay ruler to the next.⁹ On inheriting these twenty-four tribes, Askia Mohammed questions the Muslim cleric Cheikh Abderrahman es Soyouti on their status. Cheikh Abderraman states that there is some doubt over their status and he asks the ruler to retain only half of the slaves for this reason.¹⁰ Askia Mohammed then proceeds to inquire of the cleric which of these tribes are his rightful property, to which the cleric responds by listing twelve tribes consisting of Songhay artisan and griot castes, as well as pagan Bamana tribes, and the autochthonous Arbi and Sorko tribes whose existence pre-dates the Aliman Dia's arrival and conquest of the area surrounding the Niger river. Since they belonged to the ruler, like slaves, their servile status was hereditary and was passed on to their children, with one significant exception.

Celui, répondit le cheikh, dont il sera établi que le père est de condition noble mais la mère appartient à l'une de ces tribus, sera de droit ta propriété. Quant à celui dont il sera prouvé que la mère est de condition noble et que le père appartient à l'une de ces tribus, s'il est demeuré dans la famille de son père et s'occupe des memes travaux que lui, il sera également ta propriété; mais s'il a quitté la famille de son père pour aller dans la famille de sa mère, il ne sera pas ta propriété.¹¹

Of the castes and tribes mentioned, the Sorko and griots are represented in the epic. We have earlier made reference to Sonni Baru's depiction as Askia Mohammed's griot, and the father of all griots. In addition to this, Sonni Ali Ber's daughter is shown as the ancestor of all sorkos, which is the Songhay term for fishermen and canoeists who are at the service of the Songhay ruler and his army.

⁹ John Hunwick, 'Notes on slavery in the Songhay Empire', in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa: The Servile Estate*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1986-2005), II (2005), 16-31 (p. 17).

¹⁰ Mahmoûd Kâti Ben El-Hâdj El-Mattaouakkel, *Tarikh el Fettach ou Chronique du Chercheur*, trans. by Octave Houdas and Maurice Delafosse (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913), p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Thus both offspring of Sonni Ali Ber are portrayed in the epic as the property of Askia Mohammed because of their servile status.

Askia Mohammed's ownership of these servile tribes raises the question of the slave as property within the epic. The presence of captives in the homes of nobles, for example the Bargantché slave (Askia Mohammed's adoptive mother) owned by Kassaye, his mother, and the Dabay slave, Amar Zoumbani's mother, who is married to the chief, Soumayla Kassa (Askia Soumeyla), are indicative of Songhay's warring expeditions, and their role in establishing the empire both as a dominant political power and a merchant society. The foreign origins of these slaves results from their acquisition during Songhay's conquests of neighbouring lands, and the continued reference to their status as aliens signifies the position of the war captive as both foreigner and outsider. In addition to the notion of the war captive existing within Songhay but being socially on its margins, is the hierarchy that exists even among slaves with relation to the probability of being sold by the master.

All slaves of the Songhay could theoretically trace their descent patrilineally to a prisoner of a precolonial war [...] a Songhay might sell his prisoner slave (benya, benyey) [...] but once the slave had produced offspring, the offspring (horso) became either farmers who tilled the soil of a noble patron, or skilled specialists (weavers, bards, blacksmiths and musicians who are still clients of noble patrons.¹²

Thus whilst the captured slave may be on the margins of Songhay society, s/he could attain incorporation through various means, for example a woman could

¹² Stoller, p. 767.

attain incorporation through marriage to a noble, and the product of such a marriage would be considered as *horso*.

Although incorporation allows certain privileges including even the right to own slaves, there remains a distinction between incorporation, that is to say belonging, and the technicalities of actual freedom. A slave could achieve his freedom by ransom or by enfranchisement. Until then he remained the property of his master. The master or indeed mistress is shown to have complete power over the slave, including the power of life and death. Hence Kassaye is able to exchange the Bargantché slave's daughter for her son Askia Mohammed's life, and the Bargantché slave must continue to nurse Askia Mohammed even after her daughter is killed by Sonni Ali Ber in the place of Askia Mohammed. The mistaking of incorporation for freedom occurs with the mother of Amar Zoumbani who in spite of being married to a Songhay chief, has never been ransomed, and so remains the property of her original owners. Amar Zoumbani's mother, who never appears physically or speaks during the course of the epic, is a captive of the former chief and father of Sagouma. Now married to the new chief, Amar's father, she remains the slave of Sagouma because her freedom was never purchased by her husband. Even though she has been incorporated into Songhay society through marriage to the chief Soumayla Kassa, both she and her son remain the property of her original owner, Sagouma's family. For this reason, Amar Zoumbani, although a prince, unwittingly remains a slave of Sagouma. This unfortunate situation is at the heart of the Amar Zoumbani episode, as the practice of dormant rights of ownership give Amar Zoumbani a false sense of security, and result in his humiliation.

This final section of the epic – the Amar Zoumbani episode – deals with the irreversibility of slave status outside of a change of formal status. It is interesting to compare this with the Askia Mohammed episode, particularly because they relate to the same subject matter, although they treat it very differently. Not much is said about Amar Zoumbani in the history of the Songhay Empire, even though almost a third of the epic is dedicated to the episode about him and Sagouma. Firstly he is a descendant of Askia Mohammed, and what is known of his parentage reflects what is initially known of Askia Mohammed by the other figures, including Sonni Ali Ber – that he is the son of a slave woman. Both episodes contain a form of challenge. In Askia Mohammed's case, it is the taunting of the children within earshot of the future leader of the empire. In Amar Zoumbani's case, it is the humiliation of being gifted as a slave to the woman he is courting, by a fellow suitor, Sagouma's brother.

The other man grabbed the hand of Amar Zoumbani who is the
prince
He said to the Fulani griots, 'I too have given you a captive' [...]
This bothered Amar Zoumbani very, very much.
He came home to his father's house, he said to his father,
So he is a captive. (Hale, p. 44)

Whereas in Askia Mohammed's case, the challenge simply proves a case of mistaken identity, because Askia Mohammed is only swapped at birth and nursed by a slave to prevent his murder by Sonni Ali Ber, Amar Zoumbani's status is proven by his father, by virtue of the fact that his mother is an unredeemed slave. Whilst Askia Mohammed's earlier questioning of his identity leads to a revelation that he is indeed descended from a noble and supernatural father, the realisation

that he is a slave causes Amar to begin a pattern of behaviour in which he repeatedly tries and fails to prove that he is of free birth. The problem is not so much that Amar Zoumbani is a slave, but that he refuses to accept his slave status. The displeasure at realising that he is owned by Sagouma's family and the humiliation that he experiences at being gifted to the woman he is courting lead Amar Zoumbani to seek to prove that he is worthy of nobility. In a society in which there are set behavioural expectations from nobles, slaves and non-Songhay with relation to dress and comportment, Amar Zoumbani's refusal to accept his position at the bottom of the scale leads to a series of problematic and embarrassing incidents that have repercussions not only for his father's reputation, but for the whole of the Songhay Empire.

In the first incident Amar Zoumbani asks his father for a black horse identical to that of Sagouma's brother, the prince. Instead he is deceived by his servants and his father, and is given a horse that has been dyed with indigo. His white clothes are stained with the dye and he is publicly disgraced. His wearing of white clothes is significant, because despite the fact that he is a slave, and is now in fact the property of the lady that both he and Sagouma's brother were courting, he still dresses like a noble and maintains his privileges as the son of the chief. Songhay society operates a hierarchical structure which consists of nobles, free, castes, and slaves in descending order. Even though he dresses like a noble, Amar Zoumbani does not act like one, and is often seen to exhibit undignified behaviour that is not worthy of the status he so desperately desires. He is prone to sudden teary outbursts and unrestrained displays of emotion. Malio describes his reaction

when he discovers that he has been deceived by his servants, and his clothes have been stained.

He jumped down, threw his shield on the ground suddenly, he
 jumped down.
 He unsheathed his sword and he cut the tendons of two legs of the
 animal.
 He came to sit down on his shield.
 He placed his sword on his feet [...]
 Then he began to cry, Amar Zoumbani began to cry,
 Then he began to cry, then he began to cry. (Hale, p. 47)

The narrator uses repetition here to represent intensity, and the passing of time, hours in fact, until Amar Zoumbani's father has to act in order to end his son's tantrum. Such childish acts which will be repeated throughout the episode contravene the behavioural code of conduct for nobles.

Earlier on, we made reference to a body of knowledge of societal rules that are the privilege and duty of the Songhay, and to which access is not granted to non-Songhay. It is essential to note that Amar Zoumbani does not desire his freedom, and never tries to ransom himself and his mother, even though he possesses the financial power to do so. He instead seeks to prove himself as a noble. However along with the notion of the exclusivity of nobility which is manifest in dress and comportment, Amar Zoumbani must prove that he is not a slave by providing evidence of an understanding of what it means to be Songhay, that is to adhere to the rules on which his society is built. In the second incident Amar drinks waste millet water, that is water that has previously been used to wash millet. The implication of this act is highlighted by his father's comment, and further explained by the griot:

‘You have returned home, Amar Zoumbani you have returned home, you have returned home.
I didn’t want this from you’.
What does this mean, he has returned home?
The fact of being a captive, that is the insult that he made to him
[...] This hurt Amar Zoumbani. (Hale, p. 60)

Amar fails to exhibit an understanding of what it means to be Songhay. His actions simply reaffirm the irreversibility of his slave status and the behaviour that is inevitably associated with it. The third incident sees Amar Zoumbani jeopardise the efforts of the Songhay army by disobeying rules of warfare. The social mores of Songhay society play a major role in this episode. It would in fact seem that the griot blames the fall of Gao primarily on Amar Zoumbani’s failure to observe the mores and social hierarchy of Songhay society, and not on the military superiority of the enemy. This episode is about slave status in the context of the porosity of hierarchical boundaries, and the need to observe the rules that govern society, and the qualities that are expected of a legitimate member of Songhay society.

Having explored the commercial and political role of the Songhay Empire in both domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan trade in slaves, it is important to note that the influence of the empire on African slave markets outlasts its operational days as a dominant military power and regional trade centre. With the decline of the empire after the Moroccan invasion, the three trading posts Gao, Djenne and Timbuktu fell into disuse, thus causing a major handicap to the trans-Saharan trade. This coincided with increasing Dutch, Portuguese and English interest in the export of African goods, including slaves from the West African coast, and the focus of trade therefore shifted away from the North of Africa, to the Western and

Southern coasts of the continent, thus resulting in the transatlantic trade in slaves, and other goods. The epic of Askia Mohammed is a study in the possibility of transformation of status through a verbal narrative of memory from non-Songhay, non-noble and apparent slave status, to becoming a figure that encapsulates the essence of the Songhay Empire in the person of Askia Mohammed. It illustrates the porosity of hierarchical boundaries in the case of Askia Mohammed and Amar Zoumbani, yet at the same time the epic shows a need to abide by the same rules it appears to break, or be prepared for the ensuing chaos. Thus the reinvention of Askia Mohammed as a ruler who fits into the concept of *bankwano*, in spite of what we know of the ruler's history, is significant, whilst the story of Amar Zoumbani and the fall of Gao is a brutal reminder of the irreversibility of slave status, and the destruction that can result from a disregard of the same rules that are broken by Askia Mohammed.

The epic of Bamana Segou

The Bamana Empire of Segou, which is located in what is currently south-central Mali, was founded in 1712 by Biton Koulibaly. The epic of the Bamana of Segou focuses on two historical aspects of the city-state of Segou: its kings, and the record of its warfare. First the epic provides a vaguely chronological list of kings – vague, because the focus is primarily on outstanding historical personalities, such as Biton Koulibaly, the founder of the empire, Ngolo Diarra the slave king, Monzon, his son, and Da Monzon, whose story forms the bulk of the epic. Therefore what is absent from the epic is the record of kings of Segou who were not as successful as the earlier mentioned rulers, for example the slave chiefs that

follow the reign of the Koulibaly dynasty and precede that of the Diarras are merely mentioned. The epic is episodic in that its format is not to recount the life of a ruler from birth through to maturity and ascension to the throne, but instead to highlight specific events that might have marked such a ruler's career, for example, Biton Koulibaly's transformation of the ton (hunters' association) into a militant slave-raiding group that wreaked havoc on neighbouring communities, and the ascension of Ngolo Diarra (the slave-king) to the throne in 1768, at the age of fifty. The climax of a retelling of such historical events is often an account of wars that have been fought by the kingdom of Segou, for example, the wars between Segou and its rivals: the Fulani chiefs Basi of Samaniana, Dibi of Niamina, Diétékoro of Kârta, along with the Fulani of Kounari, and the Fulani of Macina, of which the Silamaka and Poullôri episode is a part. Some of these wars, in addition to the raids carried out by Biton Koulibaly, and his successors' ton members against neighbouring towns and villages reveal a culture of warring and the resultant capture of hoards of slaves who were either absorbed into the kingdom or sold into the slave trade. Although there is no overt referencing of the practice of slave trading by the kingdom of Segou itself, the epic contains multiple accounts of warfare and the capture of slaves, through the recurring theme of the honey beer tribute which is paid by Segou's tributaries. This mode of capture along with kidnapping will be treated in this chapter.

The majority of the events in the versions of the epic of Bamana Segou that are available in published form occur during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. They depict the rise to power of Biton Koulibaly, the founder of the empire, and his transformation of the ton into his own personal army with which

he carried out raids on the neighbouring villages, and captured and enslaved their inhabitants. There is a reference to the fact that Koulibaly's mother produces honey beer, a theme which becomes significant throughout the epic, as the capture of slaves occurs only as a result of a community's inability or refusal to pay the honey beer tribute demanded by Koulibaly's and subsequently, other rulers' emissaries.

‘Since Biton came to power,
His mother gave us beer and honey liquor
We spend the day drinking at their house and come home after,
But we do not plough for her or clear her field.
Let us see about this.’¹³

As a result, the Bamana institute a custom in which money is raised from their tributaries in order to pay for the honey liquor. This honey price or soul price is given to the ruler of Segou. Thus honey beer becomes a metaphor for the slave raiding lifestyle of the ton, as villages that cannot pay the honey price are carted away into slavery. This becomes a cause for war against various tribal groups, including the Fulani of Macina. Quite early on in the epic we see such a raid as providing a low scale forum for people to be exchanged peacefully in the absence of the complete monetary value of the honey beer tribute, as in the case of Ngolo Diarra who is given away by his brothers, as a child. This exchange of a human being as payment for a debt is not unusual within the context of domestic slavery, but what becomes problematic for Segou is the fact that Ngolo Diarra eventually rises to become ruler of the kingdom, and this in spite of various schemes to murder him. Therefore within the epic, alongside the theme of the honey beer

¹³ *A state of Intrigue: The epic of Bamana Segou according to Tayiru Banbera*, ed. by David C. Conrad (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 96.

tribute as a metaphor for war and slave-raiding is the insult to the king in the person of Ngolo Diarra, recalling his slave status. This insult to Ngolo Diarra and the kings who descend from his line, including Da Monzon, often instigates war between Segou and the offending village. If slavery is at the heart of Segou's military exploits and political and economic dominance, the social impact of the influx of captives into the city state of Segou is equally a threat to its stability.

Upon arrival in Segou, slaves are taken into the homes of nobles and warriors, and they exist at the bottom of a hierarchy that consists of nobles, freeborn, occupational caste groups, and slaves. What is significant, however, is the role that some slaves play within the political corridors of Segou. The tonjon or slaves of the ton are unlike the house or farm slaves. They are a part of the ton, the elite group which is at the heart of Segou's military exploits. The institution of captives as slaves of the ton occurs during the reign of Biton Koulibaly, after the battle against Bina of Fabugu upon his refusal to pay the honey tribute. The account is found in Conrad's edition of the cycle.

They shaved the mens' heads
Leaving only a big tuft of hair.
The women were shaved in the ordinary way,
But the men were left with a big tuft.
So they were recognised as slaves among the other people.
This was the origin of the tònjònw, council slaves. (Conrad, p. 99)

The slave was differentiated by his physical appearance as well as by his name. Slaves of the ton were given distinctive proverb names such as Sini Ye To Alama (Leave tomorrow to God), Nyuman Tilè Tè (It is not time for good things) and K'i Bila I Yèrèma Segu O Mago Tè Nya (To be left alone in Segou, goals are never

achieved).¹⁴ In addition to their physical difference, slaves were also noticeable within the social space by a lack of knowledge of socio-cultural norms as discussed earlier in the case of Amar Zoumbani in the Songhay epic. Thus the slave was seen to act outside of acceptable Bamana behaviour because he was an outsider.

They did foolish things in the village,
They did foolish things in the house,
But nobody paid attention to them.
They said 'Leave him alone,
He is just a council slave.' (Conrad, p. 99)

Although the distinction between slave and free born was well defined, the organisational structure of the ton provided a different hierarchy, or a supposed lack thereof. Members of the ton were all equal, each one surrendering his powers to the leader of the ton. In the context of this equality, each possessed the right to become a leader of the ton. The warriors paid allegiance to the ton or warrior class which was founded on equality and on their military ability. The ton thus formed a dominant class that attacked Segou's hierarchical system of aristocracy, lineage and clan, by creating a forum where slaves had access to power, as seen in the period of the reign of the slave chiefs after the end of the Koulibaly dynasty. As David Conrad explains:

This new society gave precedence to associations rather than clans, to adhesion and co-optation as forms of recruitment rather than kinship and birth, to prowess and feats rather than age. The *ton-jon* formed the dominant class made up of rival warriors who

¹⁴ Conrad, p. 161.

were jealous of their autonomy and were often of captured origin themselves.¹⁵

This elite group usurped the role of kinship and age as Segou's hierarchical values of cohesion and respect. The warrior was father and he reproduced through the capture of slaves. His military prowess put him at the top of the hierarchical order irrespective of his age, lineage and even slave status, and the political power engendered by this phenomenon was twofold. Firstly, as mentioned above, a council slave had the right to become ruler of Segou, a slave chief, until such a time as he was overthrown by a fellow council slave. For this reason the state of Segou experienced two decades of political instability after the reign of the Koulibaly dynasty until Ngolo Diarra, himself a slave chief, brought a decisive end to the coups d'état by putting the army under the control of his son. Secondly, the council slaves served as advisors to the king, and were a compelling influence on his decision-making process, often determining whether or not Segou should go to war against neighbouring tribes. Socially, such slaves were at the bottom of Segou's hierarchy, beneath the nobles, freeborn and endogamous caste groups. However in the domain of military and political power, they were the engine room of the kingdom. The position of the slave within Segou society was therefore multi-dimensional – to exist on the outside, but to inhabit the centre. To be at the bottom of the hierarchy, but to control the kingdom from the highest echelons of political power – the battlefield and the vestibule of the king's palace.

The frequency of Segou's victories on the battlefield is highlighted in the epic. It was during such wars, specifically the war against Basi of Samaniana, that

¹⁵ Claude Meillasoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The womb of Iron and Gold* (London: The Athlone Press, 1991), p. 150.

certain slaves distinguished themselves and led Segou to victory through unconventional means. Both Conrad and Kesteloot's editions contain varying accounts of the war against the Fulani chief Basi of Samaniana. For Kesteloot's griot, the reason for the war is Basi's refusal to pay the honey-price. In Conrad's version, however, it is his refusal to give his daughter as wife to, and his insult of, Da Monzon because of the latter's slave status. In both accounts, Da Monzon needs to retrieve Basi's talismans from him in order to win the war against Samaniana. Honey liquor thus serves as a metaphor for seduction as the slave woman, or slave women, as in Kesteloot's version, becomes a femme fatale figure whose tools of seduction cause Basi to lower his guard. In Conrad's version, the slave woman is not merely depicted as an unidentified slave. Instead her beauty is described as incomparable, and the griot, Tayiru, states her name as well as Da Monzon's promise to her if she succeeds:

Da spent a whole week summoning people and telling them nothing.
 At that time there was a female slave in his house.
 She was created when the angels had no other work to do.
 She was more beautiful by a whole night than any genie.
 Her name was Sijanma [...]
 Da said, 'If you succeed in doing this for me, I will cool your eyes.
 If you succeed in doing this for me I will free you from slavery and make you a noble.
 If you succeed in doing this for me I will give you any amount of gold you ask for. (Conrad, pp. 210-212)

Through Tayiru's repetition of 'If you succeed in doing this' there is an emphasis not only on the importance of the task, but also on the promises that Da Monzon makes to Sijanma, to reward her with riches, freedom from slavery, and nobility.

This is in stark contrast to what occurs upon Sijanma's completion of the task, and Da Monzon's subsequent victory against Basi.

Then Da said, 'Sijanma!'...
 'All right, you who succeeded in leaving Segu and getting Basi's
 first handful of food,
 You who got Basi's sandals,
 You who got Basi's cap,
 We cannot leave you among our people.
 Otherwise you could do the same to us.
 You could deliver us to other people.'
 So they took Sijanma and broke her head.
 This was done by Da. (Conrad, p. 263)

Again the pattern of repetition is evident, but the result is different from what has been earlier promised. Sijanma is rejected by Da Monzon for fear that she may use her skills to betray Segou, and she is murdered. The slave is shown here as an outsider that cannot be trusted, someone who can be disposed of once her task is completed.

In Kesteloot's version of the same episode, the slaves are anonymous, first because of their number – there are three of them – and also because their names are not mentioned in the epic. In spite of this, they wield a considerable amount of power over the king and the state, especially when compared with Sijanma. Whereas Sijanma is submissive to Da Monzon, the three slave women in Kesteloot's account are able to manipulate Segou and its leader into total dependence on them, even twice delaying a response to the king regarding their expedition to Samaniana. The first incident occurs when the king has searched for days for someone to undertake the trip to Samaniana. When the slave women are asked, they respond to the king by asking him to wait a whole day, until they make their decision.

Les servantes répondirent: ‘Da Monzon, notre roi, ce n’est rien
 mais là où dans l’eau tombe la feuille,
 ce n’est pas là qu’elle pourrit;
 d’ici demain du crépuscule à l’aube
 nous les captives, nous réfléchirons
 et te ferons part de ce qui nous vient à l’esprit.’¹⁶

Later, upon the completion of their mission, and their return to Segou, they are questioned by the king about the result of their undertaking:

On demanda aux trois servantes et aux Somonos
 ‘Comment se porte Samaniana?’
 et s’ils ont fait bon voyage?
 et comment se sont passés les choses?
 Les femmes ont dit ‘Ne nous pressez donc pas
 Demain nous vous donnerons toutes les explications.’
 (Kesteloot I, p.55)

In the Kesteloot version, the treatment of the slaves upon their return to Segou differs from that in Conrad’s account. The slaves demonstrate a confidence here that is endorsed by the fact that they are not killed in this variant of the account. They understand the importance of their contribution to the kingdom, and even exhibit pride in their service to Segou, not as slaves or captives as they have been earlier called, but as women. Speaking of the three items that they have taken from Basi, they say:

‘Nous les avons apportées toutes les trois;
 nous en avons même rapportés trois autres
 qui lui seront peut-être utiles en sus:
 nous avons son tourti, son pantalon, son bonnet;
 et qu’il sache que nous sommes des femmes
 habiles et capables, de l’Est à l’Ouest.’ (Kesteloot I, p. 56)

¹⁶*L’epopée Bambara de Ségou*, ed. by Lilyan Kesteloot, 2 vols (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1993), I, p. 44. Further references to quotations from this first volume will be indicated as Kesteloot I.

Regarding the influx of slaves into Segou, it would appear that this occurs as a result of the confrontation between peoples with differing modes of subsistence, such as in the frequent clashes with neighbouring Fulani cattle rearing tribes, as evident in the epic's account of the wars against Basi, Hambodedio, and Silamaka. The political and military dominance of weaker neighbouring tribes by Segou is initially said to spring from a thirst for honey liquor. However slavery increasingly becomes a threat to the throne of Segou, as in the case of Ngolo Diarra whose brothers give him to Biton Koulibaly's men as part of the honey price owed by their town, Nyola. Meillasoux states that within the context of slavery in a single community, 'the existence of a debt presupposes a hierarchization of lineages based on the acquisition of wealth, and thus the disappearance of the principles of equality and solidarity between families; this can take place only through contamination by the merchant economy.'¹⁷ Although this is historically relevant, Ngolo's case is a result of his brothers' jealousy, as opposed to an inability to pay the honey price. They say:

Let us make a plan of what to do against Ngolo [...]
 When the honey-price collectors come this year,
 Let us plan not to pay the full amount of cowries.
 We will give two hundred cowries less twenty,
 And say our hands cannot reach.
 We will send our brother with the cowries to Biton Kulubali the
 man-killing hunter. (Conrad, p. 107)

With regard to the common practice of pawning an individual in return for a debt or loan, Meillasoux highlights the fact that the pawn does not lose his position of

¹⁷ Meillasoux, p. 40.

kin, and slave status is not hereditary as the slave only remains such until the debt is cleared.¹⁸ The latter however is not the case within the Segou cycle, as Ngolo Diarra is never shown to be redeemed by his family in return for the remaining debt, and even after his ascension to the throne, his descendants are still regarded as slaves, and as such, their slave status is used by neighbouring rulers as an insult against the king, and against Segou.

Such insults are seen throughout the cycle: references to Ngolo Diarra's slave status follow subsequent generations, especially Da Monzon, his grandson. When Da Monzon asks Basi, the Fulani chief, for his daughter's hand in marriage, the latter sends this reply:

Eh, does Da not know about his grandfather Ngolo?
 That he was added to the honey-price from Nyola?
 Does he not know that Ngolo was given to Biton Koulibali in Sekoro?
 Does he not know that all his ancestors were slaves?
 Oh, that a slave should come to a noble such as me, asking for my daughter! [...]
 He should ask for a weaver's stool, comb and shuttle.
 He should ask for a basket and hoe so he can collect termites and feed the chickens.
 A slave's work is to collect termites or to weave. (Conrad, p. 203)

This is the standard formula for the insult against Da Monzon, to quote his lineage, his origins in Nyola, and to emphasize his slave status. The same is cited by Biton Koulibaly's descendants who fled to Segou Kaarta upon Ngolo Diarra's ascension to the throne. Again, as in the case of Samaniana, the affront is in response to Da Monzon's request for a daughter's hand in marriage. Diétékoro of Kaarta's response is as follows:

¹⁸ Meillasoux, p. 40.

‘Retourne à Segou,
 dis à Da qu’il est un Monzon
 et que Monzon est fils d’un captif de case.
 Monzon est le fils du captif Ngolo
 qu’on a fait venir de Niola
 comme complément au prix du miel
 de mon grand-père Biton Koulibaly à Segou Koro.’
 (Kesteloot I, p. 98)

Both this and the Samaniana episode in Conrad’s version show an unwillingness to enter into a marriage alliance with a slave descendant, even though the slave descendant is Da Monzon, king of Segou. The wars that occur in response to these insults, along with other wars in the name of the honey-price, result in entire villages being taken captive by Segou. Although the epic fails to mention details of the mechanics of the slave market, and the ways in which demand interacted with the supply of slaves, there is a reference by Silamaka the Fulani chief to slaves being sold on into the slave market after capture. On the verge of losing a war against Da Monzon of Segou for refusing to pay the honey tribute, he writes to a fellow Fulani chief, Hambodedio of Kounari, who is married to Da Monzon’s daughter. In his letter, he asks him to ensure that his people, the Fulani of Macina, are not captured for onward sale on the slave market by the slave-trading state of Segou.

Je te confie le pays du Macina,
 agis en sorte que les Peuls
 ne soient point emmenés en captivité
 et qu’on ne s’en aille point les vendre
 au marché comme du vieil bétail.¹⁹

¹⁹ *L’épopée Bambara de Ségou*, ed. by Lilyan Kesteloot, 2 vols (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1993), II, p. 101. Further references to quotations from this volume will be indicated as Kesteloot II.

From the Segou cycle, it would appear therefore that warfare was responsible for the influx of the majority of slaves who were brought into the kingdom. Other modes of capture included brigandage and mounted raids, the latter of which is not directly referenced in the epic. Brigandage also formed the basis of power in the city-state of Segou. Biton Kulibali led bands of raiders made up of outcasts from the small decentralised villages of the Niger basin.²⁰ These warriors, as was mentioned earlier, raided neighbouring villages in return for protection and immunity. The raids created an atmosphere of insecurity in the region and destroyed the social order of kinship and protection. In addition, individuals or small groups preyed on vulnerable travellers and children from Segou, and kidnapped them for sale.

Some Bamana were hiding near the river, concealed nearby.
 They were looking for somebody, because those times were
 different from today.
 If you could catch somebody, you could sell him.
 If somebody could catch you, he would sell you.
 (Conrad, p. 194)

The most significant example of brigandage within the epic is the case of Bilisi who kidnapped children from Segou and gave them as payment in exchange for his honey beer.²¹ The theme of honey beer thus returns to the cycle in the story of Bilisi. Where it had earlier been used to depict the wanton slave-raiding lifestyle of Segou's soldiers, it becomes a threat to the security of the state, in particular the vulnerable children of Segou. There is a lot of controversy over the origins

²⁰ Meillasoux, p. 143.

and physical appearance of Bilisi. Both Conrad and Kesteloot's griots, Tayiru Banbera and Sissoko Kabiné, state that he is a Fulani, although his link to Segou is explained through his ancestors' earlier migration to the city-state. Whilst Sissoko depicts him as a monster, Banbera states emphatically, and with an awareness of Sissoko's rendition of this episode, that Bilisi is not a genie.²² Banbera makes reference to Bilisi's physical appearance, specifically, his unusual skin condition which is characterised by a lack of pigmentation in certain parts of the body, a point that is also cited in Sissoko's account.

Bilisi's two legs were white up to the knees.
 Bilisi's two arms were white up to his 'God's rock'.
 His face was white,
 His head had three corners.
 To see him was a fearful thing. (Conrad, p. 270)

Sissoko's description of Bilisi is more grotesque, and the reason is possibly two-fold: to explain Bilisi's physical deformity and to accurately render the intensity of fear that he inspires in the people of Segou. In addition to his skin condition, Sissoko's depiction emphasizes his power, as Bilisi rides five horses, as well as his horror and his greed, as Bilisi is seen to possess seven heads and seven mouths. The griot says:

Quand il quittait son village,
 Il montait cinq chevaux blancs [...]
 Bilisi avait sept têtes et sept bouches,
 Avec sept yeux et sept oreilles
 Avec ses cinq taches blanches,
 Il semait la terreur chez les tondyons de Ségou. (Kesteloot II, p. 6)

²² Conrad, p. 268.

He is shown here as an all-consuming ogre figure who inspires fear in Segou's warriors. Yet Banbera would insist that Bilisi is not a monster, that he is merely a human slave-raider. Thus perhaps, as Kesteloot suggests, this monster is a creation of Sissoko's imagination. But Sissoko reaffirms that he has not invented this figure, stating through the citizens of Segou that he is real:

Vous mêmes ici vous connaissez Bilissi:
Ce n'est pas un humain, c'est un genie,
Il a sept têtes, sept yeux et sept oreilles.
Rien qu'à sa vue on peut mourir de peur. (Kesteloot II, p. 26)

Whatever the case, one can never truly say that hyperbole is far from the domain of the epic. Through these depictions it is clear that Bilisi creates a great sense of insecurity in Segou and its surrounding villages by threatening the people and exacting a tribute of a portion of meat from them every week, as well as kidnapping their children to pay for his honey beer:

Il s'empare de deux jeunes filles et deux garçons,
Il les troque contre du dolo et se met à boire
Et s'adressant aux habitants de Ségou il dit:
'Vous ne me connaissez pas: mais moi je suis Bilissi
Et je tiens Ségou à ma disposition.
Le prix de mon dolo vient de Ségou.' (Kesteloot II, p. 6)

For the first time in the epic cycle, we see the security of Segou threatened, after the kingdom has consistently wreaked havoc on neighbouring villages through war, and upon its most vulnerable through kidnapping. Both griots portray Segou as vulnerable, for Bilisi is Segou's nemesis. At the end of the episode he is killed by Segou's most prominent warrior, Bakari Dian, but he is so powerful that even

in his dying moments, he is able to curse Bakari Dian and cause him permanent blindness.

The poetic description of Segou which is sung repeatedly through the cycle presents an image which vividly illustrates the fact that in Segou, weakness is an implicit part of strength. The city is surrounded by four thousand four hundred and four balansa trees, and one humpbacked balansa tree. The griot Banbera explains this humpbacked balansa tree as Segou's tendency towards treachery, as it represents conspiracy against the king.²³ The notion that the most powerful person in Segou, the king, can be subject to dethronement, implies that in spite of its military and economic strength through slave raiding as represented by the honey beer metaphor, Segou is not impenetrable, as seen in the Bilisi episode. In fact by relating the treachery and vulnerability of Segou, and the insults of other rulers against its kings because of their slave status, the epic presents a critical account both of its legendary figures, and of a memory that is not focused merely on the victories of the kingdom, but is self-critical enough to assess its own flaws along with its strengths.

The epic of Silamaka and Poullôri

Having discussed the slave trading activities of the city-state of Segou, the role of the slave in Segou society, and the threat of slavery to both throne and state within the social memory that is the epic of Segou, I will consider the Segou epic's representation of the war against the Fulani of Macina as compared with the Fulani rendition of the same event with specific reference to the account of

²³ Conrad, p. 119.

Silamaka and his slave Poullôri. The case of Poullôri is a poignant example of a master/slave relationship in which the slave voice is not silent, and the slave is not simply portrayed as an outsider. I examine the position of the slave in the Fulani context, through both the Segou cycle, and the Fulani epic of Silamaka the prince and his slave Poullôri. Although certain slaves could possess economic wealth, including slaves of their own, the accounts of Silamaka and Poullôri go beyond the slave's accumulation of material wealth and the attainment of social standing to portray an intimate rendering of the affection that exists between master and slave. Such is its import that it is even noted in the Segou account of the war that occurs between Silamaka and Da Monzon of Segou. I will therefore consider how both the Bamana of Segou and the Fulani of Macina retell the account of the same event – the war between Segou and the Fulani of Macina, and the relationship between Silamaka and Poullôri his slave. Where variants of the episodes treated in this section exist in both the Segou and Fulani cycles, I have chosen the published versions of the epic which contain the most complete accounts of the events. In the case of the Segou cycle, I have chosen both Kesteloot's and Conrad's editions as between them, they give a fuller picture of the cycle, with the former containing historical chronicles in prose form in addition to the epic, whilst Christiane Seydou's compilation of various accounts of the epic of Silamaka and Poullôri by the griot Boubacar Tinguidji, provide a concrete source to be compared with the Bamana account of the war against the Fulani.

Christiane Seydou states that the function of the Fulani or Peulh epic is 'l'exaltation nostalgique d'un passé prestigieux, mêlant sans la moindre réticence les événements historiques les plus contradictoires, les traits de culture les plus

inconciliables, mais retraçant pour tout Peul – et c'est là l'essentiel de son message – l'image héroïque et noble de ce que furent ses ancêtres et de ce qu'il rêve d'être.²⁴ The image of the Fulani as cattle herder and conquering hero form the foundation of the epic and the virtues of the Fulani hero are sang-froid, fearlessness, dignity and pride, amongst others.²⁵ As in the Songhay epic of Askia Mohammed, binary oppositions such as noble and commoner, foreigner and Fulani, slave and free born create social boundaries which govern Fulani society. This makes the account of Silamaka and Poullôri's relationship all the more exceptional. Poullôri is a *captif de case*, as he is born into the master, Silamaka's father's home. He thus bears the clan name of his master and is considered to be one of his children. In Seydou's edition, the bard Tinguidji states that Poullôri is born three years before Silamaka. The close relationship and affection between them means that there is barely any distinction between master and slave:

On aurait beau faire, on ne saurait les distinguer:
Y passât-on cent ans,
On ne saurait lequel est
Le captif,
On ne saurait lequel
est le maître,
on ne saurait lequel d'entre eux est l'esclave.
Silâmaka et Poullôri jamais ne se quittèrent. (Seydou, p. 79)

Despite this claim, Tinguidji distinguishes between them both on the level of the appetite, as Silamaka the noble shows restraint in the face of food, whilst Poullôri seems to be somewhat gluttonous:

Silâmaka prenait trois bouchées,

²⁴ *Silâmaka et Poullôri: récit épique peul raconté par Tinguidji*, ed. by Christiane Seydou (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972), p. 9.

²⁵ Seydou, p. 17.

Poullôri prenait six bouchées [...]
 On apportait dix noix de cola pour leur dîner.
 Silâmaka
 Prenait trois noix,
 Poullôri sept noix. (Seydou, p. 81)

In spite of their friendship and brotherhood, there are certain aspects of Silamaka's character that distinguish him from Poullôri. From birth, Silamaka exhibits the attributes of the Fulani hero – sang-froid, fearlessness, dignity and pride. When Da Monzon of Segou's emissaries come to Macina to exact the honey tribute from his father whilst Silamaka is still a baby, there is a curious incident in which a hornet sucks blood from Silamaka's forehead without the infant even flinching:

Silamaka n'a pas remué,
 Il n'a pas cillé d'oeil,
 Il n'a pas pleuré
 Jusqu'à ce que le taon gavé de sang tomba
 Alors le sang coula sur le visage de Silamaka. (Kesteloot II, p. 85)

It is significant that this is portrayed in the Segou epic cycle, and not in the Fulani account, as Silamaka's invulnerability and superhuman courage are typical of the representation of the Fulani hero. There are other references to Silamaka's strength in the Bamana epic. However, it is notable that both the Segou cycle and the Fulani account depict his downfall as directly or indirectly linked to a quarrel with a woman. In the Bamana version, the reason for his rebellion is a challenge thrown by a woman that he is courting:

'Va plutôt prouver ta valeur à Da Monzon
 Car c'est à lui que ton père paye une mesure
 Pleine d'or malléable, le prix de ta respiration,
 Et Da Monzon ne s'en sert que pour acheter de l'hydromel.'
 (Kesteloot II, pp. 87-88)

This insult hurts Silamaka's pride and leads him to refuse to pay the honey tribute, Segou's excuse for slave raiding, and to rebel against Segou. In the Fulani account, although he starts the rebellion without any prompting from the above-mentioned woman, his defeat at the hands of Segou is an indirect result of a quarrel with a woman, as he is betrayed by a griot whom he slaps for trying to settle a dispute between himself and his wife. As the bard has been attached to Silamaka's family, and is a father-figure to Silamaka, the insult is all the more damaging for him, and leads him to betray the secret of Silamaka's invulnerability to Da Monzon:

‘Lances ni fusils
N’empêcheront Silâmaka et Poullôri de venir.
Mais il est un anneau
Qui se trouve
Parmi les amulettes d’une de ses parentes, Bandâdo-Ardo.’
(Seydou, p. 113)

Although Silamaka and Poullôri are brothers, friends and comrades, on two occasions – once when they are about to face a serpent, and the other in battle against Da Monzon's soldiers – Silamaka distances Poullôri from imminent danger, in order to face it alone. The distinction is made between the noble free man and the slave who has been adopted into the king's family. The Fulani hero must be fearless, willing to face danger and to overcome it, and evidently such a hero must be a noble. Although Silamaka states that there is no distinction between them both, it is clear that Poullôri is sent away because it is the noble and not the slave that must emerge victorious. On the occasion when they are about to face the snake, Poullôri questions Silamaka about whether or not he will be considered a coward for obeying his master Silamaka and running an errand to

fetch weapons with which to kill the snake, instead of staying to kill it. Silamaka replies:

‘Si tu m’avais, toi le premier, envoyé, j’y serais allé [...]
 La camaraderie n’aime pas la contestation,
 La fraternité n’aime pas la contestation,
 La confiance n’aime pas la contestation
 L’affection n’aime pas la contestation.
 Je veux que tu partes sur le champ.’ (Seydou, p. 91)

Even though this is essentially a master ordering his slave to obey him, Silamaka tries to mask this by invoking such values as camaraderie, brotherhood, trust, and affection, the supposed hallmarks of his relationship with Poullôri. As soon as Poullôri disappears, however, Silamaka battles the snake with his bare hands, and even on Poullôri’s return, Silamaka at first refuses to allow him to help capture the snake. Again, when Silamaka is faced with the certainty of death in the battle against Da Monzon’s men, he sends Poullôri on an errand. In the Segou cycle, he claims to send him away because he does not want Poullôri to watch him die.²⁶ However in his letter to Hambodedio a fellow Fulani prince, he says that he has sent Poullôri to him because he does not want the slave to die with him. He wants Poullôri to survive him. The underlying intent of his apparent benevolence is adequately interpreted by Poullôri – Silamaka is distinguishing between himself, the noble warrior, and his slave. In fact in Poullôri’s emotional lament at Silamaka’s death, he states that his master had only ever made him aware of his slave status three times. In both the Bamana and Fulani accounts there are more instances in which there is a distinction between Silamaka’s nobility and

²⁶ Kesteloot II, p. 101.

Poullôri's slave status, however those mentioned by Poullôri are perhaps the most significant, the final instance being just before Silamaka's death.

‘Silamaka sachant qu’il allait mourir
N’a pas voulu que j’assiste à son trépas
Et il m’a dépêché vers Hambodédio;
Il m’a montré que j’étais son captif
En m’empêchant de partager son sort.’ (Kesteloot II, p. 103)

It is clear that despite Poullôri's slave status, Silamaka is not the only hero in this epic. The Fulani chief's association with Poullôri inevitably makes the slave a champion of the Fulani, and the praise song with which he is addressed show both Silamaka's affection for his slave, and his wealth and elevated social standing in spite of his status as a *captif de case*.

‘Esclave qui mourra sans avoir été la chose de personne,
L’amas de *bougués* bleus qui charge sa tête, jamais ne la quitter;
Sous le faix des *bougués* ploie son cou;
Abri d’acier inébranlable!’ (Seydou, p. 117)

This praise song portrays Poullôri as a slave who is not a mere object, the property of his master. Tinguidji's gloss of the word *bougués* is treated in Seydou's introduction to the epic. The griot states that this is a sheer fabric from which the Poullôri's turban is made. The fact that it is dyed indigo indicates wealth, and that it must be a gift from Silamaka, the master showing the high esteem in which he holds his slave. In addition, the image of the steel shelter is representative of Poullôri's position in Macina society. According to Tinguidji, it is ‘un très grand abri: celui qui le possède c’est celui qui a auprès de lui vingt mille personnes qui

ne dépendent que de lui.²⁷ This would imply that Poullôri possesses both economic wealth and slaves of his own. The other indication as to Poullôri's hero status is in his death. Silamaka is killed by a child during the battle against Segou, and laments the anticlimactic nature of his death:

‘Méhariste
Ni cavalier ne m’ont tué
Et voila qu’un enfant nu est venu et m’a tué!
Je meurs ignominieusement, moi Silamâka Ardo Mâssina!’
(Seydou, p. 137)

Poullôri's death however, is more glorious, in that he is translated along with his army of horsemen out of the sight of onlookers. Therefore in spite of Silamaka's attempts to distinguish between himself and his slave, the lasting image of the great conquering hero is not so much of Silamaka, but of his slave, Poullôri whose death exists as legend both in Segou and Fulani culture.

Jusqu’à ce jour, quand arrive la saison des pluies,
Depuis Sâ
Jusq’au Mâssina,
Si l’orage gronde,
Les vieux Bambaras
Disent ‘Poullôri Benâna!’²⁸
Ils soutiennent que Poullôri et ses cavaliers sont partis dans les airs
Et qu’ils ne sont pas sur terre [...]
Dieu les a enlevés et conduits là-haut
Car il est tout-puissant. (Seydou, p. 173)

Poullôri's legacy is also described in the Segou cycle as a constant reminder of the rebellion of Macina, and the heroism of Poullôri the slave, but also Poullôri the warrior who fought valiantly against the soldiers of the kingdom of Segou.

²⁷ Seydou, p. 117.

²⁸ Poullôri is coming in Bambara.

C'était le moment où le soleil se couchait
 Et la nuit les avala tous [...]
 Ces mille chevaux dans la légende
 Montèrent dans le ciel avec Poulorou,
 Et aujourd'hui quand marchent les nuages,
 Quand le tonnerre tonne et que les pluies divalent [...]
 Les Bambaras disent: 'Voilà Poulouru
 Qui pourchasse encore les cavaliers de Ségou.'

(Kesteloot II, p. 104)

In the Segou and the Fulani epics, Poullôri is represented as both slave and warrior. I have considered accounts of the Bamana epic of Segou by different griots, and have compared these against versions of the epic of Silamaka and Poullôri by the same bard over a period of four years (1964-1968) in order to present a memory of slavery that is not restricted to one particular kingdom, but one that is told through the eyes of their neighbours. For Segou, the memory of slavery is one of warfare, raiding and kidnap in which the kingdom emerges victorious over Macina. For the Fulani the victory is in the memory of heroism and the diplomatic agreement brokered by Hambodedio so that they maintain their freedom and are not enslaved by the kingdom of Segou. More important, however, are corresponding accounts of the intimate relationship between Silamaka and the slave Poullôri in both epics, showing that it is possible for a slave to dominate the scene of the epic, as much as the rebellion of the weaker tribe, the Fulani, leaves its mark on the Segou cycle. The same ability to cross hierarchical boundaries through personal merit or association with royal lineage is tempered by the constant reminder of slave status by both the bard, and Silamaka himself. Yet the epic, often paradoxical, ends with the slave as hero, transported to the heavens along with his celestial army.

Conclusion

The verbal recollection of the memory of slavery in the African empires of Songhay, Segou, and the Fulani state of Macina provide a way into understanding the complexity of the ramifications of slavery and the slave trade across the sub-region. The manipulation of the account of Askia Mohammed foregrounds invention, in a sense: a fictional history that legitimises the king's reign over the empire. Yet at the end, the same epic which vaunts the supposed porosity of hierarchical boundaries through its text, shuns them in favour of the observance of society's rules with respect to slave status. Whilst in the Bamana epic of Segou, the mnemonic device of honey beer recurs as a motif throughout the epic, with reference to wars, slave raids, the insult against the king, and Bilisi the slave raider's reign of terror over the city-state; with each repetition of this theme, its significance appears to evolve, so that honey beer encapsulates slave acquisition in its different forms. Yet the strength of the empire in the form of the slave trade threatens to be its downfall. In both the Songhay and Segou epics, one sees a memory that is as inventive as it is questioning of identity, and challenging of its nobility through the theme of slavery. The centre is threatened by the phenomenon of slavery, whether through the allegation of slave status as in the case of Askia Mohammed and Amar Zoumbani, or through the insult to the slave-king and his descendants, as well as the terror of Bilisi in the Segou Empire. What the Fulani epic of Silamaka and Poullôri provides therefore is an epic account in which the slave crosses hierarchical boundaries and emerges, and indeed is remembered, unequivocally as a hero of the state.

Chapter 2: The oral epic in fictional representations of slavery

Introduction

Oral narratives of slavery and the slave trade, although limited, predate the historical novel, significantly in the oral epic tradition of Francophone West Africa. Oral tradition in general bears a particular significance within the Francophone West African novel tradition, both as a manifestation of a nostalgic desire for a traditional pre-colonial past, and a re-imagining of contemporary Africa, and conversely, as the deconstruction of the myth of an idyllic past, and its deployment as a critique of the present. Within the context of slavery and the slave trade, the historical novel, in its attempt to return to a pre-colonial moment, draws heavily on oral tradition as both a stylistic and historical source of memory. Oral tradition in general forms the basis of the work of such prominent authors as Ahmadou Kourouma (*Monné, outrages et défis*), Boubacar Boris Diop (*Les tambours de la mémoire*), Yambo Ouologuem (*Le devoir de violence*), and Aminata Sow Fall (*Le Jujubier du patriarce*). Notably the last two authors have been preoccupied with the form and content of the oral epic as source and/or subtext for their work on the memory of slavery. The recurrence of the epic as a narrative of social memory within the West-African historical novel on slavery therefore raises questions such as the relevance of that which is remembered and verbally recounted on the subject of slavery, as well as the significance of that which is omitted from this narrative of the past.

Both Ouologuem and Sow Fall draw on the oral epic tradition, not for its historicity but for its value as a *phantasm* of the past, a social construct that is an *illusion* of a group's past in order to create and affirm its collective identity. By

mirroring the fictionalisation of the narrative of social memory in this body of work both stylistically and in terms of content within the novel, memory in the form of the oral epic is both imitated and disputed, affirmed and challenged. The epic's dual quality of memory and fiction form a platform for subsequent inquiry into the nature of a social memory of slavery as represented by the novel. Through the use of the epic form, these authors situate the oral narrative at the centre of an inquiry into the past that examines the content and form of the epic by questioning its subjectivity as a curator of memory. By focusing on the transformation of the epic form and its impact on memory, they reconnect with the past by challenging the way in which remembering and forgetting are socialised through the adaptation and invention of this form within the social context. For this reason, the oral epic is constantly being adapted as the processes of remembering and repetition are subject to omission, as well as to invention, with both elements creating a transformation of the oral epic. Whilst omission highlights the fragility of an oral narrative of memory through the perpetuation of forgetting, invention does the same through the fictionalisation of what is supposedly a historical account. Whilst these authors imitate the form and content of the oral epic through the implementation of similar constructs of adaptation and invention, their use of the epic itself within the novel constitutes one such transformation of the genre.

In his study on collective memory, Halbwachs states that individuals within a group are implicated in each other's past, and therefore memory is not restricted to the subjective repository of the individual mind, but instead finds

substance and expression within the context of the group.¹ By virtue of its ritualistic and commemorative features by which formalism and performativity are at its core, the oral epic form constitutes a narrative through which collective memory is communicated within a group that is defined by ethnicity, culture and geographical space. Thus the structures provided by the group make remembering possible. What then do these epics signify for their audiences within the novels, and to what extent do they adequately represent the spectrum of a social memory of slavery? This chapter will examine the way in which Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* and Aminata Sow Fall's *Le Jujubier du patriarche* highlight the epic's historical, cultural and political value as a social construct through which the memory of slavery is both explored and marginalised within the group. First, I will address Ouologuem's questioning of memory through the multiplicity of sources in *Le devoir de violence* and the ways in which they are employed and manipulated. I will then consider the theme of invention with relation to the epic form in *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, before concluding with a look at transformations of the epic, as presented by both these authors.

Sourcing the epic

Le devoir de violence relates the history of the domestic slavery and serfdom of the fictional kingdom of Nakem, a possible anagram of the Kanem Empire which is located in modern-day Western Chad.² The novel, published in 1968,

¹ Halbwachs, p.38.

² Thomas A. Hale, 'Rewriting the Songhay Past in *Le devoir de violence*', in *Yambo Ouologuem: Postcolonial writer, Islamic Militant*, ed. by Christopher Wise (London: Lynne Rienner, 1999), pp. 155-74 (p. 157).

deconstructs idealist notions of Africa by opposing Africanist romanticising of the continent's pre-colonial past, and replacing it with what Ouologuem presents as a more realistic history of unrelenting violence, inflicted by the ruling Saifs upon their subjects. After an introduction to the genealogy of the Saif dynasty and the fight against French colonial invasion, both of which are characterised by domestic slavery and slave trade in the first two chapters, the narrator's focus shifts to the family of Kassoumi and Tambira, his wife, who are serfs in name, but slaves in practice, of the current ruler. Riddled with unrelentingly violent and sexually explicit passages, the novel tells the story of the Kassoumi family against the backdrop of colonialism, illegal slave-trading, and Saif ben Isaac al-Heit's oppressive rule. After the murder of his mother by the Saif's men, Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, Kassoumi's eldest son, is adopted by the Saif, and sent to study in France where for a period he becomes the lover of a male patron in exchange for money. Following his marriage to a French woman, and a period of fighting in World War II, Raymond returns home with the hope of becoming president of the newly independent nation that emerges from the former Nakem Empire, at which point it becomes clear to him that he will always remain a slave of the Saif.

Without digressing too much into the academic arguments regarding allegations of unacknowledged borrowing and plagiarism that surround *Le devoir*, which have been extensively commented upon by both Eric Sellin and Christopher Miller, it is important to note that Ouologuem borrows from European and African sources alike. The only difference is that that he vaguely acknowledges his African sources, but fails to credit such writers as Graham

Greene, André Schwartz–Bart and Guy de Maupassant from whom he borrows.³ Specifically the way in which Ouologuem, then a student in Paris, lifted passages from Greene’s *It’s a Battlefield* and Schwarz-Bart’s *Le dernier des justes* with neither acknowledgement nor alteration of the texts cast a shadow on the initial acclaim with which the novel was received, having been awarded the Renaudot prize in the year of its publishing. Eric Sellin describes this controversy on plagiarism as ‘a tragic by-product of the cultural conflict inherent in hybrid literatures which adopt the lingua of another country but still maintain their own ontology’.⁴ By borrowing from already existing texts, the boundaries between adaptation and creation are blurred, Ouologuem believing that the adaptation of already existing material is the author’s prerogative, vaunting his penchant for plagiarism and prescribing the same to his readers in his book, *Lettre à la France nègre* which was published a year later.

However, Ouologuem’s borrowing is not restricted to the minor passages lifted from the works of Greene, Schwartz-Bart and de Maupassant. For the historical account of the Nakem Empire in *Le devoir*, he draws primarily from African sources, specifically oral and written narratives of the Songhay Empire. First is the oral epic of Askia Mohammed, the primary source for the account of the Songhay Empire upon which the Nakem Empire of the novel is modelled. Whilst the novels from which he borrows remain unacknowledged, Ouologuem’s narrator acknowledges the oral epic as well as two chronicles in Arabic – the

³ For more on the allegations of plagiarism, see Eric Sellin, ‘Ouologuem’s blueprint for *Le devoir de violence*’, in *Research in African Literatures*, 2 (1971), 117-20. Also see Eric Sellin, ‘The Unknown Voice of Yambo Ouologuem’, in *Yambo Ouologuem: Postcolonial writer, Islamic Militant*, ed. by Christopher Wise, pp. 67-88, and Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁴ Sellin, ‘The Unknown Voice of Yambo Ouologuem’, p.85.

Tarikh el Fettâch (Chronicle of the Seeker) and the *Tarikh es Sudan* (Chronicle of Africa) – both commissioned by the Songhay ruler, Askia Mohammed. From these written sources, the *Tarikh el Fettach* which contains an account of the Songhay Empire from the start of the reign of Sonni Ali Ber up until 1599, and the *Tarikh es Soudan*, also a primary source on the Songhay Empire, as well as the oral epic of Askia Mohammed, Ouologuem sources the information for *Le devoir*, manifesting, albeit differently, the hybridity to which Sellin refers.

Ouologuem problematises memory by presenting the reader with a multiplicity of accounts, highlighting the discrepancies and inaccuracies that are posed by memory in its oral and collective, as well as its written form. He sets these narratives against each other, his narrator sometimes unable to determine which of them represents a true memory of the lives of the empire's rulers. Ouologuem implies that memory, and specifically social memory is a process of recollection that incorporates variation through a spectrum of adaptation ranging from socially and politically motivated invention to complete fictionalisation in the form of legend. At a point where there are inaccuracies and variants in the account of the ruler Saif Isaac's life, the narrator says:

La tradition se perd dans la légende, et s'y engloutit; car les récits écrits font défaut et les versions des Anciens divergent de celles des griots, lesquelles s'opposent à celles des chroniqueurs.⁵

The stylistic influence of the oral epic, and indeed the Arab chronicles is confined to the first two chapters of the novel – 'La légende des Saïfs' and 'L'extase et l'agonie' – which describe the life of the Saïfs in very formal

⁵ Yambo Ouologuem, *Le devoir de violence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), p. 11.

language. After the first two chapters, however, when slavery is discussed in relation to the individual lives of the Kassoumi family, the language is marked by the use of a more modern and informal idiom. At the beginning of the novel the twentieth-century griot/narrator situates the genealogy of the Saifs historically, as is the practice in the Songhay epic. He dates this genealogy as far back as the 13th century, modelling Nakem and its rulers on the reign of Sonni Ali Ber and his successors. He also attributes his account to the oral texts of other griots:

[...] Il est raconté, dans les annales talismaniques des sages anciens, parmi les récits des traditions orales, l'épopée célèbre... de Mahmoud Meknoud Traré, descendant d'ancêtres griots, et griot lui-même de l'actuelle République africaine de Nakem-Ziuko, seul vestige de l'ancien empire Nakem. (*Le devoir*, p.12)

The interplay of the autochthonous oral epic and the Arab chronicles with their Islamic slant is seen in the narrator's oral form of delivery as well as his use of the Arabic language, and formulaic Islamic phrases in both Arabic and French. Although Ouloguem's narrator does not indicate that there is an audience present, the orality of his delivery is evident and it would appear that he speaks directly to an invisible audience, digressing to explain his narrative, and frequently making religious Arabic asides as a commentary on his story. However whilst his seeming contempt for what he describes as *la négraille* (niggertrash) may indicate a white, French audience, his mockery of such symbolic figures as the ethnographer Frobenius, the colonial administrator, and even the Christian priest is a satire of such spectators. All of this indicates that the epic is being recounted to an audience of Africans, the same niggertrash that the narrator denigrates. The epic in *Le devoir* therefore problematizes the affirmation of African identity through

the recollection of the past. However this is not a past populated with legendary heroes and their celebrated accomplishments. Instead it is one that is characterised by extreme violence and slavery.

As is the custom of the oral epic performer in recounting the memory of the past, Ouologuem's narrator compresses time, limiting the centuries-long genealogy and deeds of the Nakem Empire's leaders to the first chapter, 'La légende des Saïfs'. He does not focus on the rulers' entire life stories, but only briefly mentions noteworthy episodes such as the ascension to the throne, and the violent death of each leader. He does however spend a considerable amount of time on Saif Moshe Gabbai and Saif ben Isaac al Heit. This is significant, as these figures are modelled on the historical rulers of the Songhay Empire, Sonni Ali Ber and Askia Mohammed, who dominate both the oral epic and the Arab chronicles. *Le devoir's* portrayal of Saif Moshe and Saif Isaac as the archetypal figures of evil and good in the novel is a tradition inherited both from the Arab chronicles and the epic account of their historic counterparts. The violent killing of children as ordered by Saif Moshe is seen in both chronicles, as Sonni Ali Ber is depicted as tearing a child from its mother's womb. However this is also an echo of Nouhou Malio's version of the epic of Askia Mohammed in which Askia Mohammed's birth is prophesied as a threat to Sonni Ali Ber's throne, and the latter orders the killing of every child born to Askia Mohammed's mother. Within both sets of accounts, Askia Mohammed is idealised, whilst Sonni Ali Ber is vilified. Yet, although the oral epic is a primary source for *Le devoir*, Ouologuem's portrayal of these and the other members of the ruling dynasty is far from heroic. Instead it is characterised by extreme violence, murder and anthropophagy. Whilst the epic

celebrates a society's heroes, Ouologuem's adaptation of the Songhay epic in *Le devoir* does exactly the opposite, as through the griot's satire of this ruling class, he creates an anti-epic that is populated with villains instead of heroes.

However, like the oral epic, Ouologuem's novel thrives on partial truth. Although it is based on one of the few epics that deals explicitly with the theme of slavery, by only focusing on such controversial issues as the internal and external trade in slaves, as well as the illegal traffic of slaves, Ouologuem paints a fatalistic picture of what he claims to be Africa's past. In fact, his account of Africa's past as encapsulated in the Nakem Empire is so damning that the Congolese critic Aliko Songolo argues that the overwhelming European reception given to *Le devoir* was 'not surprising because the novel seems to exculpate the former metropolises for crimes for which they had, justly or unjustly, been held responsible.'⁶ Slavery, the slave trade, and even forced labour, are attributed solely to African rulers, and instead of highlighting the ideals of the African community as is the epic's primary function, Ouologuem's revival of the epic form in *Le devoir* exposes the greatest errors of the continent's past to the exclusion of anything else. His account counters the glorification of the epic's rulers, and the affirmation of Africa's identity through an oral narrative of the past, by portraying the Saif dynasty as bound to a duty of violence through domestic slavery, the external slave trade, and forced labour. The Zairian critic J. Mbelolo ya Mpiku states that 'by deliberately selecting from the African past only

⁶ Aliko Songolo, 'Fiction and Subversion: *Le devoir de violence*', trans. by Jo Anne Cornwell in *SubStance*, Vol. 6/7, No. 21, *Literature and Its Others* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978-1979), 141-55 (p. 146).

those myths that may debase it, Ouologuem created a myth different from but as dangerous as the one he was seeking to destroy.⁷

Inventing the epic

Aminata Sow Fall's 1993 novel, *Le Jujubier du patriarche* relies on the epic form more as a narrative technique, than as a source for the content of the novel. In *Le Jujubier*, Sow Fall's narrator tells the story of Yelli, a descendant of a ruling Muslim family, originally from the town of Babyselli, and the tensions that exist within his family through his quarrels with his wife, his economic and therefore social downfall, and the fragmented fictive kinship that exists between his wife, Tacko, and a slave descendant Naarou whose family has served theirs for generations. Through the figure of Naarou, Sow Fall explores contemporary discrimination against people of slave descent, via the marginalisation of the record of their lineage from social memory in the form of the oral epic. Sow Fall creates the fictive epic of Fouta Djallon, an account of Yelli's ancestors, as a dominant narrative in which the slave descendant Naarou struggles to find adequate representation. Structurally, the modern-day narrative of Yelli's life is interspersed with epic accounts of his ancestor Almamy Sarébibi and his son, Yellimané, except for the end where Naarou narrates the account of her slave ancestors, Warèle and Biti. The epic revolves around the conflict between two Fulani clans – the Islamic Almamy Sarébibi, and the pagan hunting clan led by

⁷ Jean Mbelolo ya Mpiku, 'From one Mystification to Another: "Négritude" and "Négraille" in *Le devoir de violence*', in *Yambo Ouologuem: Postcolonial writer, Islamic Militant*, ed. by Christopher Wise (London: Lynne Rienner, 1999), pp. 23-38 (p. 34).

Guéladio. This conflict arises after the marriage of Dioumana, Gueladio's daughter, to the Almamy, and her exile in the belly of a whale following her husband's infidelity. The schism that exists between both clans leads to years of war, and it is only with the help of two of the Almamy's slaves, Warèle, and subsequent to her death, her granddaughter, Biti, that Yellimané, son of Dioumana and the Almamy finds his mother and puts an end to the wars between the rival Fulani clans.

Parallel to and interspersed with Yelli's own present-day story, therefore, is the epic of Fouta Djallon, which is diegetically authentic within the novel, and develops through accounts by various characters in song, poetry and prose form. The relationship between the epic as a chronicle of the past and the modern-day account of the life of Yelli and his family is seen through the coexistence of both strands of narrative by which Sow Fall creates an equilibrium in which the past and the present are related simultaneously. Borrowing minimally, if at all, from the Wolof tradition, specifically the epic of Ndiadiane Ndiaye, Sow Fall, herself Wolof, addresses the vestiges of domestic slavery within contemporary society. The only thematic resemblance to the Wolof foundation epic of Ndiadiane Ndiaye, is found in Sow Fall's character, Dioumana, who exiles herself in the belly of a whale as a result of a conflict with her husband. This theme of self-exile is reminiscent of Ndiadiane Ndiaye, the founder of the Wolof Empire in the oral epic tradition, who himself undergoes a prolonged exile in the river as a result of a conflict with his mother who has married his deceased father's slave. Unlike Ouologuem, Sow Fall does not borrow *explicitly* from previous oral epics or even written historical accounts. Instead she situates the characters and events within a

realistic ethnic space thereby exploring ancient tensions that arise from the historical coexistence of multiple ethnicities, as well as the discrimination against slave descendants in the Senegambian sub region, through the epic screen of warring Fulani clans. Yet by creating a convincing, albeit completely fictive epic of the Fulani of Fouta Djallon she uses the epic style as a platform for the oral recounting of social memory within the novel.

In his study on African epic traditions, Stephen Paterson Belcher defines the epic as an ‘extended narrative on a historical topic, delivered in public performance, most often with musical accompaniment, by a specialized performer’.⁸ The performance element of the epic indicates that the oral performer or griot speaks or sings the narrative, and is listened to by an audience. As the epic is an ethnotext – a community’s discourse about itself – the initial audience would usually be a specific cultural group, one that is connected to a particular geographic location. Since the primary purpose of the epic is to reaffirm identity in order to legitimise social and political structures within the contemporary context, its performance and narrative elements are as integral to its formulation and indeed its presentation as its location in a *specific cultural and geographical milieu, that is, to a particular audience*. To stage the epic therefore, is to locate it in a specific geographic and material space, and to address it to a definite audience. This is achieved by Sow Fall through the association of the topography of Babyselli, specifically, the river Natangué and the jujube tree of the novel’s title, with the epic. Thus the narrator speaks of the canal that flows from the river Natangué, and describes the river, a metaphor for memory, as having dried up.

⁸ Stephen Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. xiv.

Pour ceux de Babyselli, il est censé avoir jadis été le berceau du fleuve Natangué qui a été le témoin – souvent actif – des pages les plus belles, les plus émouvantes mais aussi les plus sombres de leur histoire. Il a tari depuis bien longtemps, mais il a eu le temps de cristalliser pour mieux rendre l'écho du chant épique qui conte les aventures extraordinaires de leurs glorieux ancêtres.⁹

The river not only delineates the geographical parameters of Babyselli, it also echoes the epic song which narrates the people's collective memory. By doing this, Sow Fall succeeds in legitimising the fictive epic of Fouta Djallon, at least within the novel.

Whilst Sow Fall presents the epic as constant and tangible through its association with Babyselli's topography, through the river Natangué, she also highlights forgetting as implicit within remembering. The reason for the river drying up is seen as the forgetting of the past as a result of the dispersion of the group, and the modern-day obsession with modernity and economic wealth. This is also reflected in the second metaphor for memory – the patriarch's jujube tree which marks the memorial site where Yelli's ancestor is buried, and is a symbol of the origins of the patriarch's lineage. Both the jujube tree and the image of the dry river bed create a picture of a social memory that has lain dormant as a result of the disintegration of the group through migration away from Babyselli, to the city, and even outside the country. The tree produces fruits that bring good luck to those who eat it. However as a result of the people's greed, one of its branches gets broken, and the tree, like its counterpart the river Natangué, dies. This is until the griot Naani brings the news to Yelli that the tree has begun to sprout again: '[...]
La souche du jujubier de la tombe du Patriarche s'est mise à bourgeonner. Le

⁹ Aminata Sow Fall, *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, (Monaco: Le Serpent à plumes, 1998), p. 12.

jujubier va-t-il reverdir!'.¹⁰ The association of both the jujube tree and the river with the epic is not only as a record of the memory of the cultural group, but also as the markers of a geographical and material site in which this memory can be re-enacted, and therefore a physical place to which the Fulani clan of Almamy Sarébibí must return to understand their origins.

As the oral epic is the social memory of a group that is linked both to a culture and a geographic location, its performance is motivated by a need to reaffirm a collective sociocultural identity through a narrative of the past. This purpose is dependent to a certain extent upon the continued existence of the group, and is facilitated by the unity of the group, and its link to the site of the epic, as it becomes more difficult for the narrative to perform its function in the absence of these factors. Where the group has disintegrated, and people no longer inhabit that social and material space, a crisis of identity ensues within the novel as a result of displacement, as one is distanced from origins and social ties, and thus from the structures that make the narration of memory possible. For Yelli, the protagonist of *Le Jujubier du patriarche* living isolated in the city, having lost his wealth, his friends, and with a marriage in crisis, it prompts a nostalgic idealisation of his home Babyselli, and the glorious deeds of its ancient heroes, to the despair of his wife who says:

Monsieur pense qu'il est encore au Moyen Âge; il veut être *impeccable* parce qu'il est le descendant de Yellimané le héros de Nantangué. Yelli reviens sur terre. Tu n'es ni Sarebibí l'Almamy, ni Yellimané son fils, ni Guéladio le chasseur que courtoisaient les fauves [...] Écoute: tu es Yelli, tu vis la fin du vingtième siècle avec ses dures *réalités*. (*Le Jujubier*, p.16) [my emphasis]

¹⁰ Sow Fall, p. 109.

The idea outlined through the character of Tacko, Yelli's wife, is that to idealise and inhabit a past populated by *impeccable* heroes who accomplish glorious deeds, is to flee from the harsh reality of the present. For her, the past is a distant mythical place that has no relevance to the present. We therefore see two contrasting notions within the novel – the idealisation of the past in the form of the epic and its association with the geographical location of Babyselli, and the challenging of the epic as outdated, irrelevant and inadequate in terms of its representation of the members of the group.

However, beyond Yelli's nostalgic longing for a past populated with heroes, the reason for a return to origins and a more complete recounting of the epic, therefore, is a crisis of social memory due to a breakdown in society. In *Le Jujubier du patriarce*, the epic is recounted in the form of praise songs, and poetic and prosaic narrative by the major characters, and by Naani the griot during his annual visits to Yelli in the city. It is depicted primarily as fragments, which are interspersed with the contemporary account of Yelli's life. This is with the exception of the long passage that spans the final three chapters in which Sow Fall's narrator is relegated to the background whilst Naarou the slave descendant, now griotte, recounts the epic, and ultimately ends the novel. The fragmentation in the earlier parts of the novel is reflective of this crisis of memory as a result of the disintegration of the original Babyselli community, as well as Yelli's own personal economic and social crisis, and the conflict between Tacko, Yelli's wife, and her adopted slave/daughter Naarou, whom she insults because of her slave status. The only resolution to the ever-increasing tension within the action is to reconstitute the group, as Yelli makes a public radio announcement for all

descendants of his ancestor, the Almamy, to return to Babyselli, a metaphor for the past, in order to hear the epic of Fouta Djallon, as recounted by Naani.

Plus tard, le monde se rassembla sous la place centrale de Babyselli [...] Naani s'assit au milieu pour une veillée mémorable. Sa voix rauque et toujours envoûtante malgré son âge couvrit Babyselli. Il annonça qu'il entrerait dans l'épopée du Foudjallon par la douzième porte [...] Naani pinça son xalam et sa voix se lança dans la nuit, sous la lune en veilleuse:

Par la mémoire de tous
Et la voix du griot
Et le son du xalam
Depuis l'aube des temps
Le chant. (*Le Jujubier*, pp. 122-123)

Sow Fall therefore addresses the need to return to a collective identity based on a social memory of the past, that is the epic as a means by which identity and social values are re-affirmed.

However whilst for Yelli a loss of identity precipitates a return to the ideals of the past via the heroes of the epic, Naarou highlights the inadequacy of the narrative in its initial form in which it excludes the lineage of her slave ancestors. This causes her to seek representation for her ancestors, and indeed for herself within the epic of Fouta Djallon, claiming a legitimate stake in the social memory of the group as a member of the Babyselli community. Where the slave voice is absent from the epic, Naarou, herself distanced from her original society, yet a member of the Babyselli community for generations via her family, seeks to retrieve her identity and affirm her belonging by inscribing her ancestors' past upon the social memory of Babyselli. She says of her slave ancestors, Warèle and Biti:

Qui dit qu'elles n'étaient pas de sang royal comme ces millions
d'êtres dont le destin a basculé le temps d'un éclair parce que des

aventuriers les ont arrachés à leur famille, à leur terre, à leur histoire, ou parce qu'ils ont perdu un combat. (*Le Jujubier*, p. 89)

The excerpts of the epic which are recounted throughout the novel therefore culminate in a final section in which there is a complete break from the twentieth-century narrative, with Naarou narrating the epic poem to an audience of relatives, and thus ending the novel. Once there is that remarkable shift from the prose narrative to the poetic epic form in the final section of the novel, the reader gets the impression that it is the epic, and specifically the addition of Naarou's voice to the narrative, that is central to Sow Fall's novel. Sow Fall's approach to the oral epic can therefore be seen as two-fold. In terms of the invention of the epic for the purpose of the novel, Sow Fall distances herself from existing epic accounts, creating a fictive epic in which she is able to explore specific themes such as the function of the epic as a social memory and an instrument of the marginalisation of the slave voice within society. Yet through the figure of Naarou, the diegetically authentic epic of Fouta Djallon forms the foundation for a questioning of the inclusiveness of social memory, thus provoking a concurrent and indeed an alternative narrative which takes into account the slave voice, albeit as a response to the master narrative.

Transforming the epic

Having considered the oral and written sources for *Le devoir*, and the invention of the epic of Fouta Djallon in *Le Jujubier*, we turn now to the transformation of this form in both novels. I earlier highlighted the subjectivity of the epic as an

ethnotext that presents to its primary audience, noteworthy deeds of legendary rulers, and remarkable events of the past in order to affirm the identity of the group. As the criterion for inclusion within the social memory is belonging to a social, political or religious centre, the slave who is on the margins of society is rarely the subject of the epic. This is of course with exceptions such as those mentioned in the previous chapter – Ngolo Diarra the slave, and his descendants who ruled the kingdom of Segou, Poullôri, slave of the Fulani prince Silamaka, whose bravery and friendship with his master is celebrated in the Segou and Fulani epics, and Amar Zoumbani who was both a slave and a member of the Segou royal family. It is clear that even though boundaries exist within the hierarchical order of these societies, inscription of a select few slaves into the social memory is based either on merit within the context of military conquest or membership of the royal family. The majority of slaves however constitute the nameless invisible masses, relegated to the realm of forgetting in the oral epic. Thus in *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, when the slave descendant Naarou asks the griot Naani about the genealogy of her ancestor Biti, he states that the lineage of slaves is not the subject of the epic, indicating that this is the privilege of the aristocracy.

Elle apprendra du griot que ‘Biti, l’amazone à l’allure de guêpe et au coeur de lion’ était sa lointaine ancêtre. Elle en éprouvera une fierté considérable et voudra en savoir plus:

Alors c’était la grand-mère de ma mère?
 Oh! C’est plus loin que ça ma fille.
 Comment s’appelaient ses enfants?
 Sira, Dior et Lari.
 Et leurs enfants? [...]
 Ma petite fille [...] Quand on a Warèle et Biti, *on peut oublier le reste.*

Belle manière d'esquiver. L'usage ne prévoyait pas de retenir la généalogie des esclaves. (*Le Jujubier*, p. 37) [my emphasis]

The idea that *on peut oublier le reste* indicates that the consequence of the omission of the slave lineage from the epic is forgetting, and the perpetuation of that forgetting within the social memory whenever the epic is repeated. The epic therefore fails to represent the totality of the group, narrating a social memory that only takes into account the dominant master figure. This results in a crisis of representation of the subaltern slave because of his/her difference and therefore his/her marginal position in society. Very few epics break from this pattern, and Ouologuem challenges this notion of the exclusion of the slave memory from the oral narrative by compressing the listing of the genealogy and deeds of the Saifs into the first two chapters of *Le devoir*, and shifting the focus dramatically from the predominance of the Saif dynasty to the lineage of Kassoumi, the slave, for the rest of the novel. The transformation in the epic form is seen in the sudden shift from the listing of the Saifs' lineage to the less formal narrative of the lives of the slave Kassoumi and his son Raymond Kassoumi. It is from the bottom of Nakem social hierarchy that Kassoumi the slave is born, offspring of the unquantified mass of *niggertrash*, with only a reference to a distant home from which he is captured. Furthermore, it is from this displaced and therefore unrooted lineage that the *négrailon*, his son Raymond emerges as the subject of the novel, the account of the Saifs constituting the historical and indeed the contemporary social background against which the slave Kassoumi and his offspring are the major actors.

Also significant is the fact that Ouologuem differs from the majority of his contemporaries by refusing to succumb to idealised and romanticised notions of Africa, as found in the oral epic. In fact Ouologuem's theory is that Africans themselves had a history of violence and brutality that preceded colonisation, and by citing the epic he confronts the perception of the continent by challenging Africanist mythification of the past through his account of a history of domestic slavery and slave trade, as practised by Africans. The tendency to romanticise Africa's past is countered by Ouologuem's resurrection, not of heroes, but of villains of epic proportions. In the first paragraph of the novel, Ouologuem introduces his account of the history of the Nakem Empire by asking the reader to forget every preconception of Africa and its people, and to listen to his own, supposedly authentic, narrative which is riddled with dates, peoples and place names:

Un récit de l'aventure sanglante de la négraille – honte aux hommes de rien! – tiendrait aisément dans la première moitié de ce siècle; mais la véritable histoire des Nègres commence beaucoup beaucoup plus tôt avec les Saïfs en l'an 1202 de notre ère, dans l'Empire africain de Nakem, au Sud du Fezzan. (*Le devoir*, p. 9)

Thus Ouologuem responds to the need for a return to the past by subverting the social function of the epic through the reconstruction of a negative memory, an anti-epic. By doing this, he asks Africans to consider their identity not through an idealised mythical screen, but through a more realistic, if pessimistic, recollection of the past.

By moving away from the dominance of the aristocratic hero that is characteristic of the epic following the first two chapters of *Le devoir*, Ouologuem focuses instead on the slave as protagonist. At the same time, he maintains the

theme of the irreversibility of slave status at the crux of the novel as a parallel to the Amar Zoumbani episode in the Askia Mohammed epic. Like the epic of Askia Mohammed, Ouologuem's narrative illustrates the porosity of hierarchical boundaries and simultaneously dispels that notion by demonstrating the fragility of assimilation and therefore of belonging. He draws from the epic of Askia Mohammed, and more specifically, the theme of the irreversibility of slave status, which is common to both narratives, achieving this through the parallel between the lives of Raymond Kassoumi, son of the slave Kassoumi and adopted son of the ruling Saif, and the epic's Amar Zoumbani, son of Soumayla Kassa, chief of Gao, and a captive woman. In both texts the idea that incorporation can be substituted for freedom is explored. The moment in which Raymond understands that he will always be a slave of the Saif is strikingly similar to Amar Zoumbani's own realisation of the inevitability of slave status in the epic of Askia Mohammed. The griot recounts the exchange between father and son:

He came home to his father's house, he said to his father,
 So he is a captive.
 Soumayla Kassa said to him,
 'You are a captive
 Because when I married your mother, I did not buy her freedom.
 It is the captive of someone else that I married.
 It is also the captive who gave birth to you.
 If at least I had freed your mother –
 But to tell you the truth I didn't free her.
 Everything they tell you is true.' (Hale, p. 44)

In fact both *Le devoir* and Nouhou Malio's account of the epic of Askia Mohammed end on a similar note – the irreversibility of slave status for the educated slave and president-elect Kassoumi and the slave Prince Amar Zoumbani, respectively.

For Amar Zoumbani, the belated realisation that he is a slave occurs through a public revelation of the same by his supposed master, and a private confession by his father, the chief. His mistaken assumption that his incorporation via membership of the royal family equates with freedom, along with a persistent refusal to accept the irreversibility of his slave status because neither he nor his mother was ransomed from their original master, leads to a series of incidents which, according to the griot Malio, culminate in the fall of Gao and the entire Songhay Empire. Whilst Amar Zoumbani, the slave prince, is merely a minor character in the epic, his lineage and heroic deeds not being highlighted like the primary characters of the Songhay narrative, in *Le devoir*, the griot/narrator traces the life of Raymond Kassoumi from birth to the moment before he becomes the president of the Nakem nation. In Ouologuem's adaptation of the account of the Songhay Empire therefore, the slave is not a footnote to the epic. Instead, as the novel progresses, he becomes central to the plot, and Ouologuem's narrator recounts his life story as well as his desire to escape from a life of slavery, through education, marriage and the hope that he can return as the new ruler of his people. Raymond Kassoumi's education and status as an enlightened Nakemian, married to a French woman, lead him to believe that he is no longer a puppet of the Saif. Yet at the end of the novel, the narrator emphasizes Raymond Kassoumi's helplessness as the impending president of the newly independent Nakem nation:

Kassoumi, habile calculateur, avait mal calculé: fort de ses titres et de l'appui de la France, il s'était cru maître de l'ancien maître, alors même que seul le flambeau de Saïf, un instant assoupi pour mieux briller, plus rougeoyant que

jamais, garantissait à l'esclave l'acquisition des suffrages.
(*Le devoir*, p. 191)

In the face of the Saif's continued oppression, Raymond Kassoumi realises that he can never escape from his status as a slave of the Saif, and that all attempts to elevate his position have been futile. Like in Nouhou Malio's version of the Songhay epic, Ouologuem attributes the fate of the empire to the problem of slavery, specifically, the irreversibility of slave status.

Whilst Ouologuem tackles the crisis of representation by adapting the epic of Askia Mohammed to focus on the slave Raymond Kassoumi as a central character against the historical background of the Saif dynasty, Sow Fall differs in her technique. Using the form of the epic as a foundation, in terms of its orality, and its incorporation of prosaic narrative, poetry, and panegyric, she creates her own epic, the epic of Fouta Djallon. She intersperses this entirely fictive epic with the contemporary narrative of the novel, so that as the epic erupts onto contemporary life, the present is constantly challenged by the memory of the past. Sow Fall is also able to challenge the social memory which she herself creates, by disputing, through the figure of Naarou, the completeness of the oral epic as presented by Naani. Unlike Ouologuem whose central characters are based on the historical figures of the Songhay Empire, Sow Fall creates her own epic and therefore her own heroes. However, she illustrates through the initial version of the epic the marginalisation of the woman and the slave through omission. Sow Fall's invention of the epic of Fouta Jallon is therefore mirrored later in the novel by the slave Naarou, who upon discovering that her slave ancestor's lineage is largely absent from the epic as recounted by the griot Naani, decides to compose

an addition to the existing account in the form of a panegyric for Dioumana, the Almamy's wife as well as Warèle and Biti, her female slave ancestors. This is a deliberate compensatory act by which the epic is transformed through the inscription of the slave past onto the social memory, so that by the end of the novel, the fictional epic is transformed from a male-dominated account to one in which both the slave and the woman are the central figures.

In fact whilst previously the epic has only featured as a fragmented narrative within the structure of the novel, by the final section, Naarou's composition is presented to the reader as an uninterrupted passage of epic song which she sings whilst the other characters listen with rapt attention. Naarou first learns the epic under the griot Naani over a period of years and upon finding a gap in the representation of her slave lineage, she addresses their marginalisation through the composition of new music in their honour.

Une seule chose comptera: la nouvelle musique, plus dense qui émanera désormais de l'épopée lorsqu'entreront en scène 'Warèle de chez Thioro la Linguère' et 'Biti la petite-fille de Warèle de chez Thioro la Linguère.' Les longueurs par lesquelles le chant le désigne trouveront une nouvelle fonction: celle de prolonger le temps d'émerveillement et l'immense Bonheur de se sentir des liens concrets avec des personnages qui, jusque-là lui paraissaient réels mais si desincarnés. (*Le Jujubier*, p. 37)

Her intention is to highlight the significance of both her slave ancestors, Warèle and her granddaughter Biti, and their sacrificial role in assisting Yellimané, son of the Almamy and Dioumana, to find his exiled mother, and thus end the wars between Gueladio, father of Dioumana, and Almamy Sarébibí her husband. Although she does not depose Yellimané from his position as the hero of the epic, she creates an alternative rendition of the narrative which sees her ancestors as co-

heroines with Yellimané. Thus Florence Martin states that ‘l’épopée noble devient alors pré-texte au futur texte de Naarou: au sein du vieux chant patriarcal aristocratique, elle cherche les noms de ses aïeules afin de récupérer son histoire à elle, enfouie sous celle, “magistrale” à tous égards, de la dynastie de l’Almamy.’¹¹

Through Naarou, Sow Fall illustrates the need for the subaltern to respond to the dominant master narrative, by addressing the omission of her past through the techniques of invention and adaptation. In Naarou’s outrage at the marginalisation of her slave ancestors, and her subsequent response to perceived gaps within the epic, she retrospectively retrieves the silenced, in this case, female slave voice, so that it exists alongside that of the dominant master figure:

‘[...] Je descends de Warèle et de Biti qui ont joué un rôle déterminant dans l’épopée. C’est Naani en personne qui me l’a appris quand j’étais toute jeune. Je n’ai jamais pensé à une cloison entre Warèle, Biti, Sarebibi, Dioumana et les autres mais comme Mère me traite d’esclave, je revendique Warèle et Biti; je revendique leur part de l’heroïsme.’ (*Le Jujubier*, p. 89)

Martin calls this attempt ‘une démarche proche de celle des *womanists* américaines qui, elles aussi, se penchent sur les diverses reliques d’un passé opaque afin d’y trouver les mots et la musique qui leur servira à nommer et chanter leur propre mythe-histoire.’¹² It is worth noting here that this reflects Sow Fall’s own preoccupation with representing those on the margins of society who would ordinarily lack the means to speak for themselves – Asta, the jailed Senegalese immigrant in France (*Douceurs du bercail*), the beggars (*La grève des Bàttu*), and in *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, the female slave, Naarou. With Naarou,

¹¹ Florence Martin, ‘Échos et grains de voix dans *Le Jujubier du patriarche* d’Aminata Sow Fall’, in *The French Review*, 74 (2000), 296-307 (p. 300).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

the response is on two fronts. Firstly, by dedicating a praise song to Dioumana, she foregrounds the female voice, subverting the vilification within the epic of this elusive figure of the wife of the Almamy who disappears into the belly of a whale because of her husband's infidelity. Secondly, based on her understudying of Naani, the griot, Naarou addresses the notion of the epic as a construction of the socio-professional caste of griots to honour the socio-political elite, and therefore inadvertently marginalise the slave voice. She responds to this by reconstituting the epic through the invention of the account of her slave ancestors, so that it commemorates the central role played by these erstwhile forgotten characters in reuniting the warring Fulani factions.

Conclusion

The oral epic is an ethnotext that actively shapes the social memory of a group. Thus omission over time results in forgetting, in the same way as adaptation leads to a variation of the social memory, and invention creates an entirely fictive memory of the past. The deployment of the epic within the novel highlights its subjectivity as a curator of memory, the choice of remembering and omission being predominantly the prerogative of the omnipresent griot figure. Yet by using the same tools of adaptation and invention that are employed in the epic form, *Ouologuem* and *Sow Fall* are able to challenge its construction within the context of slavery. The function of the epic is the same, however, that of a social memory of the group, but a group in which the members claim the right to the retelling of their past within the epic, irrespective of status. Whilst the fictionalisation of

memory that is typical of the epic form is reflected in these entirely fictional works, it no longer serves as a tool for the politically-motivated white-washing of the account of heroes' lives. Instead fiction becomes the servant of the slave, and a means by which his/her account can be inscribed into the oral epic. The challenging of the epic by these authors, and their transformation of the epic, albeit in different ways, therefore addresses more acutely the questions raised in the West African epic about the position of the slave in society. By incorporating the epic form in their novels, both Ouologuem and Sow Fall affirm the role of social memory, specifically, oral memory, in the African novel tradition, whilst at the same time integrating their work into society as a different kind of contribution to a social memory of slavery.

It is important to return to the metaphor of the echo as highlighted in *Le Jujubier du patriarce*, what Sow Fall refers to as *l'echo du chant épique*. The idea of the epic song as an echo of the past which is repeated and relived through narrative is relevant to all three of the areas that we have considered –the past, the presentation of that past within the context of the group in the form of the oral epic, and the fictional representation of the oral epic within the novel. Like the echo which reverberates through time and space, the past, in its repetition, is subject to adaptation and omission. This can be through socio-political influences and the contemporary concerns of the group, as is seen in the oral epic form. Thus, in its repetition of the past, the oral epic becomes a subjective curator of memory, the griot choosing what to forget and what to recall, and indeed embellishing what is remembered. Following this, in their repetition of memory through the use of the oral epic in their novels, Ouologuem and Sow Fall

challenge the epic as an the echo of the past. Social memory is interrogated, omission is investigated, and the tools of adaptation and invention are once more employed, with the effect of transformation. Through this challenge, therefore, the omitted past, that is the slave past, is wrestled back into the public arena, and the slave voice is heard. Thus, both the oral epic, and the epic within the novel, are reverberations through time and space that constitute a variation on an original theme of the past, a memory that becomes altered once it is repeated, but still maintains its quality as an illusion of the past.

ENSLAVED BODIES

Chapter 3: Trauma and the slave body

Introduction

The institution of slavery and practices associated with the slave trade in Africa are often synonymous with shame and guilt-induced silence. This silence might be the result of a temporary repression of trauma, and can be seen as a precursor to verbal narrative, but it can also coexist with compulsive repetition and acting out through the body, that is to say, *corporeal* forms of remembering. These corporeal forms of remembering narrate a memory, in this case, the physical and/or psychological wound of slavery, through the body. The interaction of the body with societal power structures, and in particular, the marking of the body by the experience of trauma creates physical traces that relate to specific events occurring at a specific time. The visible wound gives way to the invisible and repressed psychological wound which then returns to the body, as it is expressed through the symbols and codes of a compulsive and repetitive corporeal narrative. Ricoeur discusses the effect of the past on the body, describing corporeal memory as the embodiment of one's past experiences:

Les mises à l'épreuve, les maladies, les blessures, les traumatismes du passé invitent la mémoire corporelle à se cibler sur des incidents précis qui font appel principalement à la mémoire secondaire, au ressouvenir, et invitent à en faire récit.¹

These physical traces represent and evoke a corporeal memory that may or may not require a re-telling of the original event so that where repression fosters the absence, temporary or permanent, of a verbal expression of memory, the body in

¹ Ricoeur, pp. 48-49.

its repetitive performative acts constitutes a narrative of that same repressed memory.

Cathy Caruth's description of the wound that cries out, based primarily on Freudian principles, is of a psychological trauma that arises from a physical attack on the body, a breaching of the external boundaries of the body. Her emphasis is on the unexpectedness and therefore the belated realisation of trauma. She highlights Freud's reference to the blood that streams from the wound inflicted by Tancred upon his lover Clorinda, in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. The wound cries out to Tancred from a tree as he unwittingly repeats the initial fatal wound to Clorinda. This tree in which Clorinda's soul and voice are imprisoned, is a verbal narrative as well as a corporeal embodiment of the trauma.

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved again.²

In the third chapter of *Beyond the pleasure principle* Freud states that neurotic patients who have experienced trauma have a compulsion to repeat the initial painful event, adding that such behaviour can also be seen in normal individuals. He however makes a clear distinction between the individual who actively recreates the past through a compulsion and usually because of a persistent character trait, and one who passively experiences a 'repetition of the same

² Freud, p. 16.

fatality' that is apparently beyond their own control.³ The latter relives the painful incident over and over again, and is merely a helpless victim of the repeated fatal action. The compulsion to repeat is therefore produced not only through Tancred's act in the forest, but also through Clorinda's reaction, in the form of the wound that bleeds and at the same time cries out to him. Not restricted to the subject who inflicts the trauma, the compulsion to repeat is also seen in the object, who repeatedly finds herself a passive victim of a recurring situation.

Where the slave voice exists on the margins of dominant discourse, and is therefore inaudible, it becomes necessary to seek alternative ways of understanding the experience of slavery. Here one thinks of Freud's reference to the blood that streams from the cut inflicted by Tancred, and how this visible weeping wound recalls the first trauma. Both Clorinda's soul, and by implication, the memory of the fatality, are imprisoned in the tree, and are only expressed upon Tancred's re-infliction of the wound. This silent imprisonment indicates a passing of time that is as significant as the moment in which Clorinda cries out and her voice is heard. The silence is a repression of the memory of the trauma that is broken simultaneously through the weeping wound, that is the wound that bleeds, and the voice of Clorinda that cries out from within the wound. If the voice is only released upon the infliction of the second wound, then it is important to consider how this might apply to novels that deal with breaking the stigmatic silence that surrounds the issue of slavery. The recounting of the past occurs through the same body which bears the marks of the past, so that the body itself constitutes a lived memory and the corporeal narrative, in the form of the wound, becomes

³ Freud, p. 16.

independent of or indeed simultaneous with a verbal retelling of the trauma. The body thus becomes the primary narrative of the memory of slavery as the slave body remembers and is remembered through physical traces that represent and evoke a corporeal memory of trauma. Through the wound, corporeal boundaries are breached from without via the attack on the body. Yet from within, the memory of trauma produces a psychosomatic reaction in which the body remembers the past through its re-enactment.

It is therefore only natural that the psyche returns to the site of the initial attack or wound that is the body, as the means by which trauma is compulsively repeated and expressed. In the case of first-generation slavery, where the master's ownership of the slave is often effectuated through the nakedness and dismemberment of the slave body, the identity of the slave is re-defined by the master through the breaching of the boundaries of the slave body. Thus the metaphor of trauma as a wound that breaches the boundaries of the body is extended to the loss of physical boundaries through nakedness, and in its most extreme form, dismemberment. Whilst the breaching and loss of corporeal boundaries indicate a narrative of slavery, the corporate repression of that narrative can also be seen through the positioning of the slave body within or indeed outside of society. By positioning the slave body outside of the boundaries of society, the slave is silenced in the corporate consciousness. Through the social exclusion of the slave body, the slave is forgotten. Yet the slave body revolts against repression by breaking through social boundaries in order to narrate both corporeally and verbally, the trauma of slavery. In this chapter, I will examine Ly's portrayal of the body in *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes*, with respect to the

notion of the physical wound as both symbol and symptom of slavery. I will then treat the nakedness and dismemberment of the slave as a result of the master's ownership, and the ways in which corporeal boundaries are lost and renegotiated by the slave. Finally, I will consider the theme of zombification with respect to the rejection and exclusion of the slave body in Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence*.

The weeping wound

Within the context of a narrative of slavery, it is essential to return to the concept of trauma as both a physiological wound and the subsequent psychological and corporeal manifestation of that wound, a concern which is central to Ibrahima Ly's 1988 novel, *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes*. Ly depicts slavery as an attack on the body, through capture and physical abuse that often precipitate the psychological wound which is manifested repeatedly in subsequent generations as a physical wound. *Les Noctuelles*, the second volume of which remained incomplete upon the Malian author's death in 1989, traces the impact of history, specifically the predatory nature of slavery and the slave trade, on the present. In *Les Noctuelles* and the author's notes for the second volume which were published posthumously in 1990, he attacks the culture of slavery across generations and highlights African agency in the slave trade. In addition to describing a relay system that takes into account the roles of black, moor and white traders in the slave trade, Ly tells the story of two characters who are preyed upon as a result of a system of overwhelming inequality in which they become pawns. The first character is Niélé, a mother of two, who is captured along with

her son and sold into slavery in the 19th century. The second is Niélé's granddaughter, Solo, who was never a victim of slavery because her mother did not accompany Niélé to the farm, but who several decades later, finds herself a victim of poverty, bereavement and descent-based discrimination.

Ly's emphasis is on seeing the wound as a symptom of the slave body. Within the novel, trauma, both psychological and corporeal, is represented by the metaphor of the wound. Ly pathologises the memory of slavery and represents it as a bleeding physical wound, depicting the slave body through deliberately scatological descriptions of the body and the excretion of bodily fluids such as saliva, mucus, blood and pus. For Niélé, slavery is experienced through the image of the wound which recurs in association with her character. Upon capture, her body is marked through branding and scarification on her forehead, to symbolise that she is a slave of her master Yigo. Closely associated with this physical marking of the body is her renaming by her master.

On l'appela Dayematchen, sobriquet qui signifiait que l'homme a été corrompu par la parole, et qui invitait l'esclave non au silence, mais au mutisme de la bête de somme.⁴

The significance of her new name is the imprisonment of the slave voice within the body, and the repression of the memory of the physical wound so that it cannot be expressed verbally by Niélé. This silence or inability to speak of the trauma of slavery is therefore countered by her body's manifestation of physical wounds which are not necessarily related to, and by far outlast her initial branding and scarification. Following her enslavement, therefore, Niélé's body repeats the

⁴ Ibrahima Ly, *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988), p. 29.

manifestation of the wound both as a symbol and a symptom of slavery. Shortly before her death, as she and her fellow slaves are herded towards the Atlantic coast, Niélé's body is described as exhibiting symptoms of enslavement in the form of the wound.

Chaque oeil de Niélé était une plaie; chacun de ses lèvres,
une tumeur. Sa bouche semblait un gouffre insondable,
rempli à ras-bord de ténèbres denses. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 89)

The wound represents the master's ownership of the body through the breaching of its boundaries. It symbolises the initial external attack on the body, repeating the memory of that trauma through a compulsive and unprovoked corporeal re-enactment of the initial symptom.

The image of the slave is therefore of putrid water flowing from the body, a corporeal wound that is weeping. Unlike Clorinda, this wound merely weeps, secreting fluid such as pus and blood, and is rarely accompanied by a verbal narrative of the original trauma. Yet in its weeping, the wound echoes the tears of the novel's title. This is not a crying out as in Clorinda's tree. Instead, the weeping wound provides a visual narrative of the memory of slavery that is viewed by other characters within the novel. If the distinction between knowing and not knowing is dependent on the voice that cries out upon the infliction of the second wound, then in Ly's work, the period of silence is one in which the memory of the trauma is withheld verbally, but can be manifested as effectively through the wounded body. Thus the notion of the wound equally represents both the original trauma and the memory of the trauma. Ly describes the enslaved Niélé with reference to the bloody pus that is concentrated all over her face.

La douleur, la détresse et un insondable lassitude marquaient profondément le visage de Niélé et formaient un pus sanguinolant qui s'était concentré dans les yeux, le nez, la bouche. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 30)

This description of the slave body as exhibiting a weeping wound is not restricted to Niélé. A fellow slave, Tokontan, is described in terms of bodily secretions, in particular, mucus, and bloody pus:

Son corps avait l'aspect rêche et craquelé d'un mur en torchis, crépi sans soins; comme une marmite à l'entretien douteux, son buste était parcouru de trainées blanchâtres: des stalagmites de morve rigide [...] Le visage était un enorme grailon où la bouche semblait un ulcère qui se replissait de pus sanguinolant et verdâtre, quand elle souriait. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 74)

It would appear that the trauma of slavery refers not merely to an initial physiological attack, but as its repetition is primarily unprovoked in terms of an external breaching of the body's boundaries, the wound itself manifests a repressed psychological trauma that originates from the attack on the body that is so painful it resists linguistic expression, yet compulsively manifests itself through bodily symptoms.

As well as the repression of trauma through silence, and its corporeal manifestation, one sees in Ly's work a belatedness of trauma in that it is only realised upon the infliction of a second wound. He juxtaposes the bodies of the two dominant female characters – Niélé the slave, and Solo, her granddaughter, the slave descendant – as both exhibiting corporeal symptoms of slavery. Yet as Solo has never experienced slavery, the source of her neurosis, in a sense, is first, the legacy of slavery as passed on to her by her grandmother, and her condition of

poverty, a second wound that causes her to re-enact aspects of her grandmother's enslavement. Regarding the belatedness of the realisation of trauma, Caruth states that the first wound is 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.'⁵ Whilst Niélé's repetition of the wound is a result of her enslavement, Solo's corporeal manifestation of slavery through the same symptoms that were exhibited by her grandmother, are somewhat unfounded. Through her we see the unconscious repetition of this physical manifestation of the memory of slavery even though she does not experience the physical trauma of enslavement. Since like Niélé, Solo is silent for most of the novel, the narrative of the memory of slavery is not verbal. Instead, it is the body of Solo that remembers:

Les larmes, la bave, la morve, et la sueur abondantes se perdaient dans le réseau inextricable de ses rides comme une pluie fine sur un terrain latéritique, fendillé de toutes parts. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 104)

Once more, we see the weeping wound, in the form of bodily secretions, as a doubly-deferred reaction to slavery and in particular the memory of Niélé's slave body. Solo's remembering is a psychosomatic reaction that recalls Niélé's slave body through the symptom. By exhibiting similar symptoms to her grandmother through the bodily fluids that are excreted in her seemingly inherited and diseased slave body, Solo herself epitomises the memory of slavery.

In *Les Noctuelles*, Ly constantly presents bodies besieged by slavery-related psychological and bodily trauma that is exhibited in the corporeal wound.

⁵ Caruth, p. 4.

For most of the novel, the reader is only witness to Solo as a wounded body that exhibits the effects of slavery as a result of her current state of poverty and alienation. Along with her grandmother, she roams the landscape of the novel as the silent embodiment of the wound of slavery. The notion that she has inherited and currently embodies the trauma of slavery through the memory of her grandmother is only verbalised much later on in the novel when she meets Haady the civil servant. Although he does not see the bodily secretions of the earlier descriptions of Solo, Haady's perception of her is of a dirty old calabash covered with holes, in essence, wounds:

Il leva la tête et fixa le visage immobile de Solo, qui semblait un bout de terre gratté dans tous les sens par une poule affamée en quête de grains introuvables. Pas une goutte de sang. Pas la moindre roupie. Nulle trace de larmes [...] Haady pensa à une vieille calebasse sale, fendillée et percée de trous noirs sur un fleuve boueux, en crue. Nul flot ne réussit à la submerger car tout eau qui l'envahit s'écoule aussitôt.⁶

His reference to the water that tries to invade the vessel and then merely flows from it recalls the weeping wound and the bloody pus that Ly has earlier described as emanating from the wounded body. While both Niélé and Solo have narrated the memory of slavery through their wounds and bodily excretions, Ly affirms through Haady the porosity of the slave body as viewed by the rest of society, as well as Solo's own perception of the effect of society's discrimination against her as a result of a corporeal memory of her grandmother's enslavement.

⁶ Ibrahima Ly, 'Extraits du brouillon du tome 2 des *Noctuelles*' in *Paroles pour un continent: la vie et l'oeuvre d'Ibrahima Ly* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), p. 20.

Ly extends the metaphor of the wound as a symbol and symptom of slavery, by drawing comparisons between slavery and poverty, in the sense that poverty and indebtedness can often lead to the enslavement of the poor by the wealthy. In this broader context therefore, the physical wound is a symptom of poverty, as well as the corporeal manifestation of the psychological fear of poverty as an incarnation of slavery, and the effect of the deeply entrenched system of slavery and corruption on African society, both of which apply to Solo. Ly depicts poverty as a modern-day reminder of slavery, in which the individual can be manipulated by the rich and powerful, as is the case with Solo who is duped by Yigo, the descendant of her grandmother's master, when having lost her home and family, she goes to seek his financial help. Earlier on in the novel, poverty is described through bodily symptoms with respect to a poor peasant who is on the verge of selling himself and his family into slavery. Faced with insurmountable debt and the prospect of enslavement to Yigo, Niélé's master, the poor peasant considers the difference between his state of poverty and the wealth of the slave master:

Le paysan pensa: 'Le corps de cet homme est comme un lit moelleux, dans lequel son âme s'ébat avec les caprices d'un petit prince; je suis, pour ma part, l'esclave de mon corps malade et dévoré de prurit; mes pauvres mains ne servent qu'à apaiser mes démangeaisons.' (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 26)

The peasant describes himself as a slave of his diseased body. Not unlike the slaves Niélé, Tokontan, and even Niélé's granddaughter Solo, his body is characterised by the wound, a sick body that exhibits the symptoms of his social condition. Thus the metaphor of the wound is also extended to disease, and

represents the trauma of slavery, the memory of that trauma and even the threat of slavery as a result of poverty.

Ly equates poverty, and the fear of it, with the threat of enslavement in the form of indebtedness to society's rich and powerful. He describes the memory of poverty in terms of disease. Through Manamanin, the judge's wife, he portrays poverty as the societal malady that makes the poor victims of society's inequalities, a transformation in slavery-related practices in which the poor are oppressed by the rich, and the weak by the strong. When Manamanin, now exceedingly wealthy, alludes to her fear of returning to her previous state of poverty, she speaks of the unnatural excretion of various bodily fluids from different parts of her body:

‘De l'eau me coule abondamment dessous [...]’ Manamanin se voyait déjà les doigts et les orteils amputés, les yeux chassieux et purulents, toujours grands ouverts, la bouche de guingois, le nez encombré d'une pituité dense qui pend, putride, tel le vers de guinea, d'une jambe tuméfiée. (*Les Noctuelles*, pp. 157-158)

Her pharmacist diagnoses her illness as a disease of the poor, ‘une maladie qui, comme la méningite et la lèpre, s'attaque plutôt aux pauvres’, and he prescribes a more luxurious lifestyle as the antidote.⁷ Although Manamanin has left a life of poverty through her marriage to the judge, her body still exhibits a memory of poverty as characterised by the symptom of the wound. Later on in the novel Manamanin's husband will remember her in her former state of poverty, one that was typified by the excretion of bodily fluids such as sweat and mucus, an image that recurs in both of Ly's dominant female characters.

⁷ ‘Extraits du brouillon du tome 2 des *Noctuelles*’, p. 158.

Nakedness and Dismemberment

Having examined the nature of the wound as a representation of the trauma of slavery, we turn now to the cycle of dismemberment and remembering in *Les Noctuelles* where slavery is experienced and expressed through the physical difference of the slave body, its isolation after capture, and its subsequent dismemberment. The master's ownership of the slave is effectuated through the stripping, branding and dismemberment of the slave body. The body therefore remembers and is remembered through these marks, as they constitute a memory of slavery that is repeated across generations. Ly uses dismemberment as a metaphor for the fracture caused by the trauma of slavery, and the rupture with identity and home. Whilst the wound is a corporeal exhibition of the porosity of the corporeal boundary as a reaction to the threat to life both from within and without, nakedness and dismemberment, as symbolic of slave status, indicate a complete loss of corporeal boundaries as a result of the master/slave relationship. Through the wound, Ly explores a corporeality that exceeds containment, yet through nakedness and dismemberment the slave subject is both threatened and overwhelmed by the master as corporeal boundaries are shifted, and indeed cease to exist. The slave body is therefore constantly in flux, threatened from within and without, its boundaries permeated and redefined by the master. Yet in its state of flux, it attempts to redefine itself by appropriating corporeal boundaries through dress. Thus animalistic nakedness seeks to be tamed and covered, and dismemberment gives way to re-membering, through dressing.

The distinction is made in *Les Noctuelles* between the dress of white and Moorish slave traders, and that of their African counterparts. Whereas Europeans

and Moors are dressed simply, the black traders are shown wearing layers upon layers of clothing and jewellery in an attempt to dissociate themselves from the nakedness and therefore the bestiality of their merchandise. Slaves are likened to animals because of their nakedness and their inability to change their clothes:

L'homme ne pouvait être que ce qu'il portait. Les vaches, les lions, les ânes et les panthères naissent et meurent avec leur robe. L'homme seul peut s'élever en variant à l'infini ce qu'il porte. Le moins homme était donc celui qui était démuné, nu. (*Les Noctuelles*, p.53)

Humanity is inextricably linked with dress, and the ability to define the self through clothing. The naked man, in essence the slave, is on the lowest echelon of the human scale, and is equal to an animal. Notions of nakedness and bestiality are therefore closely associated with slave and slave descendant status, with Niélé often being portrayed as naked or scantily clad, wearing nothing more than a simple *pagne*. When she arrives at the home of her master Yigo, she is stripped, and initiated into her new position through a symbolic baptism and renaming:

Comme si elle venait de naître, elle fut baptisée et privée de tout habit. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 29)

The nakedness of the slave body represents a stripping away of identity and notions of the self by the master. When she is stripped of her clothes, Niélé loses her identity, and is deprived of the protection once provided by her clothing, that boundary that defines the space which is occupied by the body.

This loss of corporeal boundaries through the stripping away of clothing recurs in the novel through Niélé's nakedness. It indicates a loss of identity, a form of forgetting in which past freedom gives way to captivity, and identity is

replaced by the anonymity of slavery. If forgetting is associated with the stripping away of clothing as a product of enslavement, then to remember is to re-clothe the body and thus rediscover identity through dressing. However, Niélé is never able to achieve this, only being barely clad in a *pagne* at the height of the cold harmattan season. A similar motif is seen in her granddaughter Solo's inability to adequately clothe herself. Unlike her grandmother, Solo is never depicted as naked. However she discovers belatedly, and only upon entering the house of Yigo, a descendant of her mother's slave master, that her clothing is torn, and that she is not wearing any shoes:

Elle s'aperçut que son boubou délavé avait une poche. Elle sursauta, se leva brusquement, les deux mains plaquées sur la poitrine, tourna la tête d'un côté puis de l'autre, comme un lièvre traqué, et d'un mouvement qui lui semblait familier, jouant des épaules et des mains, fit passer la poche en derrière [...] Elle ne pouvait se pardonner de s'être si grossièrement trompée de boubou.
(*Les Noctuelles*, p. 122)

The inability to fully clothe herself is reminiscent of her grandmother's nakedness, the stripping away of identity and the loss of corporeal boundaries. Whereas nakedness is a part of the experience of slavery for Niélé, for Solo, the absence of adequate clothing forms the belated realisation of the trauma of slavery, in essence, a memory that is activated in this manner when she is confronted with a tangible reminder of her grandmother's enslavement in the person of Yigo. All attempts to dress, that is both to clothe and tame what Solo and other characters view as a defective body prove futile, as her clothing remains torn and inadequate.

The most extreme form of the loss of corporeal boundaries is the dismembering of the slave by the master, as witnessed in the castration of Niélé's

son, and Niélé's own dismemberment by wild animals because of her rebellion against Yigo, her master. The fear of dismemberment as a form of punishment poses a very real threat to the slave body, and this is seen in the sense of disintegration that Niélé feels within her body. Before her capture, Niélé is described in terms of her body, as a physically attractive woman.⁸ However on becoming a slave, her body undergoes a transformation and her slave status is depicted through malnourishment, isolation and physical suffering. She feels that her limbs are separated from her body and have become pestles that crush her soul within the mortar that is her body. Her body no longer seems to be under her control, and she demonstrates corporeally the helplessness of her situation:

Son buste maigre et sec semblait un mortier dans lequel de gros pilons, les bras et les jambes écrasaient l'essence, la dignité, la spécificité. Niélé était devenue méconnaissable.

(*Les Noctuelles*, p. 30)

The sensation of dismemberment here prefigures a literal dismemberment by wild animals when Niélé is abandoned in the desert as a punishment for her resistance to being traded across the Atlantic. Subsequently, Niélé's granddaughter, Solo, experiences a sense of dismemberment in her own body. She is ill at ease with her body, and it seems in fact that as in her grandmother's case, her body works against her:

Ses seins, longs et flasques, mains pesantes du destin lui giflaient à chaque pas. 'Oui, pensait-elle, son corps maudit ne lui avait pas porté Bonheur [...] La malédiction pourchassait sa famille depuis ce jour où sa grande-mère, Niélé fut "poignée" et vendue.' (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 104)

⁸ *Les Noctuelles*, p. 12.

Solo believes that her body is cursed, a curse that is initiated at the point of her grandmother's capture. Through her body she re-enacts her grandmother's physical experience of dismemberment through the feeling that her body fights against her. The memory is therefore of slavery as a curse upon the body, one that continues to follow her family.

Niélé's resistance to her master, and her consequent dismemberment by wild animals both signal a crucial axis in Ly's representation of the memory of trauma, as her dismembered remains continue to have an impact on her granddaughter Solo's body and her position in society. Niélé's is a dismembered body that is remembered by Solo's own body. The trauma of the inherited and corporeal memory of slavery manifests itself in the threat to life, as Niélé's wounded and dismembered corpse evokes a similar bodily reaction in Solo. Although Niélé's body is buried along the desert highway, it is omnipresent in Solo in that it provokes a psychosomatic reaction that incorporates the threat of dismemberment as a precursor to death. This memory of slavery as the nakedness and dismemberment of the slave thus manifests as both psychological and physiological trauma in Solo's character. She is haunted by a dream in which, like her grandmother, her own body is dismembered:

Un bourreau dont on ne voyait que le bras et l'enorme coutelas qu'il tenait, s'approcha de Solo aboulique, l'égorgea et la débita en morceaux. De petits génies blancs, qui participaient à la reunion, accoururent et s'abreuvèrent du sang qui jaillissait de tous les côtés [...] Curieusement, Solo, découpée en morceaux, restait vivante: son âme discernait tout. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 108)

By reproducing physical attributes of Niélé's slave body in her granddaughter, Ly evokes a psychosomatic memory of slavery, using the body as a medium for the

trans-generational transmission of what he sees as a contagious memory of trauma, one that is vested with the emotional, psychological and in this case the malady of the initial trauma. Physical dismemberment is accompanied by a psychological manifestation of this menace, in which the character feels the threat of fracture and rupture within the body.

Possessing the slave body

Whilst in *Les Noctuelles*, Ly deals primarily with the breaching of the slave body through the wound and the loss of boundaries through nakedness and dismemberment, Ouologuem's work focuses more on the position of the slave in society. In his work, he combines the notion of slavery as social death with the expulsion of the slave body outside of the boundaries of society within the context of the illicit slave trade after abolition. He achieves this through the phenomenon of the zombie, which will be treated in this section. Whilst the zombie phenomenon is relevant in a contemporary context as the memory of forced labour is evoked by the present-day exploitation of the poor by the rich, in his text, Ouologuem uses the zombification of the human body to represent various forms of enslavement that take place during the colonial era, such as domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade. The domestic trade is merged with the Arab export trade, and forced labour is portrayed as a reincarnation of the trade in slaves that occurred prior to abolition. In Ouologuem's account of the pre-colonial period, the Saif's razzias, wars and the traffic in humans are frequently described. However, post abolition and with the advent of colonisation, the narrator

highlights the nominal transformation in slavery-related practices through the purported change from slave-holding to serfdom. Slavery is supposedly abolished; yet, all of the citizens of Nakem remain serfs of the Saïf, still performing slave-like duties.

Les mêmes notables promirent à ces mêmes sujets qu'après...
hem... un... hem un petit 'apprentissage' aux travaux forcés, ils
obtiendraient en récompense les Droits de l'homme [...] Mention ne
fut pas faite de ceux du citoyen. (*Le devoir*, p. 28)

The inhabitants of the empire are all serfs of the Saïf, while at the same time an illicit slave trade continues to flourish, albeit clandestinely within the kingdom. Slaves are traded across the sub-region by the Saïf and his men for the purpose of forced labour and export to the Arab world. These slaves are Nakem's living dead. Buried alive by Saïf's men, their bodies are in a sense divested of their souls, as their will is forced into submission through the use of drugs. These slaves are reduced to soulless bodies, Nakem's living dead who are destined for onward sale within the sub-region and across the Sahara into the Mediterranean. These bodies do not exist outside of their corporeality, and the zombies are therefore a symbol of the objectification and commodification that is typical of the slave trade, a theme which *Ouologuem* explores within the novel.

The theme of zombification illustrates the commodification and alienation of the slave body by the master within the context of absolute possession and the societal repression of the trade. Drugged by their masters in order to maintain a loss of their cognitive capacity, and therefore keep them enslaved, the victims of this practice of zombification illustrate the objectification of the body through the divestment of the soul, and alienation through separation from their society as

implemented by the Saïf and his men. These slaves exist on the margins of society. In Nakem, and within the text itself, knowledge of the illicit slave trade is repressed, and it is only brought to the foreground on three occasions – through the accounts by Sankolo, Bourémi and Abbé Henry's congregants – all of which are met with the silencing of the relevant witnesses by the Saïf. The first occurs when the zombification of slaves is reported to the priest Abbé Henry by his Nakemian congregants:

[...] Ses acolytes, caressant la *Sainte Bible* par laquelle ils juraient, révélèrent à Henry que Doumbouya, négrier soudanien, ne se contentait pas seulement de pratiquer le servage – fait social observé dans tout le Nakem – mais encore, droguant la négraille des cercles reculés, l'acheminait sur les pays côtiers, d'où il la vendait, abêtie et sans défense au trafiquants arabes et aux 'pèlerins' en partance pour La Mecque. (*Le devoir*, p. 82)

Doumbouya drugs the slaves, selling them to Arab traffickers, and arranging their transport to Mecca for supposed pilgrimages from which they never return. The knowledge of the existence of these zombies is merely a whisper between Abbé Henry and his congregants and after Saïf's men murder Doumbouya, the priest is no longer able to corroborate the account.

Similarly, on the occasion that the account of the zombification of these slaves is publicised by Bourémi the witch doctor, it is dismissed by all as the ranting of a mad man. The drug used by the Saïf and his men to control the slaves causes what Bourémi describes as a loss of the soul, in essence, a loss of a narrative capacity. The victims of this attack on the body through the dabali drug are subject to a loss of control of the mind and an inability to express themselves coherently. As Bourémi is drugged in order to invalidate his account of the Saïf's involvement in the trade, he is seen as a mad man whose testimony cannot be

taken seriously. He roams the streets of Nakem decrying the Saïf's involvement in the zombification of Nakemians for forced labour and export. His perceived insanity is further complicated by the effect of the dabali drug. As a result of this madness, Bourémi describes his state as no longer human. He is ghostlike, merely a shadow of himself. Like the zombie slaves for whom he speaks out, Bourémi has ceased to exist:

‘Dès que ma folie paraît, criait Bourémi, je ne suis plus homme, je suis être imaginaire. L'être du diable, c'est de n'être pas. S'il existait, ce ne serait qu'un pauvre diable... Ce qui rend un homme diabolique, c'est le fait qu'il ait perdu son âme.’ (*Le devoir*, p. 96)

Later in the novel, Sankolo, one of the zombie slaves, attempts to narrate his experience of slavery in an extended and disjointed speech. He describes it as characterised by hallucinations and madness as a result of the drugs which are mixed into the slaves' meals. The basic need for food is manipulated in order to maintain his state of slavery, and Sankolo illustrates through addiction the attack that slavery poses to both mind and body, and likewise, the control exerted over the slave by the master:

Il faut que je marche. Les fruits sauvages me rappellent la verdure, la verdure me parle de l'eau, l'eau assoiffe ma soif. Je boirai tout à l'heure. Il faut que je marche. Autant que l'eau, ce que veut mon corps, c'est mon mil drogué, mon calmant à moi. Le Sud. Je dois obéir. (*Le devoir*, p. 120)

Through zombification, Ouologuem portrays slavery and the slave trade as the commodification of the body via its objectification and possession by the master. However the notion of possession in *Le devoir* extends beyond ownership by the master in which the slave is an object that can be consumed in exchange for

wealth. It refers also to a form of spiritual possession in which the slave's will is taken over by the master, and the slave is exploited for his/her labour. According to Elizabeth Isichei, Ouologuem's treatment of slavery as a form of zombification has its roots in witchcraft practices of West Africa, specifically Cameroun, that reflect the effect of socio-economic change on ritual beliefs through the remembering of enslavement as the threat of zombification within a spiritual context. She states that the practice of snatching bodies, dead or alive for labour is a recurrent motif in popular culture emphasizing the fact that the abolition of slavery occurred in 1848 and so the practice of ekong witchcraft is probably based on forced labour during the colonial era and subsequently by African entrepreneurs.⁹ These slaves or ekong (Douala for zombie), are sacrificed by an *ekoneur*, 'a male sorcerer who enslaves the dead and puts them to work on plantations on Mount Kupe, the magic mountain which is also a real landmark, sixty miles north of Douala.'¹⁰ These ekoneurs, often relatives of their victims, are thought to be a secret society of chiefs and merchants who use their captors' bodies for their economic benefit. Isichei highlights the control of the will and indeed of the body through zombification, as well as the alienation of the slaves who are separated from society and put to work on the plantations of Mount Kupe. The zombie is therefore a metaphor for power relations, specifically, exploitation by the chief or master, as experienced through the objectified slave body. Although the practice of Vodun is highlighted in Sankolo's speech through the reference to Saïf's idol, it is the dabali drug that constitutes the primary instrument of control, and therefore the attack on the body, as Sankolo, having

⁹ Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *Voices of the Poor in Africa: Moral Economy and the Popular Imagination* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), p. 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

been buried alive by Saïf's men, is traded into slavery outside of Nakem, and continuously drugged in order to maintain him in a state of slavery.

... Il avait été enterré vivant, puis exhumé de son tombeau, drogué ensuite et expédié à l'Est, travailler pour le compte d'un *Flencessi*... lequel, l'éduquant à force femmes et drogues, le fit passer pour mort, le renvoyant au Sud, chez Tall Idris, ami de Saïf, auquel Tall, en échange, enverrait ses *mort-vivants*. (*Le devoir*, p. 114)

Claude Meillasoux, in *The Anthropology of Slavery*, develops the notion of the alienation of the slave and his dependency on his master in stages which he describes as desocialisation, depersonalisation, desexualisation and decivilisation, three of which are relevant to the theme of zombies. Meillasoux describes the slave's loss of social ties and a state of social death (desocialisation), the commodification of the slave and the establishment of fictitious kinship links to his captor, purchaser or master (depersonalisation), and the slave's dependence on his master to establish his link to society (decivilisation).¹¹ Through the theme of zombification, Ouologuem highlights the desocialisation of the slave through death, his depersonalisation through the commodification of his body, and his decivilisation through the dependence on the dabali drug as provided by the master. In *Le devoir*, the state of social death is one of rupture, displacement and marginality, the zombie being 'a metaphor for alienation as well as exploitation'.¹² It also refers to the simulation of death in which society sees the victims of zombification as dead, ceasing to exist. Unlike Bourémi, Sankolo struggles to accept his death, and reports meeting a fellow slave on the outskirts of the town who explains the concept of social death to him:

¹¹ Meillasoux, pp. 106-113.

¹² Isichei, p. 107.

‘Tu es mort, ne comprends-tu pas? Tu vas travailler au Sud pendant deux ans. Deux ans et trois mois. Pendant le recensement et les descentes de police on t’enverra à l’Est. Tu seras si bien drogué que tu ne pourras répondre, avec des allures de bête tu hurleras, tes yeux agrandis voudront des femmes, et les gens te fuiront.’ (*Le devoir*, p. 125)

Dead to the societies from which they originate, and unknown to their host societies, Sankolo and his fellow zombies are therefore alienated through a form of death, albeit staged. The corpse which is, in this context, the *undead* slave, is cast out of the boundaries of society, and only exists on the periphery. Through the rejection of the zombie or slave body because of the fear which it incites, society separates itself from the death of slavery, choosing to completely silence the knowledge of the illicit trade in slaves, as both Bourémi and Sankolo are killed by the Saïf.

Conclusion

In *Les Noctuelles*, the memory of slavery is a combination of a subconscious evocation through an omnipresent memory of trauma, and a re-telling as expressed through the physical narrative of the body. The body’s interaction with power structures and hierarchy within society is shown through the physical wound, nakedness, the threat of dismemberment, and the attempt to remember the body through clothing. However equally significant is the transmission of these physical traces and their subsequent manifestation as a memory of trauma. Where the narrative of slavery is not verbalised and only occurs as an internal monologue, the body serves as an external representation of that memory, so that by the end of the novel, the corporeal trauma that is exhibited in the two dominant

female characters serves as a narrative in itself of the memory of slavery. Ly's construction of a narrative of slavery is one that is not dependent on the audibility of an often silent slave voice, but relies instead on the existence of the inherited slave body through whose physical presence he is able to challenge the predatory nature of the slave trade.

Within both novels, the body is represented as a border which is constantly being breached and renegotiated. In *Le devoir*, the slave is a zombie, existing outside the boundaries of society, a corpse that is expelled from the corporate consciousness. Yet like the slave bodies explored in Ly's work, it seeks to reinsert itself into society, to affirm itself in spite of its enslavement. Both Ly and Ouologuem deal with the threat of the corpse to the living. In *Les Noctuelles*, Niélé's dismembered body is a memory that recalls death within her granddaughter Solo because she is essentially a slave descendant. Although there is no physical harm to Solo's body because of slavery, the threat of slavery emanates from within in the form of an imagined memory of her grandmother Niélé. In *Le devoir*, the corpse or zombie escapes rejection on the periphery, and violently intrudes upon public consciousness, thus permeating the boundaries of society. In each of these novels, corporeal boundaries are permeated, and renegotiated. Life eschews death, only to identify with it. The slave body is dead, an object to be consumed, rejected and expelled. Yet it affirms life through the negotiation of corporeal and societal boundaries in which it seeks to be recalled from the periphery to the centre.

Chapter 4: Reproducing the slave body

Introduction

Gender in the contemporary African novel is often approached from the perspective of the emergence of female writers as the authentic voice of a hitherto peripheral subject. Often autobiographical in nature, as in the works of Ken Bugul and Mariama Bâ, these novels address and challenge African society's definition of woman, or more specifically, the roles which are assigned to her by society through binary oppositions such as victimhood and agency, voice and silence, within the context of the social constructs which often characterise the female existence, such as sexuality, marriage and motherhood.¹ With respect to novels on slavery and the slave trade in Francophone West Africa, the contribution of female writers is minimal, as noted from my treatment of the work of a single female author, Aminata Sow Fall in the second chapter. However, the works of their male counterparts reflect a hierarchy in which the female slave is distinguished not only by socio-cultural difference, as are male slaves, but also by physiological difference. Paradoxically, it is this further marginalisation within society that makes the female slave central to a discourse on slavery. In the majority of these novels therefore, the female character is central, precisely in a gendered role, as slave/woman/wife, slave/woman/mother, and slave/woman/prostitute.

Significantly, the sexual difference of the female slave extends to her capacity

to bear and raise children. Her confinement to the role of slave/mother is seen in the figure of Tambira in Ouologuem's work, yet Ly's novel *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes* depicts the inability or indeed the unwillingness to bear children as a result of the trauma of slavery as portrayed through the separation from family and the loss of children. The transmission of a memory of trauma occurs horizontally and across generations in various contexts, ranging from the individual and familial to the collective and official. Here I would like to focus on a corporeal narrative of trauma as specific to the female body. In addition to the notion of the repetitiveness of trauma which I will consider in relation to the corporeal manifestation of the slave past within the female body, Caruth's notion of the belatedness of trauma as mentioned in Chapter 3 is as relevant to the transmission of memory between generations as a belated remembering of the trauma of slavery. This Hirschian postmemory which is in essence a deferred realisation of trauma through its repetition not only in the originally enslaved, but in subsequent generations, is crucial to the representation of the female body. The focus in this chapter will therefore be the familial, specifically the transmission of the trauma of slavery across generations especially as it applies to the reproductive capacity of the female body.

This chapter will look at the treatment of women by Francophone West African male authors such as Yambo Ouologuem, Ibrahima Ly, Timité Bassori and Ali Zada, with specific reference to the female body within the context of slavery and

¹ Obioma Nnaemeka, 'Introduction: Imag(in)ing knowledge, power and subversion in the margins' in *The politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Obioma Nnaemeka (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.1-25 (pp. 1-6).

the slave trade. Through the relationship with the husband/master within a patriarchal society, for example, marriage is viewed not merely as confinement, but as a form of enslavement, exploring the nuances of slave/master relationships. Whilst marriage and miscegenation provide an opportunity for the female slave/wife to free her lineage through the association with the master, I examine here the complexities of such relationships with respect to identity and freedom in the Ivorian Bassori's *Grelots d'Or*. In his telling of domestic slavery and trans-Saharan slave trade in West Africa, Malian Ouologuem's *Le devoir* provides a graphic and unrelenting interpretation of power relations between master and female slave as played out in the sexual arena. The violence of the novel's title is as pervasive as it is perverted, and the woman is the corporeal site upon which these actions are carried out. By questioning Ouologuem's use of sex and violence, within the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts, during which slavery, servitude and the slave trade persist, I hope to highlight the inescapability of violence in the association between sex and power. The final aspect to be considered in this chapter will be the role of the female slave as mother. Through the work of another Malian author, Ibrahima Ly (*Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes*) and Nigerien Ali Zada (*La marche de l'esclave*), I will interrogate the powerlessness brought about by the objectification of the woman through slavery, and its effect on her capacity to produce children, as well as the transmission of that trauma to descendants of female slaves.

Marriage and Miscegenation

In the first chapter, I referred to the case of Amar Zoumbani, the slave-prince of the Songhay epic as typical of slave/master relationships in which the offspring of such unions may receive a formal change in status, subject to the redemption of the mother by the free father. The opportunity to obtain freedom for offspring through the relationship between a free man and his female slave is complicated by legal ownership rights. Whilst marriage and miscegenation in theory might provide an avenue to freedom for both the female slave and her offspring, both show the woman as one who is still enslaved. Thus slavery for the woman is seen not only in terms of ownership by the master, but also as overlapping the marriage relationship between a man and his wife. The trope of marriage as the confinement of the woman to a role defined by society which entails submission to the husband and the production of children is synonymous with her enslavement by her master/husband. In fact, in Bassori's rendering, marriage becomes intertwined with a fictive father-daughter relationship, which is at the same time a master-slave relationship. Timité Bassori's novel, *Grelots d'Or*, recounts the relationship between the female slave, Grelots d'Or, and her various masters, within the context of a Muslim state between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, as one of kinship. Better known as the director of Ivory Coast's first fiction film, *La femme au couteau* (1969) and the short film, *Sur la dune de la solitude* (1964), Bassori in his 1983 novel presents the slave trader as father, and the slave master as husband, highlighting the complexity of the association of slavery with fictive kinship and marriage.

Grelots d'Or, the principal character of the eponymous novel, is rescued from a raid on her village by a stranger, the Fulani warrior, Samba. Samba saves Grelots from her village which has been pillaged by raiders fleeing the colonial army. In following him, she is spared the death and destruction that has befallen her fellow villagers, but as a result, she owes her life to Samba, whom she describes as 'le seul être au monde qui pouvait prétendre à un droit de paternité sur moi.'² In her old age, decades later, Grelots is confined to her bedroom in a state of paralysis, as she recalls her past, as a slave/daughter, slave/wife, and a slave/mother. It is this remembering of the past that forms the primary narrative of the novel. After her rescue, Grelots is passed on to successive owners by her father/master, Samba. First he gives her to the service of an old lady who Grelots refers to as her grandmother. He subsequently sells her on to a rich noble man. When the rich noble falls on hard times, he is forced to place a member of his family in the home of one of his creditors as a guarantee that he will repay his debts. He chooses Grelots who sees this as an indication of her value as a member of his family:

'Cet acte constituait une reconnaissance de dette et une garantie; car la valeur la plus sûre est l'homme, et personne n'oserait abandonner *un membre de sa famille* placé en caution chez un créancier. On est tenu d'honorer sa dette et de reprendre *son enfant* qui risque d'être vendu comme esclave. [...] La femme du créancier chez qui je vivais, me prit en sympathie et me traita comme *sa propre fille*.' (Grelots d'Or, pp. 76-77) [my emphasis]

Although she has been passed from the hands of Samba to various other owners, Grelots refers to Samba and the creditor in whose home she is placed in familial

² Timité Bassori, *Grelots d'Or* (Abidjan: CEDA, 1983), p.35.

terms. Furthermore, here, she portrays her relationship with the rich noble as a bond between father and daughter, thus idealising slavery as fictive kinship in which the slave is a part of the master's family, a view that will later on in the novel be disputed by Grelots herself.

The theory outlined by Miers and Kopytoff, in which they 'see the roots of these servile institutions in the need for wives and children, the wish to enlarge one's kin group and the desire to have clients, dependents, servants and retainers' is illustrated in Bassori's novel primarily from the position of the master.³ This is perhaps the perspective from which Miers and Kopytoff define slavery positing freedom as an entirely Western construct for which the African equivalent is incorporation where the slave, in this case Grelots, moves from an initial position of marginality to one of belonging in the master's family and the host society. Thus relationships that replicate familial ties are evoked even though there is no biological bond between such persons. The rich noble who significantly is never named, addresses Grelots as 'ma fille' and she recalls her sale to him as an adoption in which he welcomes her into his family:

Je me rappelle qu'il me dit 'Viens! tu fais partie de ma famille à compter de ce jour.' [...] C'est ainsi que je vins grossir la suite du Riche Notable. Je n'avais pas les mains liées, mes pieds n'étaient pas entravés; comme une personne libre, je suivais le cortège.
(*Grelots d'Or*, p.61)

Although Grelots emphasizes the condition of her purchase, one in which she is not

bound like other slaves, and is in fact recognised as a member of the master's family, her adoption by her master does not equate with freedom. The rich noble purchases Grelots for the purpose of a future marriage. She naively idolises him, as master/father/husband-to-be, until the actual moment in which she is to be married to him:

Mon admiration grandissait chaque jour pour lui, car, il représentait tout pour moi: père, maître, fiancé, et prophète. Il incarnait, à mes yeux, l'image de la sainteté, de la puissance, et de la beauté.
(*Grelots d'Or*, p. 79)

As in her relationship with Samba where she is slave/daughter, the duality of this relationship between the rich noble and Grelots, the slave/wife is evident. Yet the marriage to her master means a further level of incorporation for Grelots, one which would free her children from the burden of slavery.

The moment at which Grelots is to be married, however, forms a crucial change in her perception of the relationship between herself and her master. Where before she had idealised incorporation into her master's family through fictive kinship and the prospect of marriage, her indignation at being asked to take on the rich noble's surname, upon her marriage to him, indicates a deeper loss at the relinquishing of her identity. This is the moment at which Grelots realises the totality of the affront of slavery:

Ce changement d'identité m'était insupportable. Si j'avais subi mon

³ Suzanne Miers & Igor Kopytoff 'African "Slavery" as an institution of marginality' in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological perspectives*, ed. by Suzanne Miers & Igor Kopytoff (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), pp. 3-82 (p. 35).

esclavage avec resignation, je ne pouvais pas accepter qu'on me 'chosifie', qu'on m'animalise. Ce nom qu'on me collait comme une étiquette de produit manufacturé, je n'en voulais pas. Celui que je tenais de mes parents était la seule chose au monde qui préservait encore ma dignité humaine. Il était la preuve irréfutable du geste illicite de mes agresseurs qui m'avait imposé ma condition d'esclave par la force bien qu'issue d'une communauté d'hommes libres. (*Grelots d'Or*, pp. 86-87)

For Grelots, her name represents identity, family, lineage, and the fact that she was born free. It is as if she must sacrifice her identity and relinquish the memory of her parents and her home in order to receive a level of informal freedom or incorporation through marriage. As a result, for the first time Grelots sees herself as an object, an animal, and a slave who has been wronged by her captor Samba and her subsequent masters. The idealisation of slavery through the association with fictive kinship is replaced by Grelots' mourning of her identity, when faced with the inescapability of her position as a slave. In fact it appears that she would rather remain a slave and maintain her identity than absolve her transgressors by taking on the name of her master and husband. Where marriage should equate with freedom, it instead emphasizes a complicity with the figure of the master and a further level of enslavement of which the woman is a victim.

Grelots' belated realisation of her objectification is epitomised by her bearing her master's name, thus consenting to his ownership of her person. Although she rejects the master's name initially, her resistance is merely internal as she does marry the rich noble, and goes on to bear children for him. Yet her powerlessness to openly resist what she describes as objectification is depicted in the novel through the theme of paralysis, a motif which had earlier been employed by Bassori in his film, *La*

femme au couteau. This film, about an Ivorian student who returns from Paris and is paralysed when confronted with recurring visions of a woman holding a knife, explores the theme of paralysis with respect to the repression of the trauma of a strict upbringing by the principal character's mother. In *Grelots d'Or*, it is the trauma of slavery and the subsequent resurfacing of its memory which is associated with the sense of powerlessness as depicted in the physical manifestation of paralysis. Grelots likens the loss of control over her body to the earlier-mentioned objectification of slavery in which she is no longer a person, but an object:

À maintes reprises, en s'agrippant au montant du lit, elle a essayé de se lever, de marcher en s'accrochant au mur, mais elle s'est retrouvée par terre avec des douleurs. [...] Elle est devenue une étrangère au coeur de sa progéniture. Il n'y a pas pire que cet isolement pour une mère. Elle ressemble à peine à un être humain; elle se 'chosifie' de jour en jour, se dessèche comme un arbre.
(*Grelots d'Or*, p.17)

She associates her paralysis and the resulting confinement to her room with the isolation from her children, all of which force her to recall her former free status and her subsequent enslavement. Having sacrificed her identity in exchange for a level of incorporation for herself, and freedom for her children, Grelots is liberated from the yoke of both marriage and slavery upon her husband's death. However physically, she is left with the feeling of powerlessness that was symptomatic of slavery and marriage. She is free, yet still bound by the memory of her slave past. Where during her enslavement Grelots' sense of confinement was heightened by the synonymy of marriage with slavery, it would seem that free from both, her body still bears and re-enacts the memory of the objectification and confinement that were characteristic of

slavery. Here the memory of slavery in which she was passed from one master to another, is played out, in essence, repeated corporeally and belatedly, as first Grelots' sense of objectification through paralysis, as well as her experience of confinement and maltreatment by her children because of her disability.

Sex and Violence

While marriage in *Grelots d'Or* deals with the woman's sense of confinement, and her enslavement, the woman is portrayed predominantly as the object of sexual violence in Ouologuem's novel, *Le devoir de violence*. As physical violence is used by the ruler of the Nakem Empire to maintain the servitude of what Ouologuem terms as 'la négraille' (niggertrash), so is sexual violence towards the female body employed as the subjugation of the female not just by the master, but also by the male slave. The societal hierarchy is thus defined not merely by socio-cultural and/or racial difference, but also by biological difference, for which reason the woman, or specifically the female body is the lowest member of that hierarchy, below male slaves, free men and the master. Rape and sexual violence are often the result of this gender distinction between male and female, whilst consensual sex which would indicate the woman's ownership of her own body takes place clandestinely. The female slave body is undoubtedly the site of slavery, and the objectification of the female body in *Le devoir* is shown through the rape of the female slave. Yet these enslaved women are not merely victims of sexual violence as exercised by the male figure. They are also agents of resistance to their fate as they struggle to escape the

confines of their pre-determined roles in order to achieve some level of freedom for themselves. What defines these sexual encounters and the women's efforts at resistance in *Le devoir*, however, are the fatalistic renderings of such attempts, in which these female characters are ultimately silenced by death.

In her feminist reading of *Le devoir*, Ann Elizabeth Willey argues that although a reading of sex as a metaphor for colonisation might prove that sex and political power are mutually exclusive, 'to substitute sexuality for politics assumes that there is an element of truth in describing sex as a form of colonisation instead of seeing the brutalisation of women as an effect of the colonial discourse that Ouologuem would subvert.'⁴ Citing Paul de Man, Willey opts for a metonymical reading of the relationship between sexual and political power, preferring syntagmatic association over metaphorical substitution.⁵ However it would seem that Ouologuem's subversion is not limited to the colonial discourse, as it challenges pre-colonial and post-colonial notions of Africa through a system of slavery and a network of slave trade that precede and follow these eras. To limit *Le devoir* to merely a subversion of a colonial discourse is to ignore one of the chief premises of the novel, which is the abuse of the African people by African rulers prior and subsequent to colonisation. The violence of the novel's title is carried out primarily by the Saïf in all his reincarnations, and it is therefore the naivety of the Africanist discourse which lays blame at the foot of the colonialists, and fails to recognise the

⁴ Ann Elizabeth Willey, 'Pornography, or the Politics of Misbehaving? A feminist reading of the voices of Yambo Ouologuem' in *Yambo Ouologuem: Postcolonial writer, Islamic Militant*, ed. by Christopher Wise, pp. 139-54 (p. 148).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.148-150.

historical antecedence of slavery, that is challenged by Ouologuem. The triangle of sex, violence and power is explored within the Nakemian population, that is between master and female slave, and between male and female slaves, and will be discussed later on in this section. However the syntagmatic association of sex with power is also illustrated in two other instances: a colonial context through the encounter between Chevalier, the colonial administrator, and Awa, the Saïf's slave, and in the post-colonial setting of France, between Kadidia the prostitute and her lovers, and Raymond Kassoumi, and his homosexual lover. At the start of her sexual encounter with Chevalier, the colonial administrator sets his dog on her, and the animal strips off her clothes:

Avant que la femme pût réaliser quoi que ce fût, elle sentit le muffle du setter et ses crocs mettre en pièces ses vêtements, déchirant son pagne et sa camisole, la dénudant à coups de griffes et de pattes, sans érafler la peau. (*Le devoir*, p. 70)

After the encounter between Chevalier, Awa, and the dogs, the administrator having discovered 'l'ardent pays de ce royaume féminin' decides to keep Awa as his mistress.⁶ Ouologuem's commentary on colonisation as the brutalisation of Africa through the violation of the woman as a metaphor for the land, is evident here. However, apart from the above-mentioned three incidents in the novel, the perpetrators of sexual violence upon the female landscape are Saïf and his men, in line with Ouologuem's belief that the exploitation of Africa, of which slavery and the slave trade form a major part, originated from within the continent.

⁶ Ouologuem, p. 71.

If the sexual encounter is associated with power relations, both within the domestic political sphere, and in the colonial experience, it becomes increasingly clear in the novel that sex also relates to the postcolonial experience. Used as a metonymy for power relations, not only between man and woman, but also between men, the position of Kassoumi and his paying lover is more nuanced than that of his sister, Kadidia who, in order to escape the Saïf, flees to a life of prostitution in France. Kassoumi is not rewarded with death for his sexual exploits like his sister and the other female characters in the novel. Whereas Awa's encounter with Chevalier is representative of the colonialist exploitation of Africa, Ouologuem effectively portrays post-colonial relationships between Empire and the different African classes – peasants and the emerging intellectual elite – through the experiences of Kadidia and Raymond in France. Like most of the black female characters that precede her, Kadidia is trapped in a lifestyle of sexual exploitation, and her life is ended by the violence that is characteristic of the sexual encounter in Ouologuem's novel. However, even though both Raymond and Kadidia sell their bodies in return for money, there is a marked difference in their experiences. When Raymond is first approached by Lambert, he appears to have no option but to accept the proposition in exchange for some money:

Il n'avait pas le choix. On le désirait et il lui fallait vivre. [...]
L'étudiant se leva: il avait accepté de se vendre. (*Le devoir*, p. 174)

Yet as the affair with Lambert progresses, it becomes one of equality, and Kassoumi

is devastated when the latter chooses to get married to a woman.⁷ For the first time in the novel, following the abruptly terminated relationship between his parents, Kassoumi and Tambira, there is a possibility of love expressed through equality and sexual intimacy. Here sex is not synonymous with violence, rape or even death. It is seemingly a product of love and tenderness, at least on the part of Lambert, with Raymond following suit, despite Ouologuem's self-conscious attempts to undermine the sexual relationship by referring to Lambert as 'l'autre' and to Raymond as Lambert's 'nègre'.⁸ The relationship is depicted as a love relationship between equals, perhaps because both are male.

Willey suggests that through 'his textual silencing of the women who are subjected to rape, Ouologuem replicates the objectification of women that he thematically depends on as indicating an abusive and intolerable climate.'⁹ This silencing of women, to which Willey refers, applies not only to the predominance of female rape in *Le devoir*, and the death of the female body following such encounters, but also to the sexual objectification in which the female genitals are reflected and reconstructed by the male. The female genitals thus become a metonymy for the female slave and female sexuality. The female slave is defined, and forced to see herself as the totality of her sexual organ whose objectification is further heightened by its manipulation by the male. Under the guise of political, sexual and religious authority, the female genitals are forced to speak, or indeed silenced as directed by the male puppeteer. This is witnessed primarily in the figure of Raymond Kassoumi's

⁷ Ouologuem, pp. 181-182.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 178-181.

mother, Tambira who, unable to contribute to her children's French education because of her illiteracy, approaches Dougoli the medicine man regarding their success. Dougouli divines Tambira's children's future through a reflection of her genitals in his divining gourd. The person of Tambira, as mother, wife, and woman, is reduced to the singular image of her genitals, as manipulated by the medicine man.

He says:

‘Héhé! Regarde! Droite assise sans bouger le pubis chevelu de ton sexe. Mire! Rouge comme le rouge de la crête du coq, *il s’entrouvre, bâille, danse, frétille, mire!* héhé! Qu’y vois tu?’ (*Le devoir*, p. 148) [my emphasis]

As both he and Tambira look upon this image in the gourd, she is no longer in control of her identity as a mother, but is instead defined as a sexual object by Dougoli who simulates the movement of her genitals in the gourd. Having been reduced to an object, it is no longer Tambira who speaks, but Dougoli who speaks for her through the reflection of her sexuality.

The distortion of the female genitals through manipulation is also portrayed in the treatment of women on a wider scale in the Nakem Empire. Under the authority of the Saïf, the obedience of all women is obtained through the reconstruction and destruction of her genitals. It is significant that while sexual freedom is the prerogative of the male slave and the master, the female slave is penalised for the exercise of sexual autonomy. For example, the woman's punishment for committing adultery, as instituted by the Saïf, consists of an excruciating ritual:

⁹ Willey, p. 148.

Elle était pour le moins mise nue, exposée en pleine cour royale, et, chargé d'un carcan aux chevilles, subissait – en vertu du droit coutumier – un lavement vaginal avec une decoction d'eau pimentée – où nageaient, *ouallahi!* des fourmis [...] un autre supplice, institué par Saïf 'maintenait la femme cuisses ouvertes au-dessus d'un feu, qui lui roussissait les poils du sexe'. (*Le devoir*, p.62)

Both of these punishments consist of the damaging of the female genitals through the use of the ants and fire in order to punish female sexual liberty. The climate of the novel makes the exercise of female sexual liberty impossible, as even when it is practised clandestinely, the woman is often punished, unlike her male counterparts. Apart from adultery, as in the earlier example, the woman is also penalised for sexual liberty as it pertains to pre-marital sex. This is done through the painful reconstruction of the female sexual organ in order to reduce pleasure from sexual activity and to restore the woman's virginity for the benefit of the man. Lovers may engage in sex; however just before marriage, it is customary for the husband-to-be to order the infibulation of his bride consisting of a clitoridectomy, along with the removal of the inner and outer labia. Once more this is at the instruction of the ruler of the Empire. Before her wedding to Kassoumi with whom she has been sexually active, Tambira undergoes this crude surgery, as ordered by the Saïf who claims his right to sexual intercourse with her just before she is married. Although the procedure is carried out by two women, it is at the instruction of the Nakemian ruler, and solely for his sexual pleasure.

[...] Tandis que la première vieille maintient la femme immobile, la seconde, à l'aide d'un couteau plutôt – *bâ'al ma yallah!* – pratique

l'ablation du clitoris, incise puis avive les deux lèvres, les rapproche et les maintient dans cette position en les agrafant avec des épines. Ménageant sous cette 'couture' un petit orifice (pour les besoins naturels) elle y introduit un batonnet évidé. (*Le devoir*, pp. 61-62)

Ouologuem thus portrays slavery as the exercise of authority over the woman through the curtailing of sexual freedom, and the wounding of the female genitals, resulting in the silencing of female sexuality.

Ouologuem's silencing of the female slave in the novel also extends to the realm of sexual intercourse. Sex is rarely associated with life or reproduction, but instead is linked to death, specifically, the death of the woman. The subversion in *Le devoir* is evident as the sexual encounter is either depicted as rape, or as a transgression for which the woman must be punished by death. This is achieved through Ouologuem's explicit detailing of sexual encounters which is pornographic as well as voyeuristic. Through the intrusion of other characters upon acts of sexual intercourse, sex, not unlike the female genitals is trivialised. For example, Sankolo masturbates whilst watching Sonia (the daughter of anthropologist, Frobenius) and Mandoubo her black lover. Unbeknownst to him, Sankolo is also being observed by his fiancée, Awa. In the moment of watching her fiancé spy on the lovers, Awa is in a position of power. However this is quickly reversed as Sankolo reports the incident to the Saïf who punishes her and not Sankolo, by sending Awa to seduce the colonial administrator, Chevalier. This inevitably leads to her murder at the hands of her fiancé, who kills her out of jealousy. Not unlike the assignment of Awa to the colonial administrator, sexual activity in the form of adultery and prostitution are portrayed by Ouologuem as roles to which women are confined by their male master

and fellow male slaves. When the medicine man, Dougoli requests sex as a payment for his services to Tambira, she refuses at first, but is forced to obey him for fear of his religious authority. Once more, Ouologuem employs the theme of voyeurism as a tool by which the sexual act is branded a transgression for which the woman, and not the man, must be punished. Two of the ruler's henchmen, having watched Tambira commit adultery against her husband, proceed to rape her upon her exit from Dougoli's hut:

Ils ordonnèrent Tambira de les suivre, et la femme s'exécute. Elle avait une peur lâche, indigne, une peur de son époux surtout, de lui si bon, et trompé par elle, peur pour lui encore: ils l'auraient tué; pour elle aussi peut-être. [...] Ils la prirent à tous deux. Ils la prirent et la reprirent autant qu'ils voulurent cette journée en la terrifiant.
(*Le devoir*, p. 150)

The consequences of the incident with the medicine man are typical of Ouologuem's treatment of the female slave in this novel. Once more, Ouologuem associates sex with violence, and subsequent death, as Tambira is found dead the next morning in a pit latrine. Later on in the novel, Tambira's prostitute daughter, Kadidia who, it is suggested, has unknowingly committed incest with her brother Kassoumi in France, is killed by one of her sadistic clients who slips a razor into her soap bar. The interpretation of death as the silencing of the woman lies not only in the agency attributed to death by Ouologuem, that is as a punishment of the female by the male, but also in a societal hierarchy in which the woman is subject to the male slave and the master, and sex is a transgression for which she must be punished.

Sexual violence can be read as a trope for the discourse on power relations

within an African context of slavery. As *Le devoir* deals primarily with domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade to a limited extent, its account of slavery pre-dates and follows an unsuccessful colonial abolition of slavery. The sexual encounters as representative of power relations occur during the rule of the oppressive master, the Saif, and span the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras. This is illustrated in the sexual alliances between master and slave (Saif and the female slave Tambira), male and female slaves (as in the rape of Tambira by Saif's men), colonists and colonised (the colonial administrator, Chevalier, and Awa), and finally, neocolonial associations as seen in the sexual activity of the prostitute Kadidia in France, and the homosexual relationship between Raymond Kassoumi and his paying French lover. Sexual relationships abound in the novel, yet it would seem that they are usually linked, directly or indirectly to violent incidents which eventually culminate in a female slave's death. Through the recurring motif of the punishment of female sexuality via the manipulation and mutilation of the genitals, it is difficult to determine whether Ouologuem speaks out against the subjugation of African women through the relentless abuse of which they are victims, or whether by equating sex with violence, he uses the former as a trope for the violence of slavery and colonisation. One can interpret the African woman's cultural position as being played out in Ouologuem's female characters, yet it seems however, that in this problematic denigration of African society's positioning of women, death is the only form of liberation from the double subjugation by the Saif and his male slaves.

Motherhood and Reproduction

The reverse of the notion of the incorporation of slaves into host families via fictive kinship is the fracture caused by slavery and the slave trade on the family unit.

Through capture and onward sale particularly within the trans-Saharan and transatlantic trades, husbands are separated from their wives, children distanced from their parents, with sometimes only a marginal hope of redemption and reunion.

Whilst slave or free status can be passed down from parent to progeny, as discussed earlier on in the chapter, I would like to focus here on how slave status is transmitted within a corporeal framework that is specific to the female slave body, and the way in which the memory of slavery is passed down and exhibited within that framework.

Here I refer not only to the reproductive capacity of the female slave body as it pertains to the conception and bearing of children, but also to ways in which the trauma of the past is imagined, projected, created and repeated in the bodies of slave descendants. As this more psychosomatic element of the transmission of memory is almost exclusively associated with the female body and female descendants within the novels that treat slavery and the slave trade in Francophone West Africa, I will focus on two writers, the Nigerien Ali Zada, and Malian Ibrahima Ly whose work I have previously discussed in chapter 3. With reference to their novels, *La marche de l'esclave* and *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes*, I will examine the reproductive role of the maternal figure alongside the nurturing and protective function of the mother within the environment of slavery.

In *Les Noctuelles*, the lineage is matrilineal in the form of three generations of female slaves or slave descendants – grand-mother, grand-daughter and great grand-daughter. Niélé, the grandmother figure is introduced to us in her youth. Captured as

a slave along with her son who is later sold to Arabs, Niélé is Solo's grand-mother (Solo's mother's name is omitted from the account). Solo, although never captured, sees herself as a slave descendant. Her daughter remains unnamed in the novel. In *Les Noctuelles*, the threat to the continuity of the family as caused by slavery and the slave trade is highlighted in the irrevocable separation from home and from family. After Niélé and her son are captured, she is isolated from him by their master, in order to break all familial ties, and attachment between mother and son:

Il était enchaîné seul. On lui fit comprendre qu'il n'avait pas de père et que sa mere ne le connut jamais. Tous les deux devaient être dépossédés de toute histoire autonome, privés de tout lignage, detachés de tout terroir. (*Les Noctuelles*, p.29)

The son is made to understand that he is no longer acknowledged by his mother, and is forced to depend on the master as the source of protection and nurturing. Through this process, it is intended that the slaves' ties to their history, lineage and geographical origin are severed. Having already suffered the separation from home and the rest of her family, this experience leaves Niélé feeling powerless to protect her son. She is further devastated when mother and son are reunited briefly, and Niélé realises that Yigo, the master, has castrated her son in preparation for his sale to Arabs. Frustrated by her inability to protect her son, and by the termination of part of her lineage through her son's castration, she asks that he no longer acknowledge her as his mother:

‘Ne m’appelle plus mère. L’amour maternel ne suffit pas à légitimer cette noble fonction. Je ne mérite plus, à mes propres yeux, cette dignité. Même la mère poule protège ses rejetons contre l’épervier.’

[...] ‘Mon pauvre petit,’ dit-elle, en se tournant vers son fils, ‘ils t’ont castré [...] Ils ont fait de toi un eunuque. Ils t’enverront à l’est, chez les Arabes.’ (*Les Noctuelles*, pp. 36-37)

As a slave, Niélé is powerless to fulfil her role as a mother because of her captivity, and since she can no longer protect her son, she abdicates the role of mother. From this point onward, slavery is represented in the novel as the duality of Niélé’s motherhood, or indeed, her failed motherhood – the inability to continue her family lineage, and the incapacity to protect her offspring – both of which are inexplicably transmitted to her grand-daughter, Solo.

Marianne Hirsch defines post-memory as a memory that is not only received, but is also subject to imagination and reconstruction. She underscores the transmission of memory through its communication, as well as the propensity for the individual interpretation of a memory by a person to whom it has been communicated. While the mode of transmission between Niélé and the grand-daughter she never meets may not be evident, slavery as experienced by Niélé is represented in Ly’s novel as a trans-generational memory that is passed down to her grand-daughter Solo who exhibits the same duality of failed motherhood. The memory of Niélé’s enslavement exists in the public consciousness, yet Solo’s appropriation of this memory is belated in a Caruthian sense, as much as it is re-imagined through her body. Although she never experiences slavery, and neither does her mother, she inexplicably embodies a post-memory of her grand-mother Niélé’s enslavement. For her, to tell the trauma is to act it out and re-experience it, as is seen through a combination of a subconscious evocation and a conscious recollection of

slavery as expressed through the female reproductive body's inability to perpetuate the family line. All Solo's children, apart from one, die at birth. Later on, her only surviving child dies in childbirth, having given birth to a still-born child:

Solo déposâ le petit cadavre sur sa natte et s'approcha de sa fille complètement nue. Elle voulut la couvrir, mais les habits avaient disparu. Elle tâta le corps froid qu'elle voulait protéger avec son propre pagne qu'elle venait de dénouer, poussa un cri à fendre la pierre et s'affala inanimée. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 116)

Upon her daughter's death, she exhibits a similar sentiment to Niélé who is unable to protect her son from castration. Faced with the corpses of her daughter, and her still-born grandson in the hospital, Solo finds herself unable to cover her daughter's nakedness and maintain her dignity. The notion of the termination of the lineage evokes powerlessness on the part of the mother – powerlessness to protect, and impotence to continue the family lineage. For this reason, Solo fears the consequences of failed motherhood – being branded a witch who has consumed her offspring, as well as her late husband:

L'ogresse de terre, telle un boa insatiable, avait, dans ses innombrables plis, digéré toute la famille de Solo, désormais seule au monde. Une vieille sans enfants et sans ressources, une vieille sans aucun parent est toujours une dangereuse sorcière. (*Les Noctuelles*, p. 102)

Yet, although sterility in the form of the inability to continue the family line is manifested through Niélé and Solo, the transmission of memory across generations replaces the incapacity to continue one's lineage, and the memory of slavery becomes the child which is reproduced paradoxically, through the death of offspring.

Reproduction in this sense refers to the reproductive memory and its corporeal manifestations, and is therefore not limited to the creation of a child of flesh and bones, but is instead the reproduction of the memory of slavery which inevitably leads to the death of the human child.

Like Ly, Ali Zada highlights the notion of the matrilineal transmission of slave status across generations, particularly from the grand-mother and mother to their daughters. Where entire families are enslaved together, particularly in the Saharan and Sahelian regions, and through domestic slavery in general, intimacy between husband and wife is threatened by the intrusion of the master upon the marital space to claim his sexual rights over the female slave, resulting in uncertainty about the paternity of offspring. It is therefore only the maternity of the child that is definite, and in the case of *La marche de l'esclave*, as in *Les Noctuelles*, the husband/father is virtually absent from the discourse. The lineage therefore consists of two women and a girl – the dominant female character, Asmaou, who is the daughter of the old unnamed female slave, and also mother to the young girl, Mariama. All three are slaves of Prince Oumarou of Djassanta. The grand-mother understands slavery as the death of the husband and the loss of children to the master, an experience that she passes on to her daughter Asmaou. Just as the grandmother was separated from her parents, all her daughters, except Asmaou, are taken away from her and enslaved in other households:

Elle avait pleuré la séparation d'avec ses propres parents quand elle a été offerte pour accompagner une princesse qui se mariait. Elle ne revit plus jamais ses parents qu'elle avait pleuré sa vie durant. Elle

avait pleuré ses filles enlevées et elle avait pleuré son mari mort de souffrances.¹⁰

The notion of slavery as belonging to the master applies to her as much as it does to her daughter and grand-daughter. Asmaou belongs to Prince Oumarou, and is a sex-slave for him and his visitors, so much so that she is uncertain of the paternity of her daughter:

Ce corps combien de fois livré à toutes les lubricités hypocrites et les lâches envies, ce corps qui a appartenu à tant d'hommes qu'elle ne savait même plus de qui est sa fille. Mais elle avait appris à n'en plus faire un problème puis qu'en fin de compte la fillette appartient au chef de canton et qu'elle n'a de destinée que de subir le même sort que sa mère et sa grand-mère. (*La marche de l'esclave*, p. 37)

Like Ly's female characters Asmaou and her mother are trapped in a trans-generational cycle of powerlessness to protect their offspring from the consequences of slavery.

Yet it is this same inability to protect her daughter that causes Asmaou to rebel against her master. If the cycle of slavery is perpetuated by the production of the female child, and her ownership by the master, Asmaou breaks this cycle by buying her daughter a doll. Through its redemptive purchase by Asmaou, this doll/child represents a break from Asmaou's enslaved lineage, an offspring that is free from slave status, and therefore not rightfully owned by the master. Instead the doll is snatched by Prince Oumarou's daughter signifying that Oumarou and his family have rights not only to Asmaou's family but also to their property. Frustrated by the

¹⁰ Ali Zada, *La marche de l'esclave* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), p. 40.

maltreatment of her daughter, Asmaou retrieves the doll from Oumarou's daughter, an act which the prince interprets as rebellion. He publicly humiliates Asmaou by slapping her at the town's well, leading the female slave to later throw herself down the same well as a curse upon Oumarou and the town of Djassanta:

Oumarou leva la main et envoya une violente gifle à la jeune femme qui s'envola littéralement avec son fardeau pour aller bruyamment atterrir sur le flanc quelques mètres plus loin. [...] 'Asmaou, je te rappelle que toi, ta mère, ta fille et sa poupée, vous m'appartenez toutes. Où as-tu donc trouvé tant de culot pour arracher à ma fille une poupée?' (*La marche de l'esclave*, p. 27)

The use of the doll to represent a departure from the perpetuity of the slave lineage is negated by the impotence of this supposedly redemptive figure as the master's rights extend to the property of the slave. Yet even the redemptive quality of the mother's love is questioned, as Asmaou dies to avenge her humiliation, but also to protect the principle of her daughter Mariama's ownership of the doll. Paradoxically, in dying Asmaou abandons her daughter to her predestined fate as a slave, without the protection of her mother.

Similarly, in *Les Noctuelles*, the theme of the redemptive puppet or doll is seen in Niélé's attempts to fill the void created by the loss of her son through the moulding of a child out of mud and urine. It is as if the objectification of slavery has made it impossible for her to produce anything other than an object. Her child is a thing created with her hands, into which she breathes life. The doll/child doubles as a fertility statue whom Niélé names and nurtures, in order to overcome the grief of losing her son. She and the slaves around her treat this inanimate object child as if it

is alive, feeding it, and taking turns to care for the doll. Through nurturing her created offspring, Niélé salvages her failed motherhood as symbolised by her inability to protect her son. She can once again become a mother, and therefore a woman:

Niélé porta la statuette à son sein gauche et entonna une berceuse, d'une voix tremblante d'émotion, les yeux voilés de larmes. [...] Niélé n'était déjà plus la même personne. Elle s'était muée en mère. A son insu, elle était redevenue une femme. (*Les Noctuelles* pp. 67-68)

The obsession with the doll is not portrayed as an act of insanity on Niélé's part. In fact the participation of the other slaves legitimises the doll not merely as a comfort to a grieving mother, but corporately, as an opportunity for Niélé and indeed the other slaves to reclaim the previously relinquished role of mother – to engender, to protect and to nurture. Having created and nurtured the doll-child, the reality of slavery makes Niélé unable to protect it from her master Yigo who snatches it from her on several occasions. The distinction between this and her earlier abdication of motherhood is her choice to give up her life for her child, choosing to be flogged repeatedly until her child is restored to her. Eventually Niélé sacrifices her life for her doll/child. Despite her efforts, the doll is torn apart just before her own death and dismemberment by wolves. In the midst of terminated lineages and the inability to protect offspring, the dignity of the woman, in both Zada and Ly's work, can only be restored in death, and a death that can either be interpreted as freedom, or as the ultimate silencing of motherhood.

Conclusion

It is almost impossible not to see the depiction of the woman within the context of slavery as one of victimhood. In the roles assigned to her by the male master and even by the male slave, she is the victim of subjugation and sexual violence. Her resistance and rebellion are often met with death, and her lineage is constantly threatened.

Paralysis, powerlessness, and death are recurring themes with respect to the female, yet death may not always be seen as an end, but as a form of resistance. We have looked at the female slave from the perspective of four male authors – Bassori, Ouologuem, Ly, Zada – yet not one shows the male master as having endured the adverse effect of female rebellion. The male seems to always emerge victorious, or at least unscathed, and the female slave is left to find honour in death. Sex, motherhood and marriage form the core of the woman's role within the context of slavery, and even then, motherhood is constantly threatened by the powerlessness brought on by slavery. The female slave can therefore only be truly liberated from this sense of confinement through the ultimate escape, death.

SITING SLAVERY

Chapter 5: The Sahara

Introduction

The Arab traffic of slaves in Africa dates back to the invasion of North Africa by Arabs in the 6th century. Through the practice of warfare and slave raiding, Africa became a major source of slave acquisition. Slaves were transported overland across the Sahara into North Africa, and onward into the Mediterranean. They were also exported out of East Africa via the Red Sea and the Indian ocean into Turkey, Iran, Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, as well as South Asia, primarily India and Pakistan. The multiplicity of the trade in the form of its trans-Saharan and Oriental routes, as well as the multiple ethnicities of its agents and the diversity of the practice of Arab slavery on the continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia, over time make this a complex and diverse phenomenon. Although the agents of the slave trade were predominantly Arab traders, that is both Asiatic and European Arabs, a significant role was played by Arabised Africans. These were the white Moors or Berber who inter-married with Arab traders, and the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes such as the Touareg residing in the Sahara and in the north of the Sahel who had assimilated Arab culture. These groups carried out slave raids upon the black populations of the Sudanic belt for the purpose of trade within and outside Africa, as well as for household chores, and agricultural tasks such as sheep rearing. It is essential to note the ways in which this ethnic diversity shaped both the export trade, notably, the trans-Saharan and Oriental routes by which slaves were trafficked out of Africa, and internally, the local distribution of slaves within Africa.

The acquisition of slaves by trade, military conquest and slave raiding provided a supply for the market internally within Africa. In addition to the trans-Saharan and Oriental slave routes out of Africa, internally the demand for slaves across the African continent ranged from plantations in East Africa, to Muslim states in West and North Africa, and the settlements of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of the Sahara and the Sahel. These slaves were used for tasks such as daily chores, agricultural labour, sheep rearing, and in particular, women were used as sex slaves. Even though raids and warfare were the primary form of acquiring slaves, onward sale at trading posts along the trans-Saharan route meant that slaves could be sold on and absorbed into these African communities in exchange for other goods such as salt, gold or clothing. Naturally, slaves could also be sold to passing caravans by middlemen or by communities within the vicinity of these trading posts in exchange for such goods. In addition, trans-Saharan traders sold slaves not only within West Africa, but also in North Africa en route for the Mediterranean. It is therefore difficult to distinguish between domestic slavery, that is slaves that were acquired as a result of warfare and shifts in regional political dynamics, as opposed to those that were raided specifically for insertion into the trans-Saharan network, but who were sold to communities at various points along the trans-Saharan trade route. The distinction lies not in the geographical destination of these slaves, since slaves issuing from the Arab trade were sold both within and outside Africa, and domestic slaves were also sold into the trans-Saharan network, and were therefore themselves exported out of the continent. It is instead the agency of the trade that is significant – the Arab and the Islamic elements that are so characteristic of the practice of this type of slavery.

The novels that will be discussed in this chapter are therefore not so much representative of the trade itself, as they are of the current practice of descent-based slavery among the Arab-Berber tribes of the Sahara and the northernmost parts of the Sahel. Both novels originate from Mauritania, where hierarchical relationships between slave and master still exist in spite of the pre-colonial abolition of the slave trade and of slavery in Mauritania, as well as the ambiguous prohibition of slavery by colonial administrations, and post-independence declarations of emancipation by the nation's successive governments. Slaves are predominantly owned by Arab-Berber or white Moor masters, though some of Mauritania's historically black populations of Wolof, Soninke and Fulani are also slave owners. According to interpretations of Islamic sharia law upon which the nation's constitution is predicated, only a master can grant freedom to his slave. Therefore even though the Mauritanian government has outlawed slavery on several occasions, most recently with its criminalisation in 2007, in the hinterland of the Sahara and the northernmost parts of the Sahel, emancipation remains even now at the behest of the master. Similar to Mauritania is Niger, in which attempts at the emancipation of slaves owned primarily by Touareg and Fulani masters have been hindered by the isolation and inaccessibility of the desert, and Mali in which black slaves are still owned by Touareg masters in the north.

This form of slavery thus constitutes a contemporary living legacy of the trans-Saharan trade, and for this reason, this chapter deals with the memory of slavery from a more contemporary perspective – by considering the social, economic and political codes that are inscribed onto the socio-geographical space of slavery as epitomised by the master's camp and the Sahara in present-day

Mauritania. These codes incorporate traditional hierarchical relationships between master and slave in the form of fictive kinship, tribal identity, racial prejudice, and economic dependency as a result of master-slave clientelistic relationships. I examine the space of slavery as inhabited by these resilient codes, which constantly recall the memory of slavery, resulting in the impossibility of forgetting the slave past despite the prospect and reality of freedom. As both novels, *Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir* (Mbarek Ould Beyrouk) and *Yessar: De l'esclavage à la citoyenneté* (Ahmed Yedaly), address the issue of slavery via the quest for freedom in the figure of the slave and the Haratine or ex-slave, as well as the enduring hierarchical relationships between ex-slave and master as a result of the caste system, I will therefore first of all consider the various ways in which both the formal status of freedom and more informal modes of incorporation are negotiated between slave and master in both novels. I will then focus on strategies of social mobility amongst slaves and ex-slaves, and the political mobilisation of the Haratines as a socio-ethnic group, before concluding with an examination of the nature of post-emancipation relationships between ex-slave and former master within the social space of enslavement as portrayed by these novels.

Negotiating freedom

An analysis of representations of slavery within West African literature would be incomplete without a discussion of the antithesis of slavery, especially within a contemporary framework in which historical slavery continues to be practised. Miers and Kopytoff see freedom as a Western concept that is alien to the African

context. They instead define the antithesis of slavery as *belonging* within a slavery-kinship continuum in which the slave is incorporated into society at a formal and/or informal level:

The acquired outsider moves from total marginality toward greater and greater *incorporation* into the institution of the host society. The reduction of his marginality occurs along at least three dimensions that may be usefully distinguished: the dimension of formal status, the dimension of informal affect, and the dimension of worldly achievement or success.¹

This means that slaves can attain a formal change in status through manumission or marriage, and slave descendants can have the status of free born if they are the offspring of a concubine and her master. Slaves can also be informally incorporated into the master's family through the practice of fictive kinship or concubinage, in which the slave may be treated as a child, or kin of the master. Through these informal avenues, the slave is incorporated into the master's family without a formal change of status, and s/he only has the rights of a child or cadet. With respect to the attainment of worldly success, the acquisition of wealth and/or education provides an avenue for the slave to receive greater levels of incorporation into the host society through upward social mobility. These informal modes of incorporation do not however preclude a change in formal status.

Yet, even though the slave maintains his/her status, s/he can still be accorded certain privileges that are reserved for the freeborn. Conversely, if the ex-slave chooses to remain within the tribal settlement, s/he is forced to inhabit a socio-geographical space which is defined by past master-slave relationships that

¹ Miers & Igor Kopytoff, p. 19.

are bound up with the notion of his/her tribal identity. This is indeed the paradox of slavery and ex-slavery in which slaves can be treated as free, and the free as slaves. It is contradictory therefore, that whilst looking forward to incorporation, and therefore kinship as the ultimate antithesis of slavery, the slave is haunted by social codes that will constantly remind him of his past, or even present status, socially through a system of fictive kinship and racial discrimination, and economically through continued clientelistic relationships or poverty-induced financial dependency on the master. What does it mean therefore to be an ex-slave, but either to still rely on traditional hierarchical relationships in order to maintain identity, social belonging, and/or financial security, or to remain a slave and to seek upward social mobility within the space of enslavement in order to shed descent-based obligation and discrimination? Whilst the concept of incorporation is relevant in the Saharan context, the idea that the notion of freedom as personal liberty without physical restraint or control by the master is entirely alien to the slave, is misguided, and both Yedaly and Beyrouk's novels challenge incorporation as problematic in that it signifies belonging not merely as identifying with the master's family and the tribal settlement, but polemically, as belonging to the master.

Ahmed Yedaly's 2007 novel, based on the author's own personal interaction with the eponymous subject of the novel, explores the concept of freedom from the perspective of Yessar, a former slave of Arab-Berber masters. Yedaly treats the issue of slavery and ex-slavery from the perspective of Yessar and his interaction with various social groups such as his immediate family, his master's family, as well the emergence of the ethnic group of Haratines or former

slaves into the political arena. In all these relationships, the author constantly examines the reality of freedom, and its limitations during the colonial era and later on within the socio-political context of the newly independent Mauritania. Yessar, an educated and well-respected slave, requests freedom for both himself and his family from their master. This request is subject not merely to Yessar and his family's ability to purchase their freedom, but is also dependent upon the generosity, and therefore willingness of the master's family to liberate them, in spite of the financial repercussions that might ensue. The achievement of Yessar's family's freedom is therefore staggered over years, with each receiving his/her freedom in turn, and the youngest daughter Halima being maintained as a slave in order to ensure the continued obligation of the ex-slave Yessar and his family to their former master, in the form of daily chores and financial contributions.

Within the practice of slavery in the Sahara, slaves can be manumitted provided they are able to pay their master the required monetary compensation in return for their freedom. The decision to free the slave is entirely dependent on the master who as a show of generosity and religious piety would release such a slave on the occasion of an Islamic feast. This is the route taken by Yessar in order to attain a formal change in his status. He initiates a process of negotiation for his freedom, as well as that of the other members of his immediate family. Although Yessar disputes the legitimacy of slavery, claiming that it cannot be proven that his ancestors were not Muslims, and citing the possibility that their capture occurred during a slave raid, rather than during holy war, he can only legally obtain his freedom by entering into financial negotiations with his master. As the liberation of all the members of his family would impoverish their master's

family, the master's response to his request is to grant Yessar's family's freedom in stages. First, the master points to the multiple ownership by several members of his family of one slave, Yessar's father, for which reason it is suggested that he be granted half his freedom in the first instance, and the rest of his freedom, belonging to uncles within the master's family, be negotiated at a later date.² Secondly, the master sets the payment for the purchase of Yessar's freedom – half of his annual salary (gained from his extra cattle herding and teaching assignments which are outside of his slave duties) over the following three years, after which he will be granted his liberty. As for his mother and two sisters, the masters consider their offspring to be their property, and as such are reluctant to relinquish ownership over them.

In the novel, Islam remains central as the motivation for enslavement and the practice of slavery, with Islamic fervour in the form of jihad providing the justification for the slave trade. However, Yedaly also challenges the notion of enslavement, that is capture as a result of jihad, as illegal. Instead he attributes capture to non-religious slave raids carried out solely for the acquisition of slaves. For Yessar, capture and enslavement are illegal acts that contradict Islamic belief, as all men are equal before God. Stating that the black populations of the Sudanic belt who were raided by Arab-Berbers for failing to convert to Islam could themselves have been Muslim, Yessar criticizes this jihad that results in the capture of slaves, declaring that these were not so much wars carried out in the name of jihad, but raids undertaken for self-serving purposes. However, although

² Ahmed Yedaly, *Yessar: De l'esclavage à la citoyenneté* (Roissy-en-Brie: Cultures croisées, 2007), p. 21.

Islam is the disputed religious foundation of slavery within this context, it is also the determinant of freedom:

En effet en droit musulman, si l'unique source légitime de traiter son semblable en esclave est la capture de celui-ci au cours d'un *jiha*d (guerre sainte) et son refus de se convertir à l'Islam, il n'existe, du point de vue du même droit, qu'une seule façon légale de s'en libérer : le consentement du maître. (*Yessar*, p. 20)

Since it is Islamic law that stipulates that the slave can only be freed by his master, Yessar, having contested the legitimacy of his capture, must yield to the same system to which he refuses to subscribe in order to obtain his freedom. Yet, even after he has been freed, Yessar continues to contest the legality of slavery. On the occasion of the freedom of the rest of his family apart from his youngest sister, he makes the following speech, challenging the basis of his family's enslavement, in the presence of his former masters:

Je n'ai jamais été convaincu que ma famille, mes grands parents et nos ancêtres puissent être descendants d'êtres capturés au cours du Jihad pour avoir refusé de se convertir à l'Islam [...] Je crois donc que les raisons qui ont fait que d'autres comme nous, nous ont réduits à la situation d'esclaves, il faut les chercher ailleurs. Or quel que soit cet ailleurs-là où on ira les chercher, il sera loin de la religion musulmane qui ne reconnaît qu'une seule origine à l'esclavage. (*Yessar*, p. 63)

Whilst Yessar negotiates his freedom with his masters, and undertakes the staggered and prolonged process of securing his family's emancipation, Beyrouk's character, Mahmoud (*Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir*), lacks the financial capacity to purchase his freedom and therefore remains powerless to confront his master. Instead he escapes from his master and the tribal settlement, and flees to the city, leaving behind his mother, and his docile lover, M'Barka.

The distinction between these two modes of obtaining freedom lies in their legality as well as the level of informal incorporation that serves as a precursor to a change in Yessar's formal status. Through his education, religious knowledge, and in particular, his wealth, Yessar is able to obtain a level of informal incorporation by gaining a high level of respect within society. This procures him a place at the bargaining table with his masters, and therefore enables him to obtain his freedom. The option of fleeing his master, braving the harsh weather conditions of the Sahara, and possible re-enslavement in order to attend one of the French (Nassara, meaning Christian) liberty villages is made available to Yessar while he is still in the process of negotiating his and his family's freedom. However, out of respect for his masters, he refuses to escape, choosing instead to obtain his freedom legally:

Les *Nassaras* annoncent que des 'villages de liberté' viennent d'être créés pour accueillir les esclaves qui se soulèvent contre le pouvoir de leur maîtres. Ces campements répondent à la nécessité de mettre en application la loi française sur l'abolition de l'esclavage. (*Yessar*, p. 22)

The antithesis to slavery in *Yessar* is therefore portrayed not as escape from the host society, and not merely as informal incorporation, as this is already the case for Yessar who is well respected by his master because of his education and religious knowledge. Instead it is shown as a formal change in status through the protagonist's successful negotiation of his manumission with his master.

Beyrouk's 2006 novel, *Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir*, recounts the lives of two ex-slaves, Lolla, a Haratine or freed slave, and Mahmoud, an escaped slave, as well as the aristocratic slave master, Bechir, a Bedouin prince of the Oulad Ayatt tribe. Set in the desert settlements of the Sahara, the novel explores slavery

and ex-slavery through the themes of rebellion and escape. Beyrouk deals with the lives of these three characters, each narrated in the first person, through Mahmoud and Lolla's struggle with the concept of freedom within the context of the social and geographical space of enslavement. In the absence of the economic and/or social bargaining power required for manumission, Mahmoud obtains his freedom by escaping from the master, fleeing the milieu of slavery and being incorporated into another environment, that is the army, in which slave status is of no importance. He says:

Tout ce que je suis, je le dois à l'errance, au vent et à l'errance [...] J'ai marché tout seul, tout nu dans la nuit noire [...] J'ai marché toute cette nuit-là pour rejoindre des inconnus [...] C'est grâce aux sécheresses et aux vents que j'ai pu m'en aller, quitter les grands espaces vides et rejoindre les cités.³

The notion of *errance* or wandering denotes Mahmoud's physical departure from the camp without which he remains bound to the master, and to the social codes that serve as a reminder of his slave status. However, without a formal change in status, Mahmoud is legally still a slave, and his wandering becomes symbolic of the constant struggle to forget his slave past.

Whilst through Mahmoud, Beyrouk illustrates the problems associated with obtaining individual freedom outside of a formal change in status, through Lolla, the dominant female character of *Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir*, the author highlights the collective plight of the Haratines, or former slaves. Like Lolla and her family, these slaves who have been formally liberated often remain within the space of enslavement – the master's camp. As ex-slaves, their daily experience of

³ M'Bareck Ould Beyrouk, *Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir* (Paris: Dapper, 2006), pp. 9-10.

living is therefore still characterised by the social codes of the caste system that has defined their slave past. Beyrouk condenses the collective Haratine problem into the figure of Lolla, portraying the Haratines' freedom as limited by the continued obligation to, and ownership by, the master. The three primary narrative strands of the novel intertwine around the subject of marriage, specifically the prospect of Lolla's *forced* marriage to Bechir, as an exploration of the limitations of freedom and the resistance of traditional social hierarchies within the context of ex-slavery. Lolla's character, and the predicament in which she finds herself, essentially highlight the paradox of ex-slavery in which although legally free, she remains bound to her former masters who maintain ownership over her and the rest of her family. Although she is a former slave, Bechir speaks of the *liberation* and further incorporation into Moorish aristocratic circles that this marriage would bestow on Lolla, indicating the incomplete nature of her current freedom as an *affranchie*:

Je la libérais de son statut d'affranchie, je la faisais pénétrer dans les grandes tentes, je secouais et la poussière de ses voiles délavés et les jougs que lui avaient imposés les siècles. (*Et le ciel*, p. 39)

Lolla however rejects marriage to Bechir, a marriage which would have otherwise sealed her status as free, and liberated her from the yoke of her slave past and her current position as a Haratine. She illustrates the predicament of the ex-slave who must constantly negotiate, and indeed re-negotiate his/her status within the social space of enslavement, epitomising the complexity of incorporation, as although free, she continues to be treated as a slave who must submit to the will of her former master. Aware that her formal status of free is meaningless within the social and geographical boundaries of her former master's

camp, she escapes. Fleeing the camp, Lolla pursues a more personal and idealistic freedom by exercising her right to decide whom she marries. She chooses not to return to the traditional hierarchies of the past, instead asserting her independence, by leaving the camp, abandoning her lover Ahmed because of his reluctance to stand up to Bechir, and accepting Mahmoud's proposal of marriage on the condition that he challenge Bechir on her behalf. Bechir thus becomes symbolic of the attack on traditional social hierarchy through Lolla's exercise of her legal right to freedom, and Mahmoud's attack against his tribe in which he denies them access to necessary government aid until Bechir relinquishes his supposed claim to Lolla's hand in marriage. Yet although Beyrouk pushes the limits of these relationships between master and ex-slave through both Mahmoud and Lolla's exploration of freedom, the traditional hierarchical status quo is restored at the end of the novel when Bechir and his men kill both the escaped slave, Mahmoud and the rebellious ex-slave, Lolla.

Social mobility and political mobilisation

In her introduction to *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories*, Benedetta Rossi interrogates the 'persistence of pre-colonial forms of enslavement' in West Africa and the 'voluntary retention of slave-master relations' by questioning the 'difference between a person of slave origin successfully passing as free, someone seeking security in old ties of dependence, someone with no choice but to inhabit traditional forms of slavery, and someone

using slave status as a political agenda?’⁴ This outlines possible trajectories along a slavery-belonging continuum, whether this is with respect to a change in formal status or to social mobility within the context of slavery, and we will consider these with reference to Yedaly and Beyrouk’s novels. First is the paradox implicit within informal incorporation in the context of the socio-geographical parameters of slavery, for example the attainment of a level of freedom, albeit limited, whilst remaining a slave within the host community. The second and third scenarios explore the navigation of the complexities of incorporation within the framework of slavery and ex-slavery, such as the voluntary and involuntary dependence on old systems of traditional hierarchies, whilst the fourth refers to the deployment of the socio-ethnic group of slaves and ex-slaves for the purpose of political mobilisation.

The slave can rise above his formal status and gain worldly success whilst remaining within the context of slavery. Through education, for example, he may attempt to leave behind his former status in order to pass as free within the wider society. Whilst children of slaves in the Sahara region do not usually attend school, those who do receive an education, whether clandestinely or with the permission of their masters, have an elevated position over other slaves as a result of their access both to religious knowledge and institutional positions within the informal and formal education system. Yessar’s Islamic education earns him the respect of his masters, as well as that of the slaves and ex-slaves within his community. He travels around the region as a teacher to children of aristocratic Muslim families, while he is still a slave. However, like the change in formal

⁴ Benedetta Rossi, ‘Introduction: Rethinking Slavery in West Africa’ in *Reconfiguring slavery: West African trajectories*, ed. by Benedetta Rossi (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), pp. 1-25 (p. 4).

status that is obtained through manumission, the notion of incorporation through the achievement of worldly success is limited by slavery, and therefore Yessar's teaching position is subject to approval by his masters. Later, after manumission, he is appointed as a teacher of Arabic, the language of his masters, by the French administration. In the person of Yessar, Yedaly shows the possibility for social elevation both within and outside the social space of enslavement. He also highlights the tension provoked by Yessar's appointment as a teacher by the colonial administration, Yessar being a former slave who relies on traditional hierarchies of dependency and kinship within the tribe, whilst at the same time trying to exercise his personal freedom within the social and political arena.

Through the teaching position, Yedaly introduces a new master into the equation – the French administration. Yessar is given the opportunity to leave the social and geographical space in which he has previously been enslaved, providing him with the physical and social mobility as well as financial security that surpass what he could have attained by remaining permanently within his host society. The allegiance to the tribal master is therefore opposed to the obligation to the colonial master. Within the camp, the news that a former slave is in the employment of the colonial government, and is in a sense elevated above his masters, is treated with the utmost diplomacy in order not to upset the hierarchical balance:

L'idée qu'un hartani de la tribu puisse être engagé comme enseignant d'arabe, avoir un salaire tous les mois, y compris ceux où l'école est fermée et où d'habitude il s'occupait du troupeau, constitue *une véritable révolution*. (Yessar, p. 55) [my emphasis]

This description of Yessar's teaching position as *une véritable révolution* highlights the power of education as an instrument by which the former slave can be elevated within and even outside of the host society, thus threatening the supremacy of the master. By providing Yessar with the means to rise above his estate and travel widely, leaving the social and geographical space of enslavement, education allows him to exercise his formal status as free, uninhibited, albeit temporarily, by the obligation to his former master.

In the case of Beyrouk's character Mahmoud who flees his master and enlists in the military, the professional ladder of the army provides a route to his rise above his slave status. Whilst trying to escape his slave past, Mahmoud not only rises in status, he also transforms himself into a slave master of sorts, cruel in his exercise of power over his subordinates whom he treats like slaves. He sees this as a way of expunging his past status as a slave, stating that as he rises in rank, he leaves his slave identity behind him by metaphorically sucking the lifeblood out of his masters:

Chaque promotion, chaque galon, chaque petit lopin d'autorité était un peu de mon nom que j'effaçais, un peu de mon passé que je niais [...] un peu de sang des maîtres que je suçais. (*Et le ciel*, p. 49)

Mahmoud's exercise of power extends not only to his subordinates but also to Bedouin nobles because of the authority given to him by the administration. Not only is Mahmoud able to successfully pass as free through his accomplishments in the army, he is also able to successfully overturn the balance of power in his favour by destroying the camp of his former master, and therefore the symbol of his past enslavement. With his military troops, he also lays siege against Bechir

and his settlement, Legeulb, attempting to force the noble to relinquish his plans to marry Lolla so that he, Mahmoud can have her for himself:

Bechir perdit tout de même, sur mes ordres, toute influence dans les affaires de la région. Toutes les administrations reçurent l'ordre de l'ignorer et d'oublier, dans toutes leur interventions les campements de Legeulb. Plus de distribution alimentaire, plus de creusement de puits, plus d'équipes médicales, plus de nouvelles salles de classe, plus de visites d'autorité locales. (*Et le ciel*, pp. 87-88)

As a former slave who challenges the hierarchy and traditions of Bedouin society, Mahmoud's pursuit of freedom is militant. The tension within the novel lies mainly in the upset of the hierarchical equilibrium through his attempt to usurp Bechir's position of power. However, Beyrouk's portrayal of the pursuit of freedom through the achievement of worldly success is also bleak, as the upheaval of traditional social hierarchy is quickly resolved when starved of water, food, and other supplies, Bechir gathers the other members of his clan and lays an ambush for Mahmoud and his soldiers, killing them all.

Significantly, Yedaly's novel expands the treatment of slavery and ex-slavery on an individual level to the ways in which these phenomena apply both to slaves and ex-slaves as an ethnic, racial and social group. First the author questions the foundation of slavery, whilst simultaneously pushing the boundaries of freedom so that even Yessar who is supposedly a symbol of freedom on a personal, ethnic, and national scale is seen to yield to the resilience of traditional social hierarchies with respect to his relationship with his former master. He then extends this framework to the socio-ethnic group of slaves and Haratines by not only dealing with Yessar's quest for freedom, and the emancipation of his immediate family, but also addressing the predicament of slaves who are unable

to vote, and ex-slaves and slave descendants who are discriminated against because of their slave past. Parallel to this is Mauritania's own fight for its independence which mirrors Yessar's personal journey to freedom, as well as that of the Haratines within the socio-political context. Yedaly tackles the question of equality with relation to the position of the ethnic group of Haratines within a Mauritanian society of both slave-owning Arab-Berbers of the desert north and the free black populations of the south. This preoccupation with the position of the ex-slave within the wider society sees Yessar in a political role in which he is asked to join the political party El Hor, and with other politicians, pushes the issue of equality for Haratines along with the quest for the freedom of all slaves. This is with the hope of an end to social and racial discrimination against Haratines, as well as political representation for this socio-ethnic group.

The historical background to the racial prejudice against Haratines is the racialisation of the practice of slavery in the Sahara, based on the ownership of black slaves by Arab-Berber masters. Although these slaves resided in the tribal settlements of their masters for generations, speaking the master's language and adopting the Islamic religion and Moorish customs, within the camp, they were victims of racial prejudice. Today, these black slaves and ex-slaves still see their cultural identity as found in the master's tribe, essentially calling themselves Soudanes or black moors, but they are discriminated against based on a system of pigmentocracy in which slavery is inextricably linked to race. Following rupture from the tribal settlement, ex-slaves or Haratines are equally at a loss when placed within the historically free black populations, as their cultural identity is different from the latter, even though racially they originate from the same stock. The

Haratine therefore finds himself in a no man's land in the middle of a Mauritania that faces schism between the northern desert region, controlled by the Arab-Berber nobles, and the West African region mainly inhabited by the country's free black populations. In *Yessar*, when the Haratines find themselves torn between their former masters and the black population of Mauritania, their instinct is to return to their master's tribe and therefore *their* tribe. For example, one such Haratine returns to his tribe to seek support for his political campaign to which one of the Haratine political leaders responds:

‘Le mal demeure dans *l'appartenance* des haratines à une tribu donnée, et de fait, seul un état de droit fort et respecté pourra se substituer aux tribus.’ (*Yessar*, p. 195) [my emphasis]

The notion of belonging as tribal identity and ownership by the master's tribe is highlighted once more. In spite of the institutionalisation of racial discrimination within the master's camp as a constant reminder of the slave past, the Haratine still returns to the camp for validation.

Yessar's role along with his political colleagues is therefore to carve out a political identity for the Haratine which does not automatically merge Haratines with Mauritania's black population irrespective of the former's Moorish culture, nor revive old hierarchical relationships in order to legitimise its stance. This mobilisation of the socio-ethnic group of Haratines and slaves as a political power is motivated within the novel by a desire to see all Mauritania free, ensuring that slaves and Haratines have the right to vote, and are adequately represented in politics. This is a collective social mobility with the hope of seeing Haratines and those who are still enslaved rise above their status and form a political power in the context of a newly independent Mauritania. Whilst Yessar and his colleagues

push forward with an agenda to obtain freedom for all slaves, and equal opportunity for Haratines across Mauritania, their initial manifesto is ambitious for its time, and it is clear that all their goals are not fully achieved.

Sur le volet esclavage, un chapitre dresse la liste des principales priorités:

- égalité en droits et en devoirs des citoyens de la Mauritanie,
- systématisation de la scolarisation des enfants des *Soudanes* au même titre que ceux des *Bidhanes*,
- interdiction de tout acte de vente de personne physique,
- permission donnée à ceux qui le souhaitent de quitter leurs campements d'origine pour rechercher un mieux être ailleurs,
- cessation de la pratique qui consiste à offrir des esclaves aux enfants nobles, à l'occasion de naissances ou de mariage dans leurs familles
- attribution à tous adultes du droit de vote en toute liberté
(*Yessar*, p.92)

The journey to a free Mauritania thus becomes a vehicle for engaging with the plight of slaves and ex-slaves within the novel. Through the fight for social mobility and political mobilisation of the Haratines within the context of Mauritania's own journey to independence, it becomes clear that beyond the achievement of worldly status, and the departure from the place of enslavement, only citizenship has the potential to create true freedom and equality.

Within this seemingly idealistic view, all men are equal. In fact *Yessar* is not simply a novel about the protagonist's personal quest for freedom. It essentially recounts the political fight for the true freedom of other Haratines and slaves, within the context of an independent Mauritania in which, not just the Bedouin and Negro-Mauritanian tribes, but, in particular, Haratines can find

equality and a common identity as citizens. There is however an over-riding sense of Yessar's personal and public failure that overwhelms the novel which sets out to depict him as a national hero. On a personal level, Yessar's failure to broker his sister's freedom, and his continued allegiance to his master in spite of his formal status as free, both prevent him from publicly expressing his advocacy for an end to slavery. Secondly, his party fails to secure long term and influential political positions, as well as to negotiate the freedom of all slaves, and equality for Haratines across Mauritania. However, while the novel is weighed down by the minutiae of the Mauritanian political scene – failed attempts by Yessar's party to gain political positions, and the fickle nature of West African political leaders – there remains one crucial subject at the heart of *Yessar* and perhaps it is for this ideology that he is celebrated. This is the realisation that freedom is not only predicated on a change in formal status, but more importantly it exists based on the need for a monumental shift from the affiliation with clan and tribe, and therefore dependence on the master, to an identity that is based on an allegiance to the nation of Mauritania through citizenship, in which all people, no matter the race, are equal.

Escaping the slave past

In addition to the socio-cultural identity and financial security that is provided by the master, the slave is also linked to his master's family through fictive kinship relationships in which the slave is child and the master is father. For this reason, although by obtaining his freedom, the slave moves from the position of slavery

and is incorporated into the wider society as an ex-slave, remaining within the space of enslavement allows for the exercise of certain constraints upon his freedom through the maintenance of dependent relationships. These relationships are complex in that they appear to be of mutual benefit to both slave and master, but do not always provide the independence that the legal status of freedom confers upon the slave. Hence incorporation as belonging in, but also belonging to, that is being owned figuratively, and literally, by the master, can often conflict with the desire of the slave to maintain his/her personal independence. Thus ex-slavery is limited by the social codes that are written into the fabric of Moorish society, such as fictive kinship, racial discrimination, economic dependency, and the continued obligation to the master and his tribe, all of which serve as constant reminders of the slave past. The camp or tribal settlement is inhabited by these codes and therefore becomes a metaphor for the inescapability of slavery, as whilst the former slave remains trapped within the social and geographical boundaries delineated by the master's tents, neither he, nor the master, nor even society, can ever forget his slave past.

Beyond the fragility of fictive kinship is the biological bond between the freed slave and his family members who may still be enslaved to his former master. For this reason, although manumitted, Yessar must continue to live with his immediate family who are still enslaved to his former master. For Yessar, manumission does not equate with a rupture from his master's family and tribe. He cannot permanently leave the camp, neither can he publicly rebel against the notion of slavery in the political arena, as the rest of his family within the settlement might be maltreated by his former master due to his actions. His master

even keeps Yessar's sister enslaved in order to ensure compliance with his social and economic responsibility towards them. His master says:

Nous maintenons Halima en servilité et nous nous approprions l'entreprise familiale, dans laquelle vous conserverez tous, vos fonctions actuelles et une partie de vos salaires, mais dont les bénéfices reviendront dorénavant à ma famille exclusivement. (*Yessar*, p.45)

On visiting the island of Gorée and touring the vestiges of the Atlantic slave trade, Yessar is shocked by the brutality of slavery, yet he is reluctant to rebel openly against slavery because of what he describes as affection for his former masters:

Les quelques visites guidées [...] à l'île de Gorée ont achevé de le convaincre que globalement il ne peut y avoir d'esclavage 'juste'. Cette nouvelle vision d'esclavage ne l'autorise cependant pas à prôner la libération des esclaves à tout prix. Car, il est non violent par nature et dans les relations qu'il entretient avec ses ex-mâtres il y a quelque part comme une certaine affection qui lui interdit d'agir n'importe comment. (*Yessar*, p. 90)

Allegiance to his former master is therefore due not only to fear of reprisals for his enslaved family, but also to a sense of duty and affection that outlive his slave status, a fictive kinship that is at the core of slave-master relationships. Thus familial ties, both biological and fictive, create constraints upon Yessar's freedom, tying him to the place of enslavement through both fear and a sense of obligation, and through affection, so that he is never truly free.

In *Yessar*, the economic obligation of the former slave is to pay his master out of his earnings, ensuring his position within the family, and in the case of Yessar, the safety of his still enslaved sister. In fact after he has been freed, Yessar regularly returns to his 'home' from his teaching post in Senegal to visit his family, and to give his former master a percentage of his earnings. In addition to

the financial contributions expected of an ex-slave by his former master, the daily responsibilities of an ex-slave who still lives in the camp do not seem to alter with the change in status, as seen in the case of Yessar's father who, upon his release from slavery, still has an obligation to carry out his former master's daily chores without pay, a task which he would have routinely performed as a slave:

Puis que Bilal est à présent libre, il pourra partager son temps entre les corvées de ses anciens maîtres (eh! oui! un bon *hartani* n'abandonne pas ses anciens maîtres du jour au lendemain) et louer ses services de berger, puisatier et *sellakh* (boucher) à tout le campement; tâches qui pourraient générer un revenu non négligeable à verser dans la cagnotte grâce à laquelle le reste de la famille espère un jour reconquérir sa liberté. (*Yessar*, p. 30)

Once more, there is the recurring notion of ex-slavery both as belonging in and still belonging to the master's clan, as symbolised by the camp. In fact both Yedaly and Beyrouk highlight this paradox of freedom in which although the slave has been freed, s/he still essentially *belongs* to the former master and is still treated as a slave.

Beyrouk also explores the position of the ex-slave via the question of identity in terms of belonging to the master's tribe, and remaining within the social and geographical space of enslavement. Although Lolla is formally free, she and her ex-slave family have remained within the Oulad Ayatt settlement of which Bechir is a chief. By remaining within the tribal settlement, she is bound to the Oulad Ayatt and to its aristocracy, and therefore has a duty to marry Bechir. For Lolla, having formally acquired a change in her status, marriage to Bechir would indicate that she is not free to make her own choices, thus irrevocably re-establishing her former position as a slave. Within the camp therefore, there is no equality, only master and (ex)slave. For this reason as long as Lolla is a member

of the clan, and resides in the settlement, she must observe her duty to the Oulad Ayatt by marrying Bechir. Unable to exercise her freewill, she flees her home to wander in the desert:

Je courus, je courus, les yeux fermés, les mains en avant, le coeur battant fortement [...] Et chaque dune qui me séparait du campement était une victoire ineffable sur le temps. M'étais-je imaginée prisonnière de mes poursuivants? Non, je n'ai pas pensé un seul instant à ma défaite, je ne me suis point imaginée les mains et les pieds liés, le corps lardé de coups, et jeté en pâture aux quolibets de la foule et aux plaisirs de Bechir. (*Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir*, p. 97)

Here, her flight from the camp is rebellion, Lolla, like Mahmoud, claiming her freedom, a right that she can only exercise outside of the camp. The fact that a freed slave must flee her former master in order to exercise her freewill is a problematisation by Beyrouk of ex-slavery not as freedom but as incorporation in which the former slave is no longer the outsider, but belongs both in the group, and to the group.

Consequently, within the novel, the legal status of a freed slave who remains within the camp is one in which s/he is still owned by, and therefore remains subject to the will of the former master. In fact, Bechir refers to the community of freed slaves to which Lolla belongs as 'nos affranchis' with 'nos' indicating his ownership of these former slaves, and 'affranchis' being reminiscent of their not-so-distant past as slaves. He brutally punishes Lolla's family for her rebellion and escape, treating them with the violence and humiliation that is reserved for slaves. He says:

Elle a choisi délibérément de piétiner la loi divine, d'insulter nos traditions, de trahir les siens et de jeter le déshonneur sur moi [...] Je fis tomber son père qui tremblait et sanglotait et le piétinai très

fort, j'envoyais au sol tous ses parents présents et les menaçai des foudres de ma colère. (*Et le ciel*, p. 43)

What then does it mean to be an ex-slave having been granted freedom by the master, but to continue to inhabit the social space of slavery? For Lolla as for Yessar's family, to reside with the tribe after receiving her freedom is both to continue to claim its identity and to accept the duties and obligations it requires, not of its citizens, but of its ex-slaves. All men/women are therefore not equal. Instead the change in status from slave to free is only ceremonial, and is not fully effectuated socially or culturally. Thus the environment which the former slave, Lolla, claims as her home, is actually the space of slavery which is inhabited by the memory of her slave past, and populated with the resilient social codes of her enslavement. It becomes necessary therefore for her to flee this place of slavery in order to exercise the move from the position of slave to the status of free. Thus it is not enough for the slave to receive a formal status as free, and continue to inhabit the social and physical space delineated by the system of slavery and inhabited by the memory of this practice. In order to fully exercise his/her freedom, and to break off the constraints that are laid upon him/her by the master, the clan, and the wider society as a result of his/her former status, the ex-slave must leave the space of slavery.

In *Et le ciel*, ex-slavery is depicted as limited by the socio-cultural codes that constitute a memory of slavery within the master's camp or the space of enslavement. Incorporation is therefore seen within the novel as the granting of a form of liberty, with the constraints of belonging both in and to the master's tribe. Beyrouk portrays freedom as only possible through escape from the tribal

settlement, that is, the space of enslavement. Yet even this is problematic, as escape does not necessarily equate with freedom because of the master's exercise of various degrees of ownership over both the escaped slave and the Haratine. Escape thus becomes a form of wandering that provides the empowerment and sense of identity that both Mahmoud and Lolla require to return to the settlement of their masters and wrestle back their freedom. For Mahmoud, the battle is physical as well as psychological – one in which he gains victory over his former masters through the total annihilation of their camp by his soldiers. He says:

Que sont devenus les campements où j'ai grandi? Je les ai rasés, j'ai effacé jusqu'à leurs traces. J'ai donné quartier libre à la troupe. 'Allez-y! Je veux que nul voyageur qui passe ne puisse plus soupçonner qu'en cet endroit, jadis, s'installèrent des gens!' Nous avons brûlé les tentes, égorgé les bêtes, et puis nous avons amené des tracteurs pour tout balayer. (*Et le ciel*, p. 90)

Lolla, on the other hand, returns to the camp with the only weapon that she has – her womanhood. She enters the settlement of the Oulad Ayatt tribe completely naked, flaunting before the whole camp the body that she refused to surrender to Bechir:

Je les affronterai avec mes seins, avec mon ventre, avec mon sexe, avec mon coeur, avec ces appas que j'ai tant ventilés mais qu'ils ne gagneront pas! Je traverserai leur campement de mon allure la plus fière, portant haut le drapeau de ma révolte, les seins nus [...] Moi, Lolla, je viens défier Bechir et tous ses pères, et Legeulb et toutes ses peurs. (*Et le ciel*, pp. 118-119)

This same womanhood that is required of her by Bechir is used by Lolla as a symbol of her rebellion, and of her freedom, not only as a human being, but as a woman who has the right to choose who she will marry. She is killed almost

immediately by Bechir's men, yet her defiance is an affront to Bechir, and her nakedness a curse on the entire camp which must relocate for fear of reprisals.

The position of the ex-slave within the social space of enslavement is characterised in both novels as being governed by the obligations and social and racial discrimination associated with slavery. Both Yedaly and Beyrouk highlight the necessity of departure, a total break from the tribal settlement in order to exercise one's freedom. However both authors also illustrate the impracticality of such a decision for reasons highlighted earlier, such as the presence within the camp of other family members who may still be slaves, as well as the fictive kinship relationship between slave and master, and the fact that the slave's identity rests within the tribe because of his affiliation with his master. Therefore within both Yedaly and Beyrouk's representations of ex-slavery, there is always the symmetry of departure and return, a wandering that results in a return, and sometimes even several returns, as in the case of Yessar, to the master. This is seen in Yessar's quasi-nomadic teaching assignments in which he leaves the camp for prolonged periods of time, yet always returns to his family within the settlement, as well as to give a portion of his earnings to his former master. For Lolla, and even for Mahmoud, the motivation for return is different from that exhibited in Yessar's homage to his masters through the reaffirmation of their hold over him emotionally and economically. Their departure from the tribal settlement consists of a wandering in which the escaped slave (Mahmoud) and ex-slave (Lolla) must depart from and subsequently return to the social space of enslavement. This is a return that completes the cycle of rebellion and revolt,

since by escaping, neither Mahmoud nor Lolla have had the courage or the power to face their masters, and claim their freedom.

Conclusion

Both Beyrouk and Yedaly struggle with the concept of freedom as total independence, indicating instead a remnant of financial and social obligations, as well as racial and descent-based discrimination, so that it is not so much the formal status of free that is the focus of the novels, but the limitation of that status as a result of incorporation. This notion of incorporation both as belonging in the kinship group, and the tribal settlement, and also as belonging to the master, is at the centre of both novels. How then does the ex-slave, and indeed the slave achieve freedom? For Yedaly, it is by negotiating freedom with one's master, and then attaining citizenship in which all men are free and equal under the law of the nation, a concept that is alien to the thousands still enslaved in Mauritania. For Beyrouk, the slave cannot negotiate his freedom with the master. Even when slaves are granted their freedom, as in the case of Lolla, they are still bound to the master. It is therefore only through escape that freedom can be attained, and because an escaped slave is still owned by his master, this freedom is limited until the moment in which destruction is exacted upon the space of enslavement, and the social codes of the slave past are destroyed.

Both authors portray freedom as a spectrum which includes incorporation through informal avenues, a change in formal status, as well as the seizing of liberty from the master through escape, and the paradoxical phenomenon of ex-

slavery. Whether it is through a formal change of status, through escape, or through a refusal to return to resistant traditional social hierarchies, the slave still bears the metaphorical mark of slavery in the eyes of the master, and the rest of society, and this is emphasized through the notion of belonging as both identity and ownership. Both Beyrouk and Yedaly emphasize freedom as a departure from the place of enslavement, but also as a return to that social space as a person that has risen above the social, financial and psychological status of a slave. There is therefore the notion of departure and return which is predicated on the necessary confrontation with the figure of the master as seen in the paying of homage by Yessar and conversely, Mahmoud's destruction of the master's camp. Yet the killing of both Mahmoud and Lolla by Bechir, indicates that freedom is only possible when it is limited by dependency, and therefore, the submission of the ex-slave to the former master, as in the case of Yedaly's protagonist, Yessar.

Chapter 6: The Atlantic

Introduction

Domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan and transatlantic systems of the slave trade have in common the transportation of individuals or groups of people across a geographical and ideological space, and the trans-placement of the memory of their lived experience.¹ The result of these systems of slave trade is the forced migration of Africans from their homes and their enslavement and dispersal within the African continent in the case of both domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade, and perhaps more significantly the export of slaves outside of Africa, within the context of the external trades predominantly to the Arab world and to newfound lands in North and South America. In French West African fictional narratives of both domestic slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade as experienced within Africa, enslavement is presented as an established reality. Although there is a consciousness of the existence of a world before slavery, there is no definite knowledge by the slave of a place or a socio-cultural identity that precedes slavery. What is known instead is that the slave *is* a slave, and whilst he may attempt to and even succeed in crossing both the social and physical boundaries that define his status, he is forced either to assimilate into his host society or escape it entirely, but, ultimately, is never able to return to his place of origin. Conversely, the novels that deal with transatlantic slavery differ in this respect, as they alternate between a geographical place and social position that

¹ Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, 'Body and mind on the move: Emplacement, Displacement, and Trans-placement in Highlands Papua New Guinea', in *Newsletter, Centre for Asia-Pacific Area Studies* 27 (2005), 205-17 (p. 205).

precede slavery, and the destination of the enslaved, one in which the reality of slavery is lived out through daily experiences.

In this chapter I explore notions of departure from Africa to the New World, and subsequently return from the New World to Africa, as well as the remembering of Africa in the context of slaves' host societies in the New World, and the memory of the experience of slavery upon return to Africa. All of these are intertwined within the concept of trans-placement – what Stewart and Strathern describe as ‘the movement of individuals or collectives across, beyond, or through physical places and ideological spaces.’² Trans-placement incorporates not only the movement of people but also the way in which they inscribe their ‘remembered experiences of previously lived places’ upon the new societies that they inhabit.³ In this case, one thinks of captive memories, of the gamut of cultures that represented the varied origins of the slaves that were exported from Africa over the four hundred year period of the transatlantic slave trade. These would be exhibited in their cognitive and bodily memory – elements such as language, culture, religion, dance – that slaves brought with them and inscribed upon their host societies. Notions of trans-placement thus focus not only on the change that occurs within the migrant groups or individuals such as the forging of new identities through the remembrance or re-imagining of former places, in this case Africa, but also on the transformation that these migrants, or indeed slaves, bring to the new societies they inhabit. Furthermore, this concept will also incorporate the transformation that occurred upon the arrival of former slaves and

² Stewart and Strathern, p. 205.

³ Ibid., p. 205.

slave descendants from Brazil in parts of West Africa as a result of the deportation of freed and/or rebellious slaves (in the case of the 1835 Bahia rebellion).

The Portuguese occupation of Arguin Island off the Western coast of Mauritania in 1445 marked the beginning of the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves.⁴ The construction of fortified posts at St. Louis and St. Joseph along the Senegal River established the French Atlantic trade system in Africa. By the middle of the 17th century the slave trade was well established as the main business of Europeans in Africa. The production of sugar in the European territories of the Caribbean and Brazil, and the importance of this product to their economies meant that 90 per cent of the slaves imported from Africa were sent to Brazil and to the Caribbean. The growth of sugar cane was therefore the basis for the exportation of an estimated 12.5 million captives from Africa to the New World, of which only 10.7 million are believed to have survived the Middle Passage.⁵ The Senegambian zone was the main source for slaves in the 15th, 16th and part of the 17th century. Along the Western coast, the trade spread from the coastal communities of the Gulf of Guinea and reached into the interior from where slaves were sourced and transported to the coast. The established African continental system of slavery and the traffic of slaves already practised in the Arab trade provided a workable model which adapted itself to the exigencies of the Atlantic market. The demand for slaves within this system of trade was therefore dictated by intercontinental economies to which the African aristocratic,

⁴ Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Trans-Atlantic Trade*, trans. by Ayi Kwei Armah (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.37.

⁵ David Eltis & David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 2.

merchant and warrior classes responded by providing the necessary number of slaves.

David Richardson and David Eltis' research into the transatlantic trade indicates that prevailing meteorological factors dictated two slave-trading systems – the North and South Atlantic systems, each with its own distinct source of captives from Africa, and different destinations for the enslaved on arrival in the Americas. First, the North Atlantic or triangular trade, originating in Europe, was determined by a clock-wise pattern of currents north of the equator, drawing its captive population from north of the River Congo, and delivering them to North America, predominantly the Caribbean and along the La Plata Basin, bordering Uruguay and Buenos Aires.⁶ The triangular nature of this trade involved the exchange of European trade goods as well as 'textiles from Asia, cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean, and tobacco, and rum and gold' on the West African coast by European traders in return for slaves who were shipped to the plantations of the New World which provided European consumers with now indispensable luxuries such as sugar.⁷ In the second system, the South Atlantic system, the currents moved counter clock-wise, drawing slaves from West Central Africa and West Africa transporting them to Brazil. Understandably it was the Portuguese who took advantage of this trade route, with the trade itself being conducted out of Brazil, and with Luanda, Angola and Ouidah (Benin) as the points of embarkation.

Although the North Atlantic system is the better documented slaving route, with historical and anthropological research as well as literary

⁶ Eltis and Richardson, p. 2.

⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

representation, especially from the Caribbean, North America, and Anglophone Africa, it is in fact a less important aspect of the South Atlantic system that has formed the focus of both of the novels that will be discussed in this chapter, that is the preoccupation with Brazil, specifically Salvador de Bahia which has geographic, historical, as well as cultural links to what the Portuguese called the Costa da Mina. Bahia was linked directly to the Costa da Mina or Slave Coast in the Bight of Benin which comprised South East Ghana, Togo and Benin because of the South Atlantic current system previously discussed.⁸ In addition to the geographical link between the point of embarkation in the Bight of Benin and the point of disembarkation in Bahia, the chronology of the slave trade and the dominance of various nations at different stages of the four-century span of the trade further emphasized the preoccupation with Brazil. Following the initial Iberian dominance of the triangular trade, by 1660 other European nations operated the North Atlantic system, whilst the Portuguese controlled the South Atlantic system. By the early 19th century, abolition and subsequent disengagement by Britain, the United States and other European nations, left both Portugal and Spain continuing to operate a now illegal traffic in slaves to Brazil and Cuba respectively via the South Atlantic trade route. Furthermore the cultural association between Bahia and the Slave Coast was reinforced by the repatriation of ex-slaves from Brazil to this region after the great Bahia slave rebellions of 1807 and 1835, and also the continued valorisation of African culture in Brazil.

Both novels that I have chosen for their treatment of transatlantic slavery are geographically situated within Brazil to varying extents, and specifically the

⁸ Robin Law, 'Ethnicities of Enslaved Africans in the Diaspora: On the Meanings of "Mina" (Again)', in *History in Africa* 32 (2005), 247-67 (p. 247).

region of Bahia. Significantly, departure and return, as well as the remembering and forgetting of the corpus of experiences from the past, be it freedom in Africa or slavery in Brazil, typify these two works – the Guinean Tierno Monénembo’s *Pelourinho*, written in 1995, and more recently, the Togolese, Kangni Alem’s 2009 novel, *Esclaves*. Common to both novels is the preoccupation with Brazil, specifically Bahia, and the use of the legend of an African king to explore the memory of the slave trade within specific geographical spaces that are associated with the slave trade and slavery. This embracing of legend and attempt at a retrieval of memory in order to place it within a socio-cultural and geographical context as relevant to the slave trade and slavery is what I will term the emplacement of memory. I will begin with an examination of this concept by focusing on the kingdom of Dahomey in *Esclaves*, before turning to the significance of forgetting in the displacement of such memories within the historical *lieu de mémoire* in *Pelourinho*. Thirdly, and finally, I will consider the memories that take the place of those that have been displaced, that is the inscription of cognitive memory into the cultural landscape of host societies, specifically Brazil, and the re-situating of memories of home, and of enslavement upon the landscape of Africa upon return from Brazil.

Emplacing memory

The former port of Ouidah (Gléhué) on the coast of Benin was the principal staging post of slave exportation from West Africa between the 17th and 19th centuries. Of the French, English and Portuguese forts that were erected in the

town at the height of its slave trading activity, only the Portuguese fort of São João Baptista remains, having now been converted into a museum. In more recent times, Ouidah has been the subject of a much disputed project to commemorate slavery, sponsored by UNESCO, amongst other organisations. In this memorial to slavery, Vodun statues erected during the 1992 Vodun festival are juxtaposed with and superimposed on supposed historical sites of the slave trade along a singular slave route, where slaves were more likely to have been led by their captors and sellers along various routes to the coast. At various points along the Slave Route are sites such as the Portuguese fort, the Place des enchères (the Slave Auction), the slave trader Francisco de Souza's house, the slave holding quarter (*Zomaï*), the mass grave of slaves who died before embarkation, the Trees of Forgetting and Remembering, and La Porte du non retour (the Door of No return), all of which mark the town's slave trading history. Kangni Alem's 2009 work, *Esclaves* primarily explores the slave trading activities of Ouidah and the role of historical figures relating to the transatlantic slave trade such as the Dahomean kings, Adandozan and Gankpé, and the slave trader, Francisco de Souza. Alem also refers to historical events that are pertinent to the history of the slave trade and slavery, such as the dethronement of Adandozan, his brother Gankpé's ascension to the throne, and the installation of Francisco de Souza as Viceroy of Ouidah, all in 1818, as well as the 1835 Bahia rebellion which led to the repatriation of slaves from Brazil to West Africa.

Earlier on, in the first and second chapters, I examined the use of epic representations of kings in the Songhay and Segou oral traditions within the context of domestic slavery, and the deployment of this narrative genre in both

Ouologuem and Sow Fall's fictional renderings of domestic slavery – *Le devoir de violence*, and *Le Jujubier du patriarche*. Similarly in the novels which depict the transatlantic slave trade, the figure of the king plays a central role. Ndindi Grand-Orange, ruler of the Mahi kingdom (located north of Abomey in present-day Benin) who sells himself into captivity after losing a challenge in the presence of his enemies (*Pelourinho*), and the Dahomean king, Adandazon whose throne is usurped supposedly because of his opposition to the slave trade – both inhabit the realm of legend, and serve as a device for the retrieval of the memory of the transatlantic slave trade and the experience of slavery across the Atlantic.

Regarding Adandozan, technically the ninth king of Dahomey, who ruled from 1797 to 1818, the year of his dethronement, historical accounts of his reign describe him as cruel, and as having sold members of his rival and brother Gankpé's family into slavery for which reason his name and emblem are omitted from official depictions of the lineage of the kings of Dahomey. Whilst his exclusion from the lineage of Dahomean kings may be a propagandist revision of history instigated by his successor Gankpé upon his accession to the throne, Alem, through his novel, aims to reverse the consistent and successful attempts to obliterate Adandozan's name from Beninese popular memory.

Alem locates the specific markers of the slave trade in Ouidah, but also systematically allocates both time and place to the three principal sections of the novel, 'Anciens temps', 'Nouveaux mondes' and 'Temps mêlés' corresponding with his principal character's departure from Dahomey in 1818, his time as a slave in Recife and Bahia, and his return to Dahomey shortly after the 1835 Bahia rebellion. The first section, 'Temps Anciens', takes place in the kingdom of

Dahomey and sees the overthrowing and imprisonment of King Adandozan at the hands of Gankpé (Guézo) and his co-conspirator Francisco de Souza with the help of the principal character, the master of rituals, who is coerced into betraying the king. This incident leads to a ceremony in which the king's name, and therefore the memory of his reign, is banished from Dahomey. He is addressed at the ceremony by his birth name, and not the appellation, Adandozan, by which he was known as king:

‘Avisu, Avisu, Avisu! Je t’appelle trois fois, Avisu Madogugu, que ton véritable nom de règne à jamais disparaisse! Tu n’es plus, tu n’es plus, tu n’es plus! Que même ton souvenir fasse mal au palais de celui qui osera prononcer ton nom banni. Va, va, va dans le néant, pour toujours ! Qu’on évoque à jamais ton souvenir avec honte, qu’on évoque ton existence sur terre en t’appelant pudiquement Daa Gbólòmeton, celui qui est quelque part dans la nature! Je raye à jamais ton nom de la dynastie de Huégbadja!’⁹

In addition to being accused of selling his rival Gankpé's mother into slavery, Alem shows the reasons for Adandazon's deposition as politically and economically motivated, the first because of Gankpé's desire to rule Dahomey, and the second as a consequence of Adandozan's own resistance to the operations of slave traders within his kingdom, especially Francisco de Souza. This is supposedly because of his belief that the plantation system can be executed on Dahomean soil. Speaking of the controversy generated over his decision to depict the life of Adandozan the forgotten king, Alem says:

Pour les Béninois je comprends, parce que j’ai parlé quand même d’un roi dont ils n’aiment pas parler, à savoir le roi Adandozan, et donc toucher la mémoire de ce roi dont le nom est interdit dans la tradition. Il n’est pas dans la galerie des rois. Son nom est barré et il

⁹ Kagni Alem, *Esclaves* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2009), pp. 167-168.

est interdit de prononcer son nom. C'est pour ça que dans le livre je ne l'appelle jamais par son nom. Il s'appelle le roi. Il s'appelle toujours le roi, et c'est seulement à la fin que son nom est prononcé, une seule fois dans le roman.¹⁰

By retrieving the name and reign of Adandozan from oblivion, the realm of forgetting, and placing it within its original historical and geographical space, Alem, in a broader Francophone West African literary context, challenges forgetting, and thus foregrounds the hitherto largely repressed issues of the transatlantic trade in slaves and of slavery within his novel.

Beginning his novel with the image of a ship that has been used for slave trading expeditions by the Brazilian manager of the Portuguese fort, and later Viceroy of Ouidah, Francisco de Souza, or Cha Cha, Alem is focused not so much on the passage to the New World, or on the popularisation of the image of the ship as an instrument of abolitionist propaganda, but on the memory of slavery as inhabited by historical spaces associated with the trade, such as the slave ship. He portrays this and other spaces such as the Slave Auction in the square in front of de Souza's house, and the Portuguese fort in which Adandozan is held prisoner by de Souza, as impregnated with the memory of the slave trade. However the duality evident in the attempt to memorialise the slave trade in Ouidah, is also present in Alem's novel, as like in present-day Ouidah which commemorates both slavery and Vodun worship alongside each other, spaces historically associated with slavery in the novel are marked by acts of wrath by Vodun deities. In *Esclaves* memory is therefore depicted as a curse, and the manifestation of that curse through the action of the divine Vodun powers. This motif is seen in the prologue

¹⁰ Interview with Kangni Alem, Brussels, April 2010.

through the effect of the curse placed on the former slave ship, the James Matthew (formerly the Don Fransisco) by one of its cargo, the unnamed Vodun priest and protagonist of the novel as he is being transported to slavery in South America:

Pendant la traversée, dit-on, un des esclaves que l'on suppose être un prêtre d'une religion obscure nommé Vodun, aurait provoqué la furie des éléments et jeté un sort au bateau. Les marins l'auraient entendu se lamenter ou chanter toute une nuit dans la cale, puis le ciel se serait couvert avant que ne surgisse de l'océan un promontoire rocheux qui abîma salement la coque du navire. L'homme aurait ensuite été déporté au Brésil, mais sa malédiction pèserait encore sur le James Matthew. (*Esclaves*, p. 17)

Here the Vodun priest calls on the divinities of the sea and of the sky, and although the curse takes effect shortly after its pronouncement in 1818, it still haunts the ship, and inexplicably leads to the drowning of its newly acquired crew and passengers, bar one, twenty three years later off the coast of Australia.

In the first section of the novel, 'Temps Anciens', which takes place in Dahomey, Alem denotes the spatial markers of the slave trade on the landscape of the trading port of Ouidah – the Portuguese fort and Francisco de Souza's house, in front of which is the Place des enchères (Slave Auction). These physical structures and material spaces in which the slave trade is practised and slavery is experienced constitute sites of memory within the novel. Apart from the incident in the slave ship in which the gods of sea and sky divert the course of the Don Fransisco, on two earlier occasions, the curse of the Vodun deities is shown to operate in the Place des enchères, in front of de Souza's house, and subsequently, in de Souza's house itself. These manifest as the wrath of the gods, but instead are a result of Francisco de Souza's manipulation of both Vodun beliefs and the Vodun ritual master. In the first incident, the god of thunder strikes down de

Souza's slave who has been falsely accused of sleeping with one of his wives, and in the second, King Adandozan shows acute symptoms of the disease attributed to the god of small pox as he crosses the site of the slave's death in the Place des enchères into de Souza's house:

Ensuite, il s'était dirigé avec Chacha et les autres invités vers la terrasse surplombant la place Brésil, la place des enchères devant le domicile de son hôte. C'est au moment d'enjamber le seuil de la porte y menant que les picotements devinrent plus accentués, gagnant pratiquement toutes les parties de son corps. (*Esclaves*, p. 57)

In both cases, the curse occurs at the site of de Souza's house and is said to be the work of a Vodun deity. However, the unnamed Vodun priest (later Miguel) discovers that de Souza has learnt the secrets of the cults of the god of thunder and small pox and has used them to his advantage. The consequences for King Adandozan are imprisonment in the Portuguese fort, where slaves were held before shipment across the Atlantic, and subsequent dethronement as a result of the 'curse'.

In the Dahomey section of the novel, Alem portrays a society that is defined and sustained by a belief in the omnipotence of the Vodun deities. Memory therefore cannot be separated from ritual, and thus becomes burdened with the weight of religion, not unlike the case of Ouidah's slavery monuments. Thus, one sees the memory of the slave trade as a curse that is manifested in the incident with the slave ship, but also as a manipulation of the curse as executed by de Souza. For the principal character, the ritual master who through his occult knowledge unknowingly betrays King Adandozan, and is later sold into slavery by Gankpé's amazons, the memory of Dahomey, and specifically Ouidah, therefore

becomes synonymous with guilt and shame. Yet if one considers the memory of the trade and of slavery as synonymous with the curse, or with its manifestation in the historic spaces of slavery, then surely through this motif Alem illustrates the desire to forget the scourge of the slave trade and of slavery, the need to relegate it to oblivion. To remember is therefore to re-invoke the curse of those who were enslaved and carried across the Atlantic upon the African merchants, warriors, kings, and European sailors and slave-dealers who traded them. Retribution and by implication, repentance are not far from the arena of remembering, as reflected in the Ouidah memorial where in 1998, an annual ceremony of repentance was instituted, in which descendants of former slaves, returnees and the progeny of those slaves that were not sold into the transatlantic trade, join descendants of slave traders every January in a Vodun repentance ritual along the site of the Slave Route.

Displacing memory

Monénembo's novel, *Pelourinho*, traces the African writer's search for a memory of slavery in Brazil through the figure of Escritore/Africano in the homonymous suburb of Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. Pelourinho is the Portuguese word for pillory, and it is within this historical space marked by the pillory where disobedient slaves were whipped that the principal character, an African writer, seeks to discover his origins. Through the search for his roots, Monénembo's character attempts a return not to freedom in Africa, but to slavery in Brazil. Like Alem, Monénembo charts the flux and reflux characteristic of the economic and cultural exchange between Bahia and the Western coast of Africa. However his perspective differs in the

sense that his return, and not his departure, is directed towards Brazil. This in itself is a subversion of the quest for origin, the place of origin being Africa. The novel is narrated by two residents of the Pelourinho suburb, and is addressed to *Escritore/Africano*. It begins with an absence, the discovery that the addressee is recently deceased, as the reasons for his arrival in Pelourinho are recalled and narrated by two initially unnamed characters. These accounts of the *Escritore/Africano* are interspersed with, and even overwhelmed by both narrators' experiences of living in the impoverished favela. The accounts follow each other without any clear indications as to which character is speaking. It is only as the novel progresses that the narrators are identified as a blind seamstress, *Leda-paupières-de-chouette*, who receives visions of both the past and future from the Yoruba god *Eshu*, and a hoodlum-cum-tour guide from whom *Escritore* seeks help. Life in Pelourinho and the deceased character, *Escritore*, seem to be the only factors that unite the marginal lives of these narrators. However as the narrative unfolds it is revealed that the blind seamstress whose account is interrupted by visions of the past, specifically the whipping of an African slave, is connected to the hoodlum. The hoodlum reveals that he bears the same name as the African slave, *Innocencio Juanicio de Conceição de Araujo*, the same slave who in *Leda's* visions of the past is whipped for refusing to accept this new Christian name from his master as a replacement for his African name, *Allagbada*. Furthermore, we find out that it is the present-day *Innocencio* and his associates who have caused *Leda's* blindness.

The arrival of *Escritore* or *Africano*, as *Leda* calls him, in Pelourinho prompts questions about the reasons for his visit. *Escritore*, an African author is

visiting Brazil to research the descendants of his ancestor, Ndindi Grand Orage who sold himself into slavery after losing a bet that he could defeat all his enemies. Upon arrival at the slave ship Ndindi demands to be taken as a slave, and that his emblem, a fist, be branded onto his shoulders, and onto the shoulders of all his male descendants:

Moi, roi des Mahis, fils de roi, esclave volontaire, je veux qu'on m'enchaîne deux fois plus que les autres. Que, sur chacune de mes épaules, soit marquée au fer rouge l'image de mon figa [...] Je veux qu'il en soit ainsi pour tous les mâles issus de mon sperme et ceux issus du leur, et ainsi de suite jusqu'au déclin du monde.¹¹

Here, branding indicates ownership not by the master, but by Ndindi himself. It becomes a corporeal mark of identity, specifically of African identity, that will be borne by Ndindi's descendants. The purpose of Escritore's visit to Pelourinho therefore, is a quest for origin. He describes the novel that will result from his research as his life's work, for he is the embodiment of the quest for origin, and indeed the search for memory:

Ce sera un livre de chair et de moelle. Ce sera moi accompli, remembré. Je le vois comme un agneau à immoler en l'honneur des absents. Chez nous, la fête est triste si la tribu n'est pas au complet. (*Pelourinho*, p. 154)

Escritore sees himself as representing the memory of home, home being both Africa marking the origin of the ancestor king, and Brazil, the destination of the enslaved ancestor and thus the diasporic population. He hopes to find his relatives, and fellow descendants of king Ndindi who bear the emblem of the fist on their

¹¹ Tierno Monénembo, *Pelourinho* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995), pp. 142-143.

shoulders, and thus re-establish a kinship that will symbolically reunite both sides of the Atlantic through their experience of the slave trade and of slavery. He says:

Mon intention est de piocher dans les rebuts. Rendez-vous compte: quelque part dans une rue, sous un poche de cette ville, se trouvent des gens de ma famille, même case, même legs, qui ne me connaissent pas, que je ne connais pas, sinon par la bonté d'une légende. Je suis venu les retrouver, eux et tout ce qui les inspire. Je suis venu animé d'une vocation: emboîter le pas aux anciens, rafistoler la mémoire. (*Pelourinho*, pp. 149-150)

The problem with Escritore's discourse however, is his presupposition that Pelourinho, is not merely a place in which slavery is experienced, but has become a site of memory, and that its slave descendant population is a homogenous body, unified by this memory. Instead he finds individuals who have forgotten a shared past of slavery, and are preoccupied with their present impoverished and marginal existences. Public collective memories are exchanged for individual private memories, as witnessed in the two narrators, Leda and Innocencio, and the other characters in the favela:

La favela est ce qu'il y a de mieux pour figurer l'autre monde. On y entre sans fourbi, sans souche, sans mémoire. Vous n'y entendrez jamais personne évoquer son berceau ou un aïeul. On y arrive seul, fuyant la famine du Sertão ou du Pernambouc, et on va vers l'autre, rêvant à une vie meilleure alors qu'on n'a rien d'autre à offrir que l'épuisement, la hargne et l'étourdissant métissage. (*Pelourinho*, p. 96)

The favela symbolises a break with the past, a place in which one leaves memory behind. It is a choice to forget, and to relinquish ancestral ties in exchange for the anonymity and hybridity offered by the Pelourinho community. This hybridity or *métissage* that characterises the favela reflects on racial identity and therefore on the memory of slavery. The descendants of slaves are not one homogenous

African people. There is no distinct African race, and therefore there is no singular memory of slavery. Since the favela represents the break with the past, Escritore's own search to retrieve the memory of slavery, and cause the rest of the Pelourinho community to remember, is met with incomprehension and hostility. By the end of the novel, his killers are revealed as the same people he comes to be reconciled with, his cousins, the descendants of Ndindi Grand Orage. And even after his death, as the inhabitants of Pelourinho try to piece together his reconciliatory, and in essence, Messianic mission, their narrative entails not so much a recollection of the enslaved past that was central to Escritore's quest, but more a remembering of Escritore/Africano himself. Once more slavery is displaced from the realm of memory, and it is instead the search for memory as represented by Escritore/Africano that is the focus of remembrance. The novel thus begins with a death – the death of the quest for memory, and Leda and Innocencio's individual rememberings of the enigmatic figure of Escritore/Africano interspersed with accounts of their own lives, and the failure of the Pelourinho community to recognise the mission of this martyr of memory. The Messianic references are obvious – the reconciliatory mission of the prophesied Escritore/Africano is met with rejection, and he is killed by those with whom he has come to be reconciled. His death is followed by a resurrection after the requisite three days, whereupon Escritore/Africano returns to Africa in the form of a migrant osprey:

Sans doute sortirais-tu ainsi plus aisément de ta tombe pour regagner l'Afrique: 'Pas plus de trois jours dans le trou où on l'a mis, avait-on prédit dans les chaumières. Ensuite, il se transformera en balbuzard. Il lui suffira alors d'un coup d'ailes pour traverser la mer.' (*Pelourinho*, p. 217)

It is not merely the memories of the individual lives of Pelourinho's impoverished inhabitants that overwhelm the narrative quest for memory. The setting of the novel in Pelourinho sees Monénembo's characters, especially Innocencio in his capacity as tour guide, navigate the streets of the historic quarter. The landmarks of the town – the Largo de Pelourinho where the pillory once stood, the Praça Municipal (Municipal plaza), the Terreio Jesus (Jesuit church and school) – all form Monénembo's landscape of the city, and the background to the narrative. But his focus is not so much the architectural centre in the form of the monumental buildings and squares, but the periphery, the margins of Pelourinho – the favela. Even the pillory for which the town is named is only mentioned twice, and each time it is seen through Leda's visions of the past as a place in which the hardship of slavery is experienced through the figure of the whipped slave Allagbada who refuses to adopt the Christian name given to him by his master. The spaces in which slavery has been experienced are almost ignored in this quest for the memory of slavery. However, the architecture of the city provides a mnemonic map that points to the memory of slavery. Escritore makes lengthy visits to the Largo de Pelourinho, the place where the pillory once stood. Place names figure as reminders of the town's history of slavery – Terreiro Jesus, Praça Municipal, and Largo de Pelourinho, all places which at one time were the site of the whipping post. In depicting the landscape of Pelourinho, Monénembo denotes the city's tourist attractions, but there is also a subconscious level of knowledge, a repressed and unspoken memory through which the reader is invited to decipher the significance of these sites to Pelourinho's history of slavery.

Although there is a reluctance within the novel to endow historic sites of slavery with its memory, this is countered by the use of the *barzinho du Preto Velho* as a *lieu de mémoire*, not an official memorial to slavery, but as a place in which slavery is remembered and spoken of. Preto Velho's bar which is located in the favela is frequented by Escritore/Africano, and is the place on which the inhabitants of Pelourinho converge. Here Escritore meets the members of the Pelourinho community, including Innocencio, who will later locate the descendants of Ndindi. It is also here that Escritore shares the legend about the ancestor, Ndindi. Amidst drinking and provocative conversation the patrons of the bar are challenged by Escritore to remember slavery, and his own portrayal of the memory of slavery is problematised by the inhabitants of a favela that is characterised by amnesia. In the bar, Innocencio asks Escritore to prove his account of slavery through tangible evidence, instead of abstract information such as the legend of Ndindi the king, his emblem (le figa), and African place names such as Oyo, Ife, Onim (later Lagos, Nigeria), and Ketu (Benin), from which slaves were transported to Brazil. Innocencio says:

Mais, dans ce genre d'affaire, il faut partir d'une base solide [...] Hum! plus solide que ton figa et que ta légende. Un indice. Par exemple le nom ou le prénom ou la dernière adresse connue. Mais toi, tu ne sors que des drôleries, des trucs comme Oyo, Onim, Ketu, Ife. (*Pelourinho*, p. 62)

The matrix of the slave trade and the experience of slavery is defined through the origin of the slaves, their points of embarkation in Africa, and the places in which they settled in the New World, as is Pelourinho, the historic place of the whipping post. Yet this does not provide the concrete evidence that is required of Escritore. The subtext to this challenge in the bar is Monénembo's symbolic use of names, of

which most of his characters remain ignorant. Not only is Innocencio, Escritore's eventual guide, the namesake of the whipped slave of Leda's visions of the past, but the name of the bar is in itself a mnemonic marker of slavery, Preto Velho being the name in the Afro-Brazilian Umbanda religion (a combination of African religion, Catholicism and Spiritism) which denotes the spirit of an old male slave who has been flogged to death at the whipping post. Preto Velho, the old man who owns the bar, states that he is of Mozambican origin:

C'est une rombière du Mozambique qui a fait la mère de ma mère.
La preuve: je suis bien le dénommé Preto Velho [...] Vous, rejetez
du Pelourinho, lequel d'entre vous se souvient encore de l'année
dernière? Et même de ce qu'il a fait hier? Vous étiez tellement soûls
que vous ne saviez plus votre nom. Escritore, tu as bien fait de
venir. Ramène-leur la mémoire, même si cela ne leur plait pas.
(*Pelourinho*, p. 63)

Reiterating the motif of the whipped slave, Innocencio Juanicio de Conceição de Araujo, who has been witnessed in Leda's visions, it is this 70 year-old spirit of the whipped slave, Preto Velho, that chastises the people of Pelourinho for their amnesia, and asks Escritore to challenge them to remember the past. However the consequences for Escritore prove fatal. The unwillingness to remember is superseded by ignorance and hostility on the part of his cousins who despite their claims of being linked to Africa through their tattoo of Ndindi's emblem, are unaware of Escritore's identity and his relationship to them. Through a case of mistaken identity, they murder him in the streets of Pelourinho.

Re-placing memory

In this section, I would like to distinguish between the enslavement and transportation of Africans from the kingdom of Dahomey, and slavery as experienced by victims of the trade, which will be my focus here. Having considered the emplacement of the memory of the *slave trade* in Dahomey, and the displacement of the memory of *slavery* from Pelourinho, I will turn to the immaterial cognitive experience which is transmitted across time and space in the form of identity, language, and religion and the interaction between these elements and the notion of return. Glissant argues that the trauma of the Middle Passage creates a rupture with the past, and with African culture.¹² To claims that the Middle Passage creates a rupture with Africa, in which only a negligible part of African culture remains in the slave consciousness, the African American Henry Louis Gates argues that the transportation of the slaves did not result in amnesia, but in the trans-placement of memory, stating that ‘the notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies. The full erasure of traces of culture as splendid, as ancient, and as shared by the slave traveller would have been extremely difficult.’¹³ Regarding Glissant and Gates’ hypotheses on the preservation of African culture across the various arenas of slavery in the Americas and indeed over the centuries in which slavery was practised, including those following its abolition, Celia Britton states that ‘the degree to which African

¹² Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 14-15.

¹³ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.4.

cultures have survived in the Americas clearly depends upon a whole range of historical, demographic and economic factors and varies greatly between different black communities; it is, therefore, not the case that if Gates is right, Glissant must simply be wrong, and vice versa.’¹⁴

Whilst the horrors of the Middle Passage signify both the trauma of slavery and distancing from Africa for the slave, the crossing over the Atlantic cannot be isolated from the torturous journeys over land that led captives from their homes in the hinterland to the slave ships at the shore. Whether they were prisoners of the numerous wars waged by African kingdoms, or they were obtained through onward sale or kidnapping, confinement in the forts and in the baracoons was as integral to slavery as was the initial capture and subsequent transportation both within and outside of Africa. If one of the first casualties of forgetting is identity, with slaves being given new Christian names by their masters upon arrival in the New World, then it must be noted that often times this renaming occurred at the point of embarkation even before the Middle Passage. In *Pelourinho*, Leda witnesses the slave Allagbada who on refusing to relinquish his African identity in place of the new Christian name given to him by his master, is flogged at the pillory for nine days, only surrendering when his master threatens to flog his pregnant wife. For Alem’s principal character in *Esclaves* – the unnamed Vodun priest – his slave name, Miguel, is given to him by the captain of the Don Fransisco at the point of embarkation. When on arrival in Recife he is asked his name by a fellow slave, Sule, he recalls his new slave name, yet is unable to remember his original African name:

¹⁴ Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (London: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 150.

‘Comment vous appelez-vous? Moi c’est Sule.

- Moi c’est Miguel.

- Non, pas cela, je veux dire, votre vrai nom?’

Il y eut un vide dans sa tête. Il ne sut plus, sur le coup, quel était son nom d’antan. Oui, il avait raison, Miguel n’était pas son véritable nom, alors quel était le vrai? Le vide se mua en vertige. Il ferma les yeux, secoua la tête pour remettre en place ses idées, mais sa mémoire s’était enlisée dans un sable fin de bord d’océan, sur une plage où on l’avait fait tourner neuf fois autour de l’arbre dit de l’Oubli. (*Esclaves*, p. 147)

Alem indicates here that the experience of amnesia occurs on the shores of Africa, before the Middle Passage is undertaken, as Miguel, whose original name is never mentioned in the novel, identifies the site of oblivion as the Tree of Forgetting, one of the sites in the earlier-mentioned Ouidah Slave Route project. Robin Law discusses the symbolism attributed in the Ouidah slavery memorial to both the Tree of Forgetting (L’Arbre de l’oubli) on the periphery of Ouidah, and the Tree of return (L’Arbre du retour) which is located near the beach, further along the route taken by the slaves:

As told nowadays, slaves were required to walk around the Tree of Forgetting (men nine times, women seven) in order to make them lose their memories, the purpose of this practice being to prevent their spirits returning to trouble those who had enslaved and sold them. Contrariwise they ran round the ‘Tree of Return’ (three times) in order to ensure the return of their spirits to Africa.¹⁵

The first circumambulation, which is mentioned by Alem, was intended to cause slaves to forget their past of freedom, their identity, and notions of home, whilst the second was to promote the return of the spirits of dead slaves to Africa. Law does however dispute this practice of circumambulation as a recent construct

¹⁵ Robin Law, *Ouidah: the social history of a West African slaving 'port', 1727-1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 153.

invented for the Ouidah memorials, as these claims cannot be verified by contemporary accounts. Nevertheless if we are to site the memory of slavery and the slave trade through the historic spaces in which they have been practised and experienced, then one can argue that whilst the slave ship is a site of forgetting for Glissant, it is the ‘Tree of Forgetting’ rooted in Ouidah that embodies this amnesia for Alem.

The second part of Alem’s novel, ‘Nouveaux mondes’, which records the capture, sale and transportation of the Vodun ritual master to Brazil, also details his daily lived experience of slavery. Here one sees the Vodun priest’s conversion to Islam, a religion practised by other slaves in Brazil, and his involvement in the Bahia rebellion, also called the Male rebellion (after the Yoruba word for Muslim – *imale*) because of its predominantly Muslim leadership. The period of the rebellion coincides with the illegal trade in slaves by Brazil, as well as the 19th century Fulani Jihad that swept across West Africa. Bahia therefore received its slave population from the captives that were taken during these wars and shipped off the Western coast of Africa. I earlier mentioned the trans-placement of cognitive experience that accompanies migration, and in this case the transportation of slaves across the Atlantic. These slaves brought with them shared language, as most were Yoruba or Hausa speaking, as well as shared religion through their contact with Islam, and it is the transformation that these African slaves effectuated upon the socio-economic landscape of Brazil that is the focus of the second section of Alem’s novel. Originating primarily from West Africa, unlike the predominantly Angolan and Congolese slave populations in Rio de Janeiro, these Yoruba, Hausa, and Dahomean slaves, found a profound sense of

unity through their faith, and a means of communication through the use of Arabic script which was indecipherable to the master. In the case of the Bahia slaves, and those in the surrounding regions who joined the Male rebellion, the inscription of their social codes onto Brazilian society was not benign. In fact both slaves and former slaves posed such a threat to Bahian society after the rebellion that the Brazilian authorities ordered the large scale deportation of the culprits to the Western coast of Africa.

For the slaves and former slaves involved in the rebellion, religion created a sense of unity and a means of communication, whilst for others the preservation of African religion also served to perpetuate cultural elements such as language as part of ritual incantation. Language thus became sacred through its ritualisation, and was transmitted across generations, for example, in the predominance of the Yoruba Orisha worship amongst the enslaved as seen in Candomblé and Umbanda religious practices in Bahia which consist of a syncretic coexistence of both Orisha ritual and the Catholic faith. In *Pelourinho*, the pantheon of Yoruba gods – Shango, Oritsanla, Ogun, Eshu – are venerated through Leda's practice of Orisha worship. She receives visions from Eshu, the messenger god in Yoruba tradition, and when Escritore/Africano arrives in Pelourinho, she states that she has had prior revelation of his coming, and that he is the one prophesied by the old song passed down to her by her mother, and now sung by Leda, herself.

Éku lai lai
 Éku a ti djo
 Je salue les gens que je n'ai pas vus
 Depuis longtemps [...]
 C'est demain qu'il vient resplendir
 Le grand prince du Dahomey. (*Pelourinho*, p. 41)

The Yoruba phrases *Éku lai lai* and *Éku a ti djo*, both greetings to loved ones that have not been seen for a long time, perhaps a greeting by slaves to long-lost relatives in Africa, are loosely translated in the following sentence. When earlier on in the novel, Leda laughs at this antiquated song, whose meaning she does not understand, she is chastised by her adoptive mother, Maria. After the death of her mother, Leda is sent to live in a convent, and it is here that Maria, her adoptive mother explains the significance of the song that has been passed down to Leda by her mother. Maria says that the song is a password, a means of communication between slaves, and one that now encapsulates the memory of slavery:

Ne la prends pas pour une simple chanson mais pour le mot de passe que les Nagos, les Gégés, les Yoruba, les Minas, les Haoussas, les Foulanis se chuchotaient dans l'ombre, au Corpo Santo et à Barroquinha, quand il y avait du grabuge dans l'air. Il y a bien longtemps de ça. A cette époque, nos pères ne valaient que deux arrobes de soca, et pour un rien, on les chicotait hart et ban au largo de Pelourinho. La chanson raconte une histoire vraie.
(*Pelourinho*, p. 43)

It is through this song, and her visions that the blind Leda recognises Africano saying: 'le tatouage, les scarifications sur le front et au milieu des tempes, ton odeur d'initié et le vrai nom de ton village. Tout même le plat de ton orixa, la chanson m'avait déjà tout dit sur toi.'¹⁶ Whilst Leda's version of the song speaks of the return of the Prince of Dahomey, the ambivalence lies in the fact that Dahomey royalty are portrayed in the novel as partners in the slave trade, having paid a courtesy visit to Bahia as part of trading relations. It is to this prince of Dahomey that Leda now alludes, in her address to Escritore, descendant of the Mahi king, Ndindi.

¹⁶ Monénembo, p. 37.

For Leda, the memory of slavery is a recollection of Africa, one that is indispensable to ritual, whilst ritual at the same time becomes vested with, and preserved by, this memory. Thus in *Pelourinho* we see the displacement of historic sites of memory, in return for a valorisation of African culture, which in itself constitutes not the commemoration of enslavement and the trauma that it entailed, but a recollection of Africa that is exhibited and transmitted through the immaterial – religion, carnival, and song. However although Leda's occupation is as a seamstress who embroiders African clothes, she despises the commodification of the African heritage, through memory tourism in which descendants of former slaves visit Africa and adopt an African culture from which they have hitherto been distanced. She criticises her boss, Gerovà who returns from a trip to Sierra Leone, sporting an Afro, wearing African dress, and whose business becomes the manufacture and sale of similar clothes in Pelourinho. In an interior monologue, Leda says:

Noble idée, sans doute, que de faire connaître l'Afrique à ses rejets égarés [...] Je remarque, moi, ta brodeuse, que tu en as rapporté la mode. Tu as porté des boubous, tu t'es coiffée afro. Non, je ne te reproche pas de vivre de ton héritage. Fais-toi des bagues et des tuniques songhaï, revends le tout aux nantis et dévore l'argent que tes combines te procurent. (*Pelourinho*, p. 80)

Unlike Alem and Ouidah, Monénembo avoids the impregnation of the landscape of Pelourinho with the memory of slavery, choosing instead to portray African heritage as transmitted in the immaterial, hence Leda's contempt for Gerovà's implicit objectification of this memory. Yet Leda herself would try to reify her own memories by seeing them as tangible objects that she can take with her: her

sandals which remind her of her mother, religious relics of her worship of Orisha as well as her Catholic faith, and the song about the king of Dahomey:

J'ai gardé les sandales, mon seul bien de famille, avec l'image de la Vierge, la double hache de Xango et la broche héritée de Maria. Si je n'avais pas peur d'exagérer, je dirais aussi: la chanson. Pour moi, c'est un objet comme un autre, comme l'horloge de la Piedade, comme l'amulette à la main fermée qui ceinture ton bras, mon mystérieux Africano. (*Pelourinho*, p. 79)

Monémbo's portrayal of memory therefore comes full circle from a reluctance to be pinned down to physical spaces and material objects to the reification of the song which embodies the memory of slavery, as well as the language and ritual of Africa.

Having established that the crossing over the Atlantic inspires both amnesia, and a fragmented remembering of the past, I will end this section with the notion of return, and the forgetting and remembering that result from the second crossing. The historical and cultural relationship between Bahia and Benin presents a unique case which allows for the trans-placement of culture through departure, and an examination of the transformations that have occurred in Africa, the initial point of departure, as well as the memories of slavery that persist and are perpetuated upon return to Africa. In 1835, slaves, freed slaves, and slave descendants who had participated in the Malé revolt were sent to the Slave Coast – Togo, Benin, and Nigeria – from which they had originated. They returned as freed slaves who had earned their freedom through their rebellion. No longer merely African, they were Afro-Brazilian, *retornados*, or *Agoudah*, as they were known. Thus the third segment of *Esclaves* begins with the deportation of the former Vodun master Miguel (now renamed Sule) to his home in Dahomey,

whilst the epilogue, 'La Banalité du mal' is a reflection on return, freedom and forgetting. Whereas for Monénembo's character Escritore, the search for memory is proactive, a return to Brazil to seek lost loved ones, on his arrival in Dahomey after decades of slavery in Brazil, Miguel/Sule's reception by those left behind is underwhelming:

Touchant le sol, il s'était souvenu de vieux gestes ancestraux. Personne ne l'attendait [...] personne pour lui donner l'accolade fraternelle. Parti dans l'anonymat, de la soute du bateau négrier, il était de retour dans l'indifférence totale de ses frères [...] Tout un pays faisait usage des oublis, abondamment. Pour ne plus se souvenir de quoi, en réalité, il l'ignorait complètement. (*Esclaves*, p.237)

It is as if whilst home has been re-imagined in the slave consciousness as populated with brethren that mourn the loss and await the return of the slave, the reality is of a land that never realised that millions of its men, women and children had been sold into slavery. There is a marked absence of responsibility as slaves have been forgotten, even when they have preserved their own memories of home during their enslavement in the New World.

This forgetting applies not only to those who have remained in Africa, but also to the returnees. The returned former slaves recall not the trauma of slavery, but the culture and civilisation of Brazil, attempting to recreate this in Africa. This is a conscious forgetting of the experience of slavery following the crossing of the Atlantic and upon return to Africa. The returnees retained their Portuguese slave names which remain in circulation on the Western coast of Africa today, seeing themselves as shaped by Brazilian culture, more than by their now distant African origins. This partial remembering means that as is the case with African culture in *Pelourinho*, the memory of slavery is replaced by that of Brazil re-imagined, an

idealised construct of the past. Afro-Brazilians perpetuated Brazilian customs such as dress, food, names, religion and carnival, in order to maintain their new identity in Africa, and exercise their superiority over the local population. The prologue of *Esclaves* therefore depicts the protagonist's disdain for the Agoudah community's adoption of the term Afro-Brazilian:

Afro-brésilien! Le qualificatif lui répugnait, mais c'était ainsi que les gens de sa communauté avaient commencé à se designer entre eux [...] Et jusqu'à sa mort, en dehors des convenances sociales, il ne se sentira jamais membre de cette communauté, allant jusqu'à enseigner à ses enfants d'oublier que leur père avait quelque lien avec les soi-disant Brésiliens! (*Esclaves*, p. 251)

Unlike his fellow former slaves who seem to romanticize the past, he remembers the shame of slavery, describing his experience in Brazil as:

La mort, de la honte, et de l'humiliation de l'esclavage. Pas de quoi faire de lui autre chose qu'un homme qui a beaucoup souffert de la main de ses propres frères et de la cruauté de ses maîtres blancs. (*Esclaves*, p. 250)

For some slave descendants and former slaves, the forgetting of the horrors of slavery is total, or perhaps their motive is revenge. Either way, they join the merchants of Brazilian and Portuguese descent who have settled on the coast of West Africa, and themselves become involved in the illegal slave trade to Brazil. In *Esclaves*, the son of Felix Santana, the major organiser of the Bahia revolt is among the many Afro-Brazilians who become involved in the trade in slaves from Africa to Brazil.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have referred to memory primarily as the cognitive and bodily experiences that pertain to sociocultural identity and geographical space. By considering departure from and return to Africa in the case of *Esclaves*, I have examined the use of the figure of the forgotten king and geographical sites of the slave trade as devices for the retrieval of the memory of slavery, and the emplacement of that memory within the nineteenth-century kingdom of Dahomey. In *Pelourinho*, one sees the thwarting of the search for memory in the tangible as the significance of slavery in the historical town, its architectural landscape, and the place of the whipping post, is effaced by time, métissage and the daily existence of the inhabitants of the town. Yet the displacement of memory from the material to the immaterial is evident. Benin and Bahia constitute the matrix for the memory of slavery and the slave trade, two sides of a transatlantic memory that are explored by both Monénembo and Alem, each a conscious quest for memory, yet at the end a falling into forgetting. The unifying factor is African culture as it remains in Brazil, and Brazilian culture as it continues to exist on the West coast of Africa. This is the memory that endures amidst the transatlantic exchange, slaves and former slaves departing and returning, bringing with them a trans- placement of the experiences that define their everyday existence, and therefore a trans- placement of memory that is transmitted across generations. By evoking these physical spaces, the memory of slavery and the slave trade are re-sited within a historical and geographical space, and the memory of *time* simultaneously becomes a memory of *place* – Brazil or Dahomey, which is in turn remembered and transmitted, or indeed repressed, as the memory of slavery.

Conclusion

The memory of slavery and the slave trade as represented by Francophone West African literature is one in which forgetting co-exists with remembering, and silence is only *occasionally* interrupted by narrative. This literature undertakes a quest to search for and narrate Africa's memory of slavery and the slave trade. Remembering is therefore anamnestic, a struggle not to relegate the past to forgetting, but to recollect its fragments, and reconstruct a memory of the past. The oral epic foregrounds remembering as the preservation and reproduction of memory as a social code, an embodiment of the values of a group that is linked to a social, cultural and material space. The griot figure extols the virtues of nobility and belonging (Songhay), military dominance and slave raiding (Segou) and heroism (Fulani), contrasting them with the irreversibility of slave status as a threat to civilisation and the vulnerability brought about by the slave trade.

The epic also highlights the manipulation of the account of the past for socio-political purposes. Memory thus becomes inseparable from the socio-political agendas by which omission, invention and fiction contrive to marginalise the slave past from the social memory of the group. Yet this is challenged and subverted in order to retrieve the memory of slavery and the slave trade from oblivion. Returning to the past via the oral epic, which in itself is not a crystallised memory of the past, Ouologuem and Sow Fall imitate the style and/or content of the genre, the epic in the novel signifying not merely an account of a community's past, but also the individual search for a collective memory. The manipulation of memory in the epic form is countered by these authors' employment of invention and fiction in order to transform the epic for their own purposes. They challenge

the epic's role as a social memory that reflects the totality of the group, highlighting its selective and elitist remembering of the past, and exposing it as a social construct of the griot class, one which fails to adequately represent the multiple voices of the group, in particular, the marginalised slave voice, in favour of an idealistic portrayal of the group identity. By challenging the supposed collective memory of the oral epic, both Ouologuem and Sow Fall transform the epic, incorporating the memory of the slave past into the oral narrative.

With respect to the oral epic, it is clear that the audience is the socio-ethnic group whose ideals are being extolled. However within the novels the imagined audiences may differ. The account of the epic of Fouta Djallon is recited to the patriarch's family in *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, whilst Ouologuem's epic is recounted for the benefit of the niggertrash. Ouologuem's audience is one of silent listeners who attend the retelling of the epic without contestation, as this role of challenging epic and written accounts of the empire is already taken on by the griot. However in Sow Fall's novel, the epic is challenged through a questioning of the marginalisation of the slave lineage, leading to its adaptation in order to incorporate the slave past. The capacity of the epic to simultaneously extol and challenge the ideals of the society from which it emerges is evident in *Le devoir* in which the griot gives an account of the Nakemian past whilst at the same time subverting the dominant narrative through the use of irony. Similarly, in the Segou epic, the subject of slavery, and specifically the trope of the honey beer become tools through which the griot subverts the course of the narrative and the purpose of the epic, openly mocking the nobility's slave status as well as the vulnerability of the city-state of Segou.

Where the slave voice is silent, and it is impossible to challenge the dominant master narrative, the work of Bassori, Ly, Zada and Ouologuem opens up alternative ways of narrating memory. The slave voice is not heard as in the oral narrative. Instead the slave body is viewed, as the repression of the slave voice gives way to corporeal narratives. The trauma of capture and enslavement is a wound that marks the body and transforms it into a memory in itself. This wound is a physical manifestation of both the psychological and physiological trauma of slavery through which corporeal boundaries are breached. The initial event of enslavement is narrated and transmitted corporeally, and relived through the repetition of the wounded slave body. The body thus experiences remembering as *mnemne*, an unconscious evocation of the past that appears repeatedly, unsolicited. Similarly, through repetition, the lived experience of the female slave body becomes a narrative of her victimhood, an otherness in which paralysis, rape, genital mutilation and the impotence of motherhood equate with slavery, and one in which her agency is seen in the mimesis of the reproductive capacity of the female body.

The use of memory to preserve the values of the group is not restricted to the oral epic. Within the Saharan context, memory, in the form of the social codes that inhabit material and immaterial spaces, also serves as a reminder of slave status, or indeed former slave status through which social, religious, political and economic practices prevent the slave or ex-slave from escaping the slave past. This is relevant to the continued practice of historical slavery as a legacy of the trans-Saharan traffic in slaves, and the discrimination against people of slave status. In the novels of both Beyrouk and Yedaly, the social and geographical

space of enslavement is inhabited by such social markers as master-slave relationships, tribal identity, and racial discrimination. By reconstructing identity through social mobility and a change in formal status, the slave or ex-slave attempts to leave behind this collective memory in which s/he remains bound to the master. Yet the pull of the memory of slavery as symbolised by the master's camp make the forgetting of slave status impossible.

In the work of both Monénembo and Alem, one observes the quest for a memory of the transatlantic trade and its relentless juxtaposition with the repudiation of that memory through the replacement of the traumatic slave past with a re-imagined cultural memory of Africa in Brazil, or indeed Brazil in Africa, by slave descendants. The duality of memory contributes to its repression as African complicity in the slave trade is confronted with the shame that often characterises the experience of enslavement across the Atlantic. This duality creates a tension in which the stigmatisation of slave status and the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade lead to the relegation of the slave past to oblivion. The reconstruction of memory, in particular collective memory, therefore applies to the quest for origins in the context of transatlantic crossings, in which memories of freedom in Africa and of enslavement in Brazil are challenged, and collective memories are exchanged for the individual present-day existence. Thus in Monénembo's protagonist's search for an idealised past, Pelourinho's sites of memory are transformed by present-day individual realities of poverty and hybridity, and social spaces and memories of culture replace the anamnestic search for the slave past. Yet in Alem's novel, notions of departure and return

across the Atlantic lay emphasis on the significance of physical sites in Ouidah as a tangible memory of the transatlantic system of trade.

My research has uncovered a significant number of novels that treat the subject of slavery and the slave trade, some of which have hitherto received no critical attention. Most noteworthy is the primacy of domestic slavery in the majority of French West African novels in which slavery and the slave trade are represented. In fact even those novels, such as *Et le ciel* and *Yessar*, which reflect the legacy of the trans-Saharan trade are geographically situated in Africa and can therefore be seen as representative of domestic slavery. What emerges from an analysis of all these novels is a pluralistic notion of the memory of slavery and the slave trade in which memory is *mnemne* and *anamnesis*, individual and collective, forgetting and remembering, traumatic repression and narrative. Social memory co-exists with the individually authored novel to interrogate the nature of oral, corporeal and spatial narratives of memory.

By confronting the earliest novel in this corpus, Ouologuem's *Le devoir* (1963), with Alem's *Esclaves*, written almost fifty years later, certain trends become evident. Both authors controversially acknowledge African agency in the practice of slavery and the slave trade. Yet like almost all the authors that have been discussed, Ouologuem's text remains confined to slavery *within* Africa whether this is with respect to domestic slavery or the trans-Saharan slave trade, and it is in this context that he highlights African agency. Although Alem treats the issue of African agency in the slave trade, his novel is distinct from that of Ouologuem, and indeed the other writers, because of his consistent engagement with the departure of the enslaved from the African continent and the experience

of slavery in the New World. One can therefore attribute the paucity of narratives of the transatlantic trade in slaves to the temporary repression of memory to which the chronology of this literature bears testament. Through a marked shift from the focus on domestic slavery to a willingness to tackle the trauma of transatlantic slavery over time, these novels indicate an evolution with respect to narrating the memory of slavery, in particular the trauma of the transatlantic trade in which African memories of slave trading coexist with the shame of enslavement, and victimhood stands alongside agency.

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