

Chapter 9

THE POSTSLAVERY GAMBIA RIVER: SILENCES, MEMORIES, SIGNPOSTS¹

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The British administration of the Gambia River declared the institution of slavery illegal only in 1930, though the slave trade had been banned in 1894 and 1906. Was the abolition of slavery effective? Gambians have differing opinions on this point. Some follow the Islamic definition of slavery that they have learned by listening to Friday Mosque sermons and by chatting with learned Muslims: the slave is the man (or the woman) that you capture or buy. This is the strict meaning of the Mandinka word *jongo*, which translates as “slavery” in English. However, there is a broader use of the same word, which points to all the conditions that in the twentieth century, and to some extent still today, have brought people into tight and enduring personal dependence and subordination: “They say it is finished, but it is not.”²

Behind this statement are the evolving relationships between the descendants of precolonial slaves and masters, the gestures of submission and declarations of dependence that citizens have learned to display in front of postcolonial big men, and last but not least the political manipulation of secret grudges between purported “victims” and “perpetrators” of the nineteenth-century internal slave trade. The former president of the Republic of The Gambia, Yaya Jammeh, proved able to articulate these resentments, while at the same time exploiting citizens’ unpaid labor on his private farms in different parts of the country. In the late 1950s, the notion of slavery helped Gambian intellectuals to articulate the anticolonial struggles in

terms understandable to rural folk whose ancestors had experienced the brutality of enslavement and the slave trade. After the military coup of 1994, which brought Jammeh to power, the same notion pointed to the political repression and moral oppression that the Gambian citizenry suffered under his regime.³

Thus, in changing contours and shapes, the idea of slavery continues to haunt people's minds and morals. How should researchers address all this? Of late, African slavery studies have started to turn the legacies of slavery into an object of historical investigation by making the argument that African societies are as much postslavery as postcolonial,⁴ and that many of the social and political problems of late twentieth-century Africa that previous scholarship depicted as the byproduct of colonial administrative policies (like ethnic violence) have roots in the longer aftereffects of internal slavery and the slave trade, which the colonizers were never really willing or able to master.⁵ One of these aftereffects, which I explore in the following pages, is the politics of censorship that postslavery African societies have followed in regard to their slave-dealing and slaveholding past. There is a paradox here. Leaders in this field of studies, as well as African intellectuals and younger generations of scholars, have underlined the layers of silence that have shrouded the legacy of slavery since the legal abolition of this institution. Yet, and this is the paradox, the same scholarship has shown that a wealth of knowledge, referring to experiences of internal enslavement, the slave trade, and slave emancipation, has continued to circulate in spite of the efforts of twentieth-century African nations, communities, and individuals to forget this part of their past. Notions such as that of the "public" or "open" secret have helped scholars to address widely shared but not overtly discussed information on people's ancestry and status, while the study of rituals, historical narratives, folktales, songs, proverbs, and body postures has provided clues to

otherwise overlooked aspects of the history of enslavement and the slave trade.⁶

I have maintained that this shaded knowledge of slavery is bounded generationally and shifts dynamically together with the overall cultural and historical imaginary to which people are exposed through education, media, and contemporary abolitionist discourses on human trafficking, forced marriage, and bonded labor.⁷ But even if the recollections of enslavement and life in slavery of men and women born in the first decades of the twentieth century are different from those of their children and grandchildren, the vitality of this legacy raises an intriguing historical question: has not silence preserved memories that officially were supposed to be erased? Historians and anthropologists of African societies have stressed the need to historicize and contextualize silences in order to fully understand their place in the fabric of African social memory and historicity.⁸ The insights of sociologists Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger are relevant here. For these scholars, silence is a device of public recollection as much as talk often becomes an instrument of forgetting.⁹ Events covered by abundant mnemonic representations may end up losing relevance in the eyes of the people, while the act of keeping silent cherishes the past through the very practice of censorship. Silences thus have the interesting effect of signposting events or situations that a community considers socially and culturally so relevant that they deserve to be left unspoken.

The historical evidence provided in the following pages exemplifies this outcome in two ways. Jenyeri (or Genieri) is a community on the south bank of the River Gambia, rebuilt after having been destroyed by one of the Senegambian religious reformers of the second part of the nineteenth century, Fode Kaba Dumbuyaa.¹⁰ An Islamic reformer and warlord, he ravaged the south bank of the River Gambia between 1878 and 1901, when a joint British and French military expedition defeated him. Jenyeri people say that the survivors of the

destruction swore an oath of silence to handle the recollections of what had happened during the siege. From that day on, the social memory of this event lived hidden in the reminiscences that aging parents entrusted to their children, and that the latter assembled patiently through fragments of conversations, when the topic surfaced accidentally before disappearing into the shadows again. The postslavery course of Baddibu (a region on the north bank of the Gambia River where the issue of slave ancestry is debated hotly up to the present) reveals another possibility. Here, silence does not mark a well-defined event in a long gone precolonial past. Instead, it commemorates a score of unfinished struggles between slave and master descendants that has spilled over generations. These struggles build on a substratum of resistance to slavery that manifested itself as early as the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1894. Baddibu “masters” struggled hard to maintain control over their “slaves,” as much as the latter reacted fiercely against the cultural ideology that marginalized them as second-class members of local communities. I put “slaves” and “masters” in quotation marks because the contemporary meaning of the Mandinka word *jonyaa* (which commonly translates to the English “slavery”) and its equivalents in other local languages are different from their meaning in the late nineteenth century, when the slave trade was a hard reality and the institution of slavery was socioeconomically strong. What remains now is a voluntary bond in the name of tradition between the descendants of yesterday’s slaves and yesterday’s masters. There is no guarantee that this relationship dates back to the old days of enslavement and the slave trade, as in Baddibu and other parts of the Gambia River, the number of people seen as “slaves” kept growing in colonial times through marriages between migrant agricultural laborers who settled in local communities and local women of slave origins. The status of slave descendant, like that of slave in earlier times, was inherited matrilineally. Thus,

if these women were not freed according to local custom, their children ended up being classified as slave descendants, even when the fathers were free men.¹¹ In addition, the voluntariness of the bond made it possible for “slaves” to look for better “masters,” that is, masters who agreed to (or better, could afford) the obligations of care and generosity traditionally attached to their role. Impoverished slave owners rapidly lost their slaves in the early colonial period out of a preference for richer men who could sustain large entourages of people.

Jenyeri: “They Laid a Curse against Anyone Who Narrates Those Events”

As with many other Senegambian villages since the early 1980s, droughts and declining government investment in the agricultural sector have made Jenyeri largely dependent on wage labor and the remittances and investments of its international migrants. In the late 1940s, when the colonial government chose it as the site of research on nutritional deficiency and the socioeconomic causes of rural poverty, migration had not started and most of the villagers lived off agriculture. For three years, Margaret Haswell and her team surveyed the social relations and the economic activities of the community.¹² Hailing from wealthier areas of the protectorate, some of her assistants, whom I met as elderly men in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, could remember the poverty of Jenyeri people: housing was rudimentary, and apart from fish and little crocodiles, people had no meat to add to their groundnut soup.¹³ Haswell and her team collected Jenyeri’s foundation story. Every village of the Senegambia has one, which helps identify the first settlers and their relationships with the people who joined them in later years.¹⁴ Though an eighteenth-century map of the River Gambia in the travel account of Francis Moore shows the village in

its present location,¹⁵ oral accounts claim that Jenyeri was established in the early nineteenth century, when an ancestor of its founding family, the Sanneh, left his homeland in contemporary Guinea- Bissau to reach the southern bank of the Gambia River. There, near a creek that linked the hinterland to the river, he selected the site where he would build the village. This fortunate geographical location and relationships between the Sanneh and other important families of the Middle Casamance ensured Jenyeri's economic prosperity.

Changes came with the movement of Islamic renewal that was started on the north bank of the Gambia River by Maba Diakhou, an Islamic religious reformer who in 1861 began to raise the Muslim sections of the population against the local elites, who either followed traditional cults or practiced a version of Islam that Maba and his followers considered contaminated by local beliefs.¹⁶ In 1863, Maba invaded the south bank, but he was defeated in the battle of Kwinella, a village not far from Jenyeri and allied with it.

Peace did not last. In the course of the 1870s, Fode Kaba, whom some scholars count among Maba's disciples, seized control of a large part of the regions of Jarra and Kiang, where Jenyeri lay.¹⁷ For more than 20 years, in the name of Islam he kept pillaging one village after the other and feeding a slave trade with the north bank of the river.¹⁸ This made the fortune of the many trading communities that had sworn their allegiance to him, including Sankandi, where in 1900 the British official in charge of the south bank of the river, Cecil Sitwell, was killed by a group of Fode Kaba's supporters after having adjudicated a land dispute between Sankandi and the nearby community of Jataba.

Jenyeri was one of several villages of Kiang and Jarra that resisted conversion to Islam. The siege that Fode Kaba imposed on the community is an important episode in local history, and in 2013 the National Council for Arts and Culture (which is the Gambian institution caring for the preservation and valorization of the national cultural heritage)

inaugurated a small museum that displays one of the war drums of Fode Kaba, and provides a description of his clash with Jenyeri people.¹⁹ More information, however, lies behind this official representation of the events. Several versions of the history of the siege have kept circulating.²⁰ The one I heard was narrated by Aba Sanneh, one of the members of the Jenyeri founding family. In the 1960s, Aba moved out of the community and found a government job in the capital city of The Gambia, Banjul.²¹

People of Jenyeri were so strong and proud—Aba reported—that they thought themselves invulnerable to attacks; yet, they proved unable to defend their village, though Mussa Moloh Baldeh of Fuladu—another strong military leader of the time, whose area of influence shared a border with that of Fode Kaba—came to their support. Like many other historical narratives that refer to the great battles of the nineteenth century, the defeat of Jenyeri is remembered through a number of clichés, that is, stereotyped models designed to frame the recollections of the past that are found in the regional repertoires of oral traditions.²² First, Fode Kaba's victory is explained in terms of the prayers and spiritual means that he used to divert the attention of Mussa Moloh Baldeh and his men; second, and more difficult to talk about, are the betrayals inside the group of Jenyeri's defenders. Some of the people sided with the Islamic reformers, as remembered through the example of the son of Jenyeri's founder, who converted to Islam and moved to the nearby community of Kaiaf. Kaiaf supported Fode Kaba during the siege. In addition, Jenyeri turncoats passed to the enemy key information on the organization of the defenses. Be that as it may, this kind of past is difficult to discuss, not only because it deals with the traces of violence, death, and enslavement but because it speaks of cracks in the community networks that should protect individuals. According to Aba's reconstruction of the story, many women and children moved secretly to neighboring

communities; while there, they heard the war drum of Jenyeri, and the wind brought them the smell of the burning huts. Fire and smoke are recurring images in local narratives of enslavement:

When they realized that many people in Jenyeri were to be killed, they selected many of the young ones, both male and female, and [sneaked them] by the river through the swamps. They appeared in Batiling. Some stayed in Kwinella. When Jenyeri was set on fire, those who were still alive beat the large wooden drum. Those who [had sought refuge] in Batiling wept while saying: “Jenyeri is destroyed, Jenyeri is destroyed!”²³

The story goes that for many of the Jenyeri warriors, death was preferable to enslavement, another cliché of nineteenth-century narratives, which helps dignify the memory of the defeated. One of the warriors, called Wali Sanyang, was an ancestor of Aba’s. Being still young, he found sanctuary together with the women and children in Kwinella. Kwinella, and other villages allied with Jenyeri, used to send food to the beleaguered men and women, and one day Wali Sanyang volunteered for this service. This is Aba’s version of the story:

One of my forefathers, called Wali Sanyang, was not yet adult, as I was told by my grandfather. Wali volunteered to take the food to Jenyeri. When his uncle, who lived in Jenyeri, heard that, he sent a word to warn him not to come as he was the last hope of the family. If he refused the advice and came anyway, he would shoot him [Wali] down himself before he was enslaved. That message reached Kwinella and Wali was informed.²⁴

The young man did not take the advice, and he reached Jenyeri with a group of other men carrying the food. Fode Kaba’s men followed in their wake and the final confrontation took place. Wali Sanyang was killed by his uncle, but many other defeated villagers were

captured and enslaved. That is where Aba ended his narrative of the siege. It was one of his two wives that commented upon the overlooked side of the story. After the brutalities of the siege, survivors swore an oath of silence in order to piece together a sense of community life: a curse was laid against those who mentioned the events again. Whether this truly happened or it was only a rumor that since then has accompanied the recollection of Jenyeri's destruction is not the point at issue. In the construction of social memory, events that people think might have happened have the same relevance as those that actually happened, and historical and ethnographic literature on the Senegambia region shows that Aba's wife was referring to a widespread social practice: vows of peace between regions, communities, and even individuals are a common feature of precolonial history that also shape present-day social interactions. Embodied in joking behavior between the descendants of the two parties involved, memories of long gone conflicts help cultivate relationships of mutuality and collaboration and contribute to conflict resolution.²⁵

What Jenyeri's oath represents is an effort at forgetting, through which survivors actually fed the curiosity of following generations by forbidding conversations on the siege. The fact that Aba provided a fairly well articulated version of the story and that other researchers like me were able to collect narratives on the siege²⁶ shows that censorship was never complete: historical knowledge leaked through the very silences that were officially meant to suppress it. Bits and pieces of information were gathered together by men and women curious enough to investigate and to produce a narrative that circumvented the official silence. Whether there was an oath or whether the story is merely a symbol of the long exercise of censorship that Jenyeri's survivors and their descendants practiced, the effect was to mark the historical event of the siege as so relevant as to deserve silence. Similar prohibitions are typical of other communities that were rebuilt after their nineteenth-century

destruction. Even today, memories of that turbulent period can surface in the most unpredictable contexts, having survived the very mechanism of their suppression. In 2011, for instance, I was chatting with the neighbor of one of my Mandinka friends on the outskirts of the capital city, Banjul. The family of the man hailed from Jali, a village brutally destroyed by Mussa Moloh Baldeh in the late nineteenth century. Jali was a Muslim community, which sided with Fode Kaba.²⁷ While chatting, the man explained: “Mussa is not a name that the people of Jali use for their children.” Naming a child is a way to honor the memory of a person, and Jali villagers considered Mussa Moloh Baldeh unworthy of this kind of respect. Yet, by forbidding the use of his name, they have long continued to commemorate his actions.

Was Jenyeri’s oath sworn some years after the siege, when people started to resettle the village, as Aba’s wife reported? Or was it a development from colonial times, when the families of Jenyeri’s first settlers needed internal collaboration in order to maintain their prominence in the new setting of the British administration? In the late 1940s, Haswell met an economically strained community led by the founding Sanneh family and their close associates. Slave status restricted access to land and office, and free families could rely on their ties with slave descendants to provide agricultural labor.

When Haswell returned to Jenyeri in the early 1960s, she found that the households of the first settlers retained social prominence, while the poorest families had moved to the nearby commercial and administrative center of Soma or to the outskirts of Banjul. This trend intensified in the following decades. Many slave descendants left, and although the Jenyeri population kept growing, the size of their small compounds decreased and the overall management of community resources remained in the hands of the wealthier descendants of the founders. These people were able to access new agricultural technologies such as ox-plows and fertilizers, and they controlled the relationships between the village and the outer world of

government and development projects.²⁸ Social inequality and pressure on land increased in the second half of the twentieth century with the emergence of a class of landless people who hired themselves out for cash or food during the agricultural season. Apparently, Jenyeri's poor belonged to families either of newcomers or of slave descendants.²⁹

“If You Hear *Koorewo*, It Is the ‘Slaves’ They Are talking About!”

Slavery and the slave trade played an important role in the nineteenth-century history of Baddibu: the early involvement of this part of the Gambia River in the expansion of commercial groundnut cultivation made slave labor economically important for the development of local communities.³⁰ The Muslim revolution of Maba Diakhou and the conflicts that followed his death in 1867 produced a large number of captives who were either integrated into the Baddibu social fabric or dispersed to other areas of Senegambia. In addition, Baddibu was crossed by two major commercial axes. The first linked the mouth of the Gambia River to the territories of the interior, which throughout the nineteenth century remained an important source of slaves; the second connected the south and the north bank of the river, and thanks to the pillaging and marauding activities of Fode Kaba ensured a constant flow of captives that Baddibu slave dealers used to buy in exchange for cattle and horses.³¹ On the eve of colonization, the Baddibu slave population was a composite: there were people of slave ancestry, whom the British commissioner John Ozanne in his early reports on the north bank described as “hereditary slaves,” as well as men and women recently enslaved. The first had their autonomous households but they owed labor and a part of their harvest to their masters; the second lived with their masters and were often harshly exploited, especially the women.³² Their process of integration was just beginning. It was this second category of

slaves that took advantage of the announcement of the British Protectorate in 1894 to escape, either to return home (if they had not been caught so young that they had forgotten their place of origin) or to establish independent communities like the group of Diola captives that settled near the chiefly villages of Iliassa and Kattaba.³³ Though slaves did not play a particularly important role in the political and economic structure of the Diola communities of the lower Gambia and Casamance rivers, Diola were involved in the slave trade both as victims of late nineteenth-century Islamic reformers like Fode Kaba and as perpetrators. Diola men served as mercenaries under the flags of many of the military leaders of the time, such as Mussa Moloh Baldeh, and Diola bands often pillaged neighboring villages for cattle and captives to be exchanged for cloth and other goods with local merchants.

The people of Baddibu—the Baddibunkas, as they are called in Mandinka—are still handling, and not always successfully, the consequences of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century events: the use of slave labor to meet the needs of commercial agriculture, the 1894 and 1906 ordinances against the slave trade, and the efforts of Baddibu masters to maintain their social predominance in spite of their declining economic status.

It was not long ago that conflicts between Baddibu “slaves” and “masters” erupted. In 2001, news of quarrels during a funeral ceremony in Kerewan reached the national level. A girl of slave ancestry died, and on the day of the funerals, representatives of freeborn families refused to let the girl’s family bury the girl in the section of the cemetery traditionally reserved to freeborn people.³⁴ This kind of discussion, which sees “masters” policing the social boundaries with “slaves” and “slaves” pressing against these boundaries, are a constant in the history of Baddibu, and started immediately after the creation of the British Protectorate with requests for emancipation by the slaves of the community of Saba, who asked the colonial administration to be relieved from their labor duties toward their masters.

The 1894 ordinance against the slave trade had just been promulgated, and Saba slaves quickly contested their subordination by bridging in a fairly efficacious way two arguments, one rooted in the ideology of abolitionism (which had spread along the river since the establishment of Bathurst as a British military and commercial post in 1816) and the other in local conceptions of slavery. When the British flag reached Baddibu, the Saba slaves protested that they all had to be considered free. The reference was to men (and not women), which reflected either the male bias of Commissioner Ozanne, who reported the statement of the leader of the Saba revolt, or that of an old man called Dua Sisé, or Dua Sisé's own view of emancipation. The other argument stressed slaves' integration into their masters' families. From the point of view of slave owners, this was a strategy of control that gave slaves the illusion of belonging. The slave members of the family were never the same as the freeborn—though Dua Sisé spoke of having been raised as a “brother” of his master.³⁵ Bondage continued across generations in the form of political, social, and economic submission, and it was this kind of relation that Dua Sisé and the other slaves of Saba were trying to remove. Their efforts did not get the sympathy of the British administration, which tried to solve the conflict by silencing the claims of both slaves and masters.

Another renowned episode took place in the 1980s. The village of Contehkunda Sukoto claimed seniority over the neighboring community of Contehkunda N'jii by virtue of an old master-slave relationship.³⁶ Contehkunda Sukoto means “old Contehkunda,” and it was the first village to be established. The term *n'jii* refers to the expression that slaves and junior members of the family used when asking elders for a plot for individual use: “Give me land so that I [can] breathe.” Contehkunda N'jii developed on lands originally given by the community of Contehkunda Sukoto to their slaves. Contehkunda Sukoto was claiming those lands back, on the grounds that N'jii had not cultivated them for a long time. The villagers of N'jii

opposed the request and sought the support of the national government. At the time, a large part of Baddibu was siding with Sheriff Dibba, who had Baddibu origins and opposed the ruling party of President Dawda Jawara. The slave descendants of N'jii were instead supporting the president, and using national politics as an instrument to solve local disputes. In the course of the conflict, the descendants of masters made some inopportune remarks on the social status of their opponents. Some people died after the clashes between the two groups.³⁷

Several stories like this are hidden in the folders of Baddibu oral history: elderly men of slave ancestry publicly disgraced because they attempted to sit in the front rows of the mosque, which other members of the community considered a prerogative of freeborn people; Islamic scholars denying rich businessmen rumored to have slave origins the right to lead prayers; and young men discovering their slave ancestry at the time of marriage negotiations. But rather than developing a sense of collective pride or any official tradition of resistance, as one might expect, the forces of silence have tamed the struggles of Baddibu slaves, and “slaves” and “masters” have continued to accommodate themselves to their differences through the Islamic virtues of *sabaroo* (patience) and *masalaa* (compromise). Strategies have developed over time to talk about slavery in a coded way that does not openly offend people of slave ancestry while indirectly it keeps alive the memory of their erstwhile subjection. In 2000, Jali Kemo Kuyate, a renowned Baddibu griot of the postindependence period who lived in Banjul, the capital city of The Gambia, explained to me that the term *koorewo* (Mandinka: family dependent, herd of cattle) signaled that people were talking about slaves.³⁸ Sheriff Jobarteh, another Baddibu griot from Baddibu, reported the discussions that some years before had been underway in his home village of Bani, where former slave quarters were easily identifiable thanks to their identification as *jongkunda* (Mandinka, *jong*: slave, - *kunda*:

compound, neighborhood, settlement). Like other old Mandinka communities, Bani hosted a core of founding families, a number of caste-type descent groups (Mandinka: *nyamaloo*, a collective name that groups together the griots, the blacksmiths, and the cobblers), and a *jongkunda*. Traditionally, this was the section of the village where the slaves who had obtained from their masters permission to live on their own constructed their huts. Many *jongkunda* grew after abolition as more and more slaves left their masters' households to build their own compounds. Whether of free or slave descent, Baddibunkas are renowned for being very progressive and socially competitive. Thanks to commercial farming in the first part of the twentieth century and then to international migrations, the families that lived in the *jongkunda* of Bani improved their economic status. Their growing prosperity began to be at odds with their slave ancestry: economically strong, they did not need the support of their former masters' families, and they refused to perform the deferential behavior usually associated with their servile origins. The next step was to express the wish to change the name of their section so as to wipe away the degrading reference to slavery. The result was a "forgetful remembering"³⁹ that clearly showed the impossibility of erasing the village's internal differentiation. The *jongkunda* was renamed *baaduma*. In Mandinka, *baa* means "big, great, large" and it is used to describe physical, moral, and social qualities. *Duuma* means "low, down." Often, this term indicates the part of a settlement that is located in the low lands. In the old days, when land was abundant and locations on which to build were carefully selected, taking into account variables such as the risk of being flooded during the rainy season, households tended to be termed *santo*, an adjective that in contrast with *duuma* describes the higher ground. Most of the time, the original compounds of the first settlers are in the *santo* section, while *duuma* land is for the later settlers or for the junior sections of older compounds

that have split because of demographic growth. To a certain extent, this spatial organization reflects the hierarchies existing within a community, and the combination of *baa* and *duuma*—which Bani villagers chose—is suggestive. *Baa* may refer simultaneously to the large size of the compounds in the former *jongkunda* and to the degree of social and economic recognition these compounds had achieved, while *duuma* conveys the idea of their enduring low status. When it was time to announce the ceremonies, Sheriff Jobarteh said, the free and founding families of Bani were called by their names, while “caste” groups (griots, blacksmiths, and cobblers) were grouped under the general term *nyamaloo* and slave descendants under *baaduuma*:

Alkalokunda [*alkaloo*: chief; *kunda*: compound or people originally associated with a specific household], have you heard it? *Konteh bulo* [which means people in the hands of Konteh, the original compound; *bulo* = hand] and others, Fodaykunda, have you heard it? Sanokunda, have you heard it? Touraykunda, have you heard it? The three *nyamaloo kunda*, have you heard it? And *baaduuma*, have you heard it?⁴⁰

The Bani example can be compared with that of the Highlands Malagasy community of Antanety studied by Luke Freeman. Here, Freeman explains, the term *andevo*, which means “slave descendants,” is banned from public discourse, though hierarchical distinctions between people of free and slave ancestry persist. The latter live in a marginalized section of the village and work as sharecroppers or daily laborers for free landowners who have mostly resettled in the city. By systematically avoiding the use of *andevo* in all their conversations, the freeborn of Antanety think they are sparing slave descendants from the humiliation of their condition. Yet, these silences also prevent discussions in which the injustice of extreme social differentiation “could be verbally addressed.”⁴¹

This injustice is not only a legacy of the precolonial past, when slavery was legal. As I have tried to show, postslavery communities have a more recent history of “slave” and “master” relationships that have unfolded since abolition, whether this is rooted in the enduring marginalization of slave descendants or in their attempts to overcome their subjection to dominant social groups. The formerly dominant groups in turn feel the shame of being overtaken by those whom they have historically controlled. The strategy of accommodating the resulting tensions through silences is often only provisional. Conflicts occur again when somebody, for any reason, says loudly what everybody knows or suspects without saying. Each new dispute builds on the substratum of previous ones, and the environment of partial versions, rumors, and biased assumptions created by censorship hampers rather than enhances the possibility of a true conciliation: the livable truce between the two parties hides long-repressed resentment. One of the controversial issues, as I suggested earlier, is that the sections of villages known by names such as *baaduuma*, which evoke a past history of enslavement and subjection, do not necessarily host only slave descendants. Throughout the twentieth century, immigration from neighboring Senegalese territories and other Sahelian countries increased the size of many Gambian communities, and latecomers often had no other option than to settle in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This created ties between immigrants and people of slave ancestry that impacted local and national politics even during the First Republic of The Gambia, and that have become more and more visible since the 1994 military coup that gave birth to the Second Republic. The discrimination that people of slave origins have experienced since legal abolition has fostered a sense of group identity that may easily lead to political mobilization. In Mauritania, slave descendants have a tradition of class consciousness and public visibility that dates back to the

1980s, while during the first decade of the twenty-first century, *l'alternance*—the handover of power from one political party to another—and political decentralization have created in some regions of Senegal the conditions for growing political participation by people of slave descent.

These developments have not been mirrored in The Gambia. But it is true that in the last 20 years the repressive trajectory of the Second Republic has muzzled civic and political debates. This further layer of silences does not mean that the aftereffects of slavery are not also smoldering in The Gambia in ways that will become visible with the opening up of political space that has followed the defeat of Jammeh at the 2016 Presidential Elections.

Concluding Remarks

As much as the notion of “postcoloniality” refers to the historical trajectory of societies emerging from the violence of colonialism, the parallel concept of postslavery speaks of the moral, social, and political tensions that flourished in the wake of slavery. In spite of their abolitionist rhetoric, colonial administrations never really addressed the hidden legacies whose resilience—I have maintained in this chapter—the very forces of silence may have strengthened.

It is true that silence is characteristic of sufferance and a good strategy with which to keep conflicts and resentments at bay; but like any other social practice, its uses are multiple, often diverging and contradictory. As shown by the Jenyeri and Baddibu examples, in different ways censorship meant to foster social cohabitation has also entrusted remembrance to the following generations, which through semi-revelations and rumors have ended up figuring out why it was so difficult to discuss a certain part of the past in public. Shared in the

privacy of homes and of intimate social relationships, memories of enslavement and life in slavery have been kept alive by avoidance of their public display. Curiosity about what is sequestered has made people wonder about the events and processes that the signpost of silence marks without mentioning. This brings us back to the starting paradox of my reflection, that is, why there is so much knowledge about enslavement and life in slavery still circulating along the Gambia River, in neighboring Senegalese territories, and in many other West African contexts in spite of all the efforts made to forget it. Only by looking at memory-work as an interplay of remembering and forgetting is it possible to undo this knot.

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² Interview with Lamin and Kebba Koma, locality of Manna (Niani), 22 January 2008.

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