

Chapter 8

Yesterday and today

Studying African slavery, the slave trade and their legacies through oral sources

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(to quote this contribution: Alice Bellagamba, “Yesterday and today. Studying African slavery, the slave trade and their legacies through oral sources,” in Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, Martin A. Klein, *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade. Vol 2: Sources and Methods*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, pp. 174-197).

Research on African slavery covers a variety of situations and contexts that show both parallels and divergences due to local historical trajectories. In relation to the role of slavery, the slave trade and its abolition in the historical experience of African individuals and communities, oral sources can provide insight into the lives of African slaves, slavers and their contemporary descendants. These materials were important in the 1960s and early 1970s, when research on African slavery started, and they remain so today thanks to the growing activism of slave

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descendants,² and the interest of historians, archeologists, cultural institutions and tourists in the heritage and the living traces of Africa's slave-dealing and slaveholding past.³ However, while the place of oral sources in the study of the African past has been discussed at length,⁴ its contribution to African slavery studies has not so far been adequately studied. It is time to make a first attempt. This is a challenging task because the methodology of oral history has expanded enormously within African studies and elsewhere. The survival of older perspectives beside the development of new ones has generated a bewildering abundance of advice that may feel intimidating. Some of the following basic principles need to be kept in mind. First, we must always use oral sources in association with other documentary materials to maintain standards of validity

² Z. Ahmed Salem, "Bare-Foot Activists: Transformations of The Haratines Movement in Mauritania," in S. Ellis and I. Van Kessel (eds.), *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa* (Leiden, 2009), 156–177; E. Hahonou and L. Pelckmans, "West African Antislavery Movements: Citizenship Struggles and the Legacies of Slavery," *Stichproben: Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien* 20 (2011), 141–162.

³ J. Alexander, "Islam, Archeology and Slavery in Africa," *World Archeology* 33:1 (2001), 44–60; C.M. Kusima, "Archeology of Slavers in East Africa," *African Archeological Review* 21:2(2004), 58–88; B. W. Kankpeyeng, "The Slave Trade in Northern Ghana: Landmarks, Legacies and Connections," *Slavery & Abolition* 30:2 (2009), 209–221; S. Wynne-Jones and M. Walsh, "Heritage, Tourism, and Slavery at Shimoni: Narrative and Metanarrative on the East African Coast," *History in Africa* 37:1 (2010), 247–273; P. Lane and K. C. Macdonald (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Archeology and Memory* (Oxford, 2012); K. C. MacDonald and S. Camara, *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa. Archeological Perspectives* (Cambridge, 2012). The efforts of African scholars to put together oral sources on slavery under the auspices of the UNESCO Slave Route Project must be mentioned as well, though these volumes mostly present already collected materials: D. T. Niane (ed.), *Tradition orale et archives de la traite négrière* (Paris, 2001), A. Simpson, *Oral Traditions Relating to Slavery and Slave Trade in Nigeria, Ghana and Benin* (Paris, 2004).

⁴ P. Curtin, "Field Techniques for Collecting and Processing Oral Data," *Journal of African History* 9:3 (1968), 367–385; J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Methodology* (Chicago, Aldine, 1965); J. C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Dawson, Hamden Conn., Archon, 1980); D. Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London, Longman, 1982); J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); T. Falola and C. Jennings (eds.), *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester, 2004).

and reliability.⁵ Second, we must remember that these materials are the result of social interactions, and that their content adapts to overall relations of power and to the micro-politics of people's daily lives.

Beginners in African history usually learn the original distinction of Jan Vansina between oral traditions and personal reminiscences. The former are "testimonies that narrate an event which has not been witnessed by the informant himself, but which he has learnt about through hearsay,"⁶ while personal reminiscences consist of what people remember about the past because that past was part of their lives.

Conscious of the hostility of conservative historians, who rejected the historical significance of oral sources precisely because of their variability, Vansina and scholars like David Henige insisted that oral traditions were a communal form of intellectual property shared and transmitted across generations with stability of content and style. Personal reminiscences, on the other hand, were less reliable. This distinction blurred in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Carolyn Hamilton showed that as ways of talking about the precolonial past, oral traditions offer a blueprint to discuss "more recent events, and vice-versa."⁷ David W. Cohen and Elisabeth Tonkin urged us to question the processes through which African societies build and circulate knowledge of

⁵ M. Diawara, "The Osmosis of the Gazes: Anthropologists and Historians through the Prism of Field Work," in P. S. Landau (ed.), *The Power of Doubt: Essays in Honor of David Henige* (Madison, 2011), 62.

⁶ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 20.

⁷ D. Cohen, S. Miescher and L. White, "Introduction" in L. White, S. F. Miescher and D. W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, 2001), 16; C. Hamilton, "Ideology and Oral Traditions," *History in Africa* 14 (1987), 68.

pastness, rather than policing the boundary between “objective” oral traditions and “subjective” personal reminiscences.⁸

It was a period of change for African oral history under the cumulative impact of postmodern approaches, feminist scholarship and the historiography of Subaltern Studies.⁹ Discussions were shifting from the textual analysis of oral traditions typical of previous generations of scholars to an appreciation of social memory (broadly speaking the plural discursive and not-discursive ways through which society links its past with its present and future) as both an historical source and an object of historical investigation. Issues of performance

⁸ E. Tonkin, “Investigating Oral Tradition,” *Journal of African History* 27:2 (1986), 203–213; D. W. Cohen, “The Undefining of Oral Tradition,” *Ethnohistory*, 36:1 (1989), 9–18; E. Tonkin, *Narrating Our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992); L. White, S. F. Miescher and D. W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, 2001), C. Hamilton, *Refiguring the Archive* (Springer, 2002). Vansina bitterly criticized some of these developments even though they were based on his idea that oral traditions (and oral sources in general) were to be approached as cultural and social artifacts, whose objective was not necessarily that of historical documentation: J. Vansina, “Some Perceptions in the Writing of African History: 1948–1992,” *Itinerario* 16: 1 (1995), 77–91. On the specificity of oral history: A. Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in R. Perks and A. Thompson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (New York, 1998), 72; M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, 1990). P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edition (Oxford, 2000); A. Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 34:1 (2007), 49–70.

⁹ Postmodernism fed a critical and reflexive attitude. Feminist scholarship showed the importance of oral sources for gaining access to women’s past social life, and opened up a discussion on doing research with marginalized groups: D. W. Cohen, “Doing Social History from Pim’s Doorway,” in O. Zunz, C. Tilly, D. W. Cohen, W. B. Taylor and W. T. Rowe (eds.), *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 191–232; S. Geiger, “Women’s Life Histories: Method and Content,” *Signs* 11: 2 (1986), 334–351; N. R. Hunt, “Placing African Women’s History and Locating Gender,” *Social History* 14:3 (1989), 359–379; S. Geiger, “What’s So Feminist about Women’s Oral History?,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2:1 (1990), 169–182; for subaltern studies: F. Cooper, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,” *American Historical Review* 99:5 (1994), 1516–1545; G. Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99: 5 (1994), 1475–1490; D. Chakrabarty, “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts,” *Postcolonial Studies* 1:1 (1998), 15–29; G. Spivack, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” *Die Philosophin* 14:27 (2009), 42–58; R. Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York, 2010). For an application to African slave voices: E. Trout-Powell, “Will that Subaltern Ever Speak? Finding African Slaves in the Historiography of the Middle East,” in I. Gershoni, A. Singer and H. Erdem (eds.), *Narrating History: Histories and Historiographies of the Twentieth-Century Middle East* (Seattle, 2006), 242–261.

and audience that Ruth Finnegan raised in the earlier stages of African oral history were once again discussed, and renewed attention was paid to the production and circulation of historical knowledge in daily life.¹⁰

Although none of these historiographical perspectives deal with the legacies of slavery, they serve as useful background to this chapter. The distinction between oral traditions and personal reminiscences, for instance, shaped research on African slavery for a long time and, for reasons that I shall explain, restrained the valorization of the experiences of freed slaves and people of slave ancestry at a time when some of the witnesses of the late nineteenth century were alive.

The discussion in the next sections stems from two broader concerns. The first is that scholarly conceptions of oral sources and the best way to approach it have been evolving as have the ways in which Africans and their communities have looked at their past. In other words, there is a history of oral historiography that accounts for the methodologies developed and for the contextual factors shaping individual research experiences.¹¹ Accordingly, I start by tracing the genealogy of the most discussed problem in the use of oral sources for the study of African slavery: the difficulty of accessing the voices and perspectives of slaves and their descendants. The challenges faced by the first generations of

¹⁰ R. Finnegan, "A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence," *History and Theory* 9:2 (1970), 195–201. The debates on orality, performance and texts of the 1990s have resulted in a series of recent publications like R. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (London, 2007); K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge, 2007).

¹¹ J. C. Miller, "History and Africa / Africa and History," *American Historical Review* 104:1 (1999), 1–32.

researchers in the 1960s and 1970s include the fact that local conceptions of history did not provide ways to express the experiences of slaves, and other subordinated groups. Policy toward public memory discouraged the recollection of conflicting pasts. Individuals tried to hide their connections with slavery. Each of these challenges can return today, maybe in a different form, maybe exacerbated by theoretical agendas.

The second concern is a focus on the building up and circulation of knowledge of pastness. I use Pierre Nora's expression "environments of memory" to speak of the social networks and contexts of interaction in which people learn about the past together with the genres, conventions and values that shape the ways they talk about the past.¹² By drawing on my research on the legacies of slavery in Fuladu, one of the major polities of late nineteenth-century southern Senegambia, and on comparative studies of other parts of Africa, I shall address the following issues: the archives and compilations of oral sources, which often provide rich insights on slavery and the slave trade if thoroughly combed, the importance of assessing how historical knowledge circulates in daily life, the public and less public contexts of historical knowledge production and transmission and the concepts of "place," "people" and "generation." I close by commenting upon contemporary African slave voices.

¹² P. Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989), 7-24.

African slave voices, a genealogy

The past is not only the history of the conquerors, of ruling clans, of privileged castes; it is also that of the people, of women, of slaves, of common peasants. The past, finally, is not only a sequence of renowned events, of glorious actions, of path-breaking facts; it is also the vanished fabric of daily life, a sociology of yesterday and of the day before yesterday. This has consequences and one in particular: there is not one history, but histories: an official or officious history, of course, but also a marginal and underground history.¹³

Since the beginning, the study of African slave systems and the slave trade made much use of oral sources, although it only occasionally addressed the peculiar nature of these materials and of the ethnographic knowledge necessary to their interpretation. Many of the contributions published by Claude Meillassoux, Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers in the seminal collections of 1975 and 1977 rested on interviews, oral accounts and the careful observation of the traces of slavery in the African societies of the 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁴ Subsequent studies also employed oral history, but none of this research prioritized the perspective and memories of slaves.¹⁵

¹³ J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, *Quand nos pères étaient captives. Récits paysan du Niger* (Paris, 1976), 22–23.

¹⁴ C. Meillassoux (ed.), *L'Esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1975); I. Kopytoff and S. Miers (eds.), *Slavery in Africa. Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (Madison, 1977).

¹⁵ F. Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven and New York, 1977); P. E. Lovejoy and J. S. Hogendorn, "Oral Data Collection and the Economic History of the Central Savanna," *Savanna* 7 (1978), 71–74; E. Isichei, *Igbo Worlds: An Anthology of Oral Histories and*

Frederick Cooper's 1979 review of the first developments in African slavery historiography pointed precisely to the lack of slave voices.¹⁶ He compared the African situation to the impressive collection of life histories and firsthand testimonies on North American slavery built up in the 1930s thanks to the New Deal's Federal Writers Project, the US government initiative set up to support American scholars and writers during the Great Depression. The resulting narratives were deposited at the Library of Congress and rediscovered in the course of the 1970s as a window on the demise of slavery in the United States from the point of view of the formerly enslaved and their descendants.¹⁷ Although after independence some African nations, with the support of international institutions like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), had started building up oral history archives as part of the effort valorizing African perspectives on African history, nothing like the US collection of slave testimonies was available on the African continent.¹⁸ Oral traditions stood as a much celebrated symbol of the ways African societies had

Historical Descriptions (Philadelphia, 1978); F. Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters. Plantation Labour and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890–1925* (New Haven and New York, 1980); R. Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700–1914* (Stanford, 1987).

¹⁶ F. Cooper, "The Problem of Slavery in Africa Studies," *Journal of African History* 20:1 (1979), 105.

¹⁷ N. R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19 (1967), 534–553; N. R. Yetman, "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," *American Quarterly* 36 (1984), 181–210; Henige, *Oral Historiography*, 116–118; P. Larson, "Horrid Journeying: Narratives of Enslavement and the Global African Diaspora," *Journal of World History* 19:4 (2008), 431–464.

¹⁸ Unesco, *Cultural Development: African Oral Traditions. Selections and Formulation of Some Themes* (accessed at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0002/000233/023399eb.pdf>, November 13, 2014).

been able to preserve traces of their past in the absence of literacy. Why were slave voices absent?

Klein tried to answer this question from the perspective of his researches in Senegal, Gambia, Mali and Guinea Conakry.¹⁹ Meillassoux's model for the analysis of African slavery represented chattel slaves as human beings historically silenced by the violence and displacement of enslavement.²⁰ Slaves had no history or to be precise their history coincided with that of their masters as they had been thoroughly indoctrinated by the very ideology that sustained their domination.²¹ That view echoed the ideology of several Sahelian slaveholding societies, like Gumbu, where Meillassoux carried out fieldwork. There, he had counted 53 manumitted slaves and 1,040 slaves born in captivity,²² and freed slaves were among his interlocutors. However, their view of Gumbu society did not emerge from Meillassoux's reconstruction: "either they talked the dominant language of their masters or they did not talk at all."²³

Klein built on Meillassoux's explanation an argument that identified the suppressive forces that, before and after abolition, prevented slaves and people of slave ancestry from articulating their own version of history. He identified three levels. First, the failure of slaves to articulate a slave perspective did not imply that they could not physically talk but that the dominant historical

¹⁹ M. A. Klein, "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery," *History in Africa* 16 (1989), 209–217.

²⁰ J. Glassman, "No Words on Their Own," *Slavery and Abolition* 16:1 (1995), 131–145.

²¹ C. Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (London, 1991 [1983]), 129.

²² Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 12.

²³ Thomson, "Four Paradigm," 26.

ideology of the societies in which they lived did not offer genres to express their experiences in their own terms. While praising the deeds of the powerful and the successful, oral traditions overlooked the contributions of commoners, women and slaves to the social and political order.²⁴ Second, the agendas of nationalist elites led new African nations to censor the legacies of slavery much as the colonial regimes had done. The memories associated with kings, warriors and big traders of the nineteenth century offered a script for the strengthening of nationalist feelings. Those of the slaves who farmed, fought and traded for the benefit of the dominant classes could instead cause divisions by exposing unreconciled layers of past violence and subjection. Third, in colonial times, after the abolition of the slave trade and eventually of slavery itself, freed slaves and slave descendants turned silence regarding their origins into a strategy of self-emancipation.²⁵ In all the areas of Klein's research, former masters and their descendants used the stigma of slave ancestry to set up boundaries between themselves and people of slave ancestry. There was no dignity in being seen as the descendant of a slave, and in no public context could memories of enslaved ancestors be displayed proudly before new generations. Klein's conclusions were skeptical and provocative. It was late to reconstruct through oral sources the world of late nineteenth-century West African slaves as many of the witnesses of that historical period had passed away by the 1980s. Scholars, however, could try to collect life stories, information on slave revolts, which often left durable traces

²⁴ J. Searing, *'God Alone Is King'. Islam and Emancipation in Senegal* (London, 2002).

²⁵ S. Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 2009), 208.

in collective memories, and traditions of migration. The latter might reflect the slaves' flights and the upward social mobility of their descendants.²⁶

The ensuing debate showed that Klein's argument needed sharpening. To be sure, the historical silencing of slaves was the key to understanding the ideologies of African slave systems, and their post-abolition legacies in terms of social discrimination of slave descendants²⁷ Klein's statement that slaves had no memories of their past other than those produced by the masters could not, however, be easily generalized. Although many enslaved men and women, either for the reasons he cited or for the fact that they were captured very young, did not pass over their stories of enslavement to their descendants, the picture varied greatly both by region and by historical period. Each context had its peculiarities. While the elite slave descendants of the Kano and Sokoto caliphates were eager to speak of their slave past and their position in the structure of the state to the researchers who met them in the 1960s and 1970s, elite slave descendants of Ilorin have started to erase their association with slavery already in the 1930s, once their status ceased to provide them benefits.²⁸ Where upward social mobility resulted from the collective struggles of freed slaves and people

²⁶ Each of these directions of inquiry has proven to be fruitful. On life histories: A. E. McDougall, "A Sense of Self: The Life of Fatma Barka," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 32:2 (1998), 285–315. On slave revolts: J. Glassmann, "The Bondsman's New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast," *The Journal of African History* 32:2 (1991), 277–312. On traditions of migrations: L. Pelckmans, "'Having a Road': Social and Spatial Mobility of Persons of Slave and Mixed Descent in Post-independence Central Mali," *The Journal of African History* 53:2 (2012), 235–255.

²⁷ For example: A. O'Hear, "Elite Slaves in Ilorin in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39:2 (2006), 247–273.

²⁸S. Stilwell, I. Hamza, P. E. Lovejoy and S. Dako, "The Oral History of Royal Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate: An Interview with Sallama Dako," *History in Africa* 28 (2001), 273–291; S. A. Stillwell, *Paradoxes of Power: The Kano "mamluks" and Male Royal Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate, 1804–1903* (Portsmouth, 2004).

of slave ancestry as in the areas of Nigeria studied by Carolyn Brown, it was easier to access slave recollections.²⁹ There were areas of Africa where a collective identity resulted out of the history of enslavement: in that case slavery was part of publicly remembered past.³⁰ In some contexts, the end of colonialism and the spreading of political ideologies that emphasized social equality had prompted the liberation of historical memory. So it was in the Songhai-Zarma slave communities considered by Olivier de Sardan in the 1960s and in the former slave villages of the Futa Jallon highlands studied by William Derman. Here, Sekou Touré's socialist rhetoric encouraged people to build myths of origins on the model of freemen.³¹

By thoroughly discussing the problem of biases, the literature on marginal groups has shown that researchers' idea of society, and their theoretical agenda, partly shapes the "practical collection of data."³² Whether grounded in the harmonic and cohesive representation of an African traditional past created by functionalist anthropology (the Kopytoff and Miers's collection) or the new Marxism interest for social inequality and exploitation (Meillassoux and other French scholars), leaders in the study of African slave systems shared an interest

²⁹ For example, C. A. Brown, "Testing the Boundaries of Marginality: Twentieth-Century Slavery and Emancipation Struggles in Nkanu, Northern Igboland, 1920–29," *The Journal of African History* 37:1 (1996), 51–80; J. Glassmann, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, 1995).

³⁰ A. Isaacman and B. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-Central Africa, 1750–1920* (Portsmouth, 2004).

³¹ Olivier de Sardan, *Quand nos pères*; W. Derman and L. Derman, *Serfs, Peasants, and Socialists: A Former Serf Village in the Republic of Guinea* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), 242.

³² Tonkin, "Investigating," 210. See also, E. Ardener, *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays* (London, 2007), 73 and 133; S. Ardener, "Introduction," in S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women* (London, 1975), xii; Hamilton, "Ideology and Oral Tradition," D. D. Cordell, "Section Introduction Oral Traditions: Classic Questions, New Answers," in T. Falola and C. Jennings, *Sources and Methods*, 244.

in the African point of view. Methodologically, however, they were ill-equipped to capture the historical vision of subordinate groups, one that was either completely suppressed or expressed through a hectic combination of fragments that belonged to public and dominant narratives.³³ As a result, they often leaned toward the representations of society built up by dominant groups, which – precisely because of their dominance – were most easily accessible and entitled to speak for the elite and the rest: “Africanists – eager to take an ‘African point of view’ – have often allowed an élite’s ideology to define society as whole.”³⁴ Oral traditions, which this generation of historians liked so much, were one of the context in which the perspective of dominant groups was divulged.

This means that the historical silencing of slaves was also a function of the kinds of oral sources that researchers privileged.³⁵ Significantly, where oral traditions were unavailable, and researchers could integrate written records only with the personal reminiscences of men and women who experienced the last days of slavery and colonial abolition, the picture was more nuanced. Through the recollections of former masters and slaves, Cooper was able to address slave resistance to the deterioration of their living and labor conditions caused by the development of the East African coastal plantation economy in the late nineteenth century.³⁶ Inspired by feminist scholarship, some of the studies that

³³ Glassmann, “The Bondsman’s New Clothes,” 280.

³⁴ Cooper, “The Problem of Slavery,” 105.

³⁵ R. Botte, “De l’esclavage et du daltonisme dans les sciences sociales. Avant-propos,” *Journal des africanistes* 70:1 (2000), 7–42; R. Botte, “Le spectre de l’esclavage,” *Les Temps modernes*, 620–621 (2002), 145–164.

³⁶ Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*.

followed unearthed the experiences of slave women and emancipated slaves in commercial settlements like Mombasa and Lamu.³⁷

Did Meillassoux access freed slaves and slave descendants in Gumbu through the assistance of their former masters? To which social group did his interpreters and research assistants belong? Were the conversations between Gumbu people and the anthropologist public or private?

This information is not available as that generation of scholars was not used to considering the circumstances of fieldwork as a valuable source of information. Recent research studies dealing with people of slave ancestry have instead questioned the very development of field inquiry. In Northern Cameroon, Issa Saïbou has found that formal interviews sounded intimidating and generated “immediate amnesia” in the people who endured the legacies of captivity. It was easier to gain their confidence through local organizations confronting social discrimination and through friendship networks.³⁸ The slave descendants of the Halpulaaren communities of Mauritania, where Olivier Leservoiser carried out fieldwork, thought that his right place was among dominant groups with which they associated his white male identity. The elite, in turn, tried to control his movements.³⁹ In order to handle these difficulties,

³⁷ M. Strobel, “Doing Oral History as an Outsider,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2:2(1977), 68–72; S. Mirza and M. Strobel (eds.), *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington, 1989); P. R. Curtin, “Laboratory for the Oral History of Slavery: The Island of Lamu on the Kenya Coast,” *The American Historical Review* 88: 4 (1983), 858–882; M. Strobel and P. W. Romero, “Where Hve All the Slaves Gone? Emancipation and Post-Emancipation in Lamu, Kenya,” *Journal of African History* 27:3 (1986), 497–512.

³⁸ I. Saïbou, “Paroles d’esclaves au Nord-Cameroun (Slaves Bear Testimony in Northern Cameroon),” *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 45: 179/180 (2005), 853–878.

³⁹ O. Leservoiser, “Enquêteur sur les groupes d’origine servile en Mauritanie. Des contraintes méthodologiques significatives” in O. Leservoiser (ed.), *Terrains ethnographiques et hiérarchies sociales* (Paris, 2005), 101–122.

Leservoisier moved along two paths: the study of local chieftancies and of slave groups. While the first route allowed him to spend time with chiefly families that belonged to the former slaveholding elite, the second put him in contact with activists fighting for the recognition of slave descendants. His remarks on the need to look at people of slave ancestry in their own terms are precious for other scholars: their view of their place in society can be embedded in their daily lives, material culture, songs, dances and proverbs, and their personal and family biographies.⁴⁰

Not only spoken words: the archives and compilations of oral sources

In the past two decades, oral historians and anthropologists have unearthed the power disparities between interviewers and the interviewed. Yet, this focus on the relational politics of research loses sight of the fact that our “impact concerns more the format of the testimony than its deep structure” and that oral sources “originated in a context of exchange, prior to our intervention.”⁴¹ This context of

⁴⁰ For example, M. Diawara, “Femmes, servitude et histoire: Les traditions orales historiques des femmes de condition servile dans le royaume de Jaara (Mali) du XVe au milieu du XIXe siècle,” *History in Africa* 16 (1989), 71–95; M. Diawara, *La graine de la parole: dimension sociale et politique des traditions orales du royaume de Jaara (Mali), du XVème au milieu du XIXème siècle* (Stuttgart, 1990); F. Declich, “‘Gendered Narratives’, History, and Identity: Two Centuries along the Juba River among the Zigula and Shanbara,” *History in Africa* 22 (1995), 93–122; E. A. Alpers, “Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World,” *African Studies Review* 43:1 (2000), 83–99.

⁴¹ L. Passerini, “Shareable Narratives? Intersubjectivity, Life Stories and Reinterpreting the Past,” Paper presented at the Advanced Oral History Summer Institute, August 11–16, 2002, Berkeley (accessed at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/education/docs/shareablenarratives.doc>, November 13, 2014).

exchange includes the archives and compilations that keep record of what other fieldworkers did in the same area.

When I reached The Gambia in 1992, one of my first actions was to visit the premises of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), the institution that preserved local cultures and oral history. In the late 1980s, the NCAC took up the former collection of the Gambian Cultural Archives and of the Oral History and Antiquities Division, a research unit that the government had established at the end of the 1970s in order to enhance the intergenerational transmission of historical knowledge through systematic research.⁴² The NCAC collection consists today of more than 6,000 reels and cassettes. Important oral traditions, such as the Gambian versions of the Sunjata epic, the epic of Kelefa Sanneh and narratives on Kaabu and Fuladu were collected in the late colonial period and published after independence.⁴³ Scholars like Philip Curtin and Donald Wright contributed to the expansion of this body of knowledge by making public the oral sources they used for their research,⁴⁴ as Vansina repeatedly recommended.⁴⁵

⁴² A. Bellagamba, "Before It Is Too Late: Constructing an Archive of Oral Sources and a National Museum in Independent Gambia," *Africa Today* 52:4 (2006), 59–72.

⁴³ G. Innes, *Kaabu and Fuladu: Historical Narratives of the Gambian Mandinka* (London, 1976).

⁴⁴ Curtin's collection of oral traditions of Bundu and Gajaaga is on deposit at the archives of IFAN (Dakar), while Donald Wright's ones were published. D. Wright, *Oral Traditions from the Gambia. Vol. I: Mandinka Griots* (Athens, 1980), D. Wright, *Oral Traditions from the Gambia. Vol. II: Family Elders* (Athens, 1980). Both Curtin's and Wright's material were stored at the Center for African Oral Data, Archive of Traditional Music of Indiana University, Bloomington, where many other historians of Africa left copy of their oral materials.

⁴⁵ J. Vansina, "Save the Bacon! Primary Sources from Fieldwork," *History in Africa* 36:1 (2009), 465–471.

In spite of all this, a look through the catalog can quickly end an attempt at research on slavery. Few tapes are labeled slavery, and even these were missing when I last consulted the archive in 2011. But the fact that the catalog is silent on slavery does not mean that the recordings never mention it. By listening to the cassettes, I understood that the omission was more the by-product of the way the archive was built up than of people's reluctance to mention that aspect of the past of the Gambia River.

Bakary K. Sidibeh, the cultural official in charge of the archive of oral sources since the 1970s, and Winnifred Galloway, the North American historian who worked with him, collected histories of the major kingdoms, the military and religious leaders and the political impact of colonization on local power structures. Although their interest in slavery or the slave trade was marginal, many of the oral accounts they collected frequently mentioned both. This means that, even if the theoretical agenda of scholars partly shapes the contents of oral history, the feelings and thoughts of the people do matter. While talking about one topic, recollections about another sometimes come up. In the 1970s and 1980s memories of enslavement and life in slavery were part of a recent past that people mentioned even if not asked about them directly. The account of Essa Camara contains, for instance, a comment by the narrator on the practice of searching for enslaved relatives. Talking about the migration of his ancestors from the region of Guidimaka to the mouth of the Gambia River, Essa recalled one young man kidnapped and sold into slavery, and the efforts of one of his brothers to rescue him:

There were three boys, Mamadi Kagoro, Damang and Mamadu Camara. While Damang and Mamadu were in the bush tending the sheep, Moors ambushed Mamadu and took him away with the sheep. Damang went back to the village and started to cry but Mamadi Kagoro stated that when the coos they had planted were ripe he would go after Mamadu wherever he was and bring him back ... In those days, when people were looking for their loved ones in other countries or town, they used to lodge at the “bantabas” [platforms at the center of the village where men used to sit and chat; at night, strangers could sleep on those platforms] and make enquiries⁴⁶

Mamadi Kagoro found Mamadu in one of the villages along the Gambia River in the hands of a kind woman who treated him like a son. Eventually, they decided to stay and establish a new household. Their adventures continued to be narrated within the family.

Another example comes from the historical narratives of Fuladu, which were collected in the 1970s following the researches by Frances Leary⁴⁷ and Joye Hawkins Bowman.⁴⁸ Sidibeh himself was interested in Fuladu because his father had married one of the youngest daughters of the last ruler of the kingdom,

⁴⁶ Essa Camara, RDD 3476, recorded on 15/12/1982, Dippakunda, Kombo, born about 1890.

⁴⁷ F. Leary, *Islam, Politics and Colonialism: A Political History of Islam in the Casamance Region of Senegal (1850–1914)*, PhD thesis (Evanston, 1970).

⁴⁸ J. Bowman Hawkins, *Conflict, Interaction and Conquest. A Political History of Islam in the Casamance Region of Senegal (1850–1914)*, PhD thesis (Evanston, 1980).

Mussa Moloh Baldeh.⁴⁹ Collected in 1978, the version of Al Haji Kawsu Sillah, a respectable elder closely associated with the colonial descendants of the Fuladu rulers, vividly portrayed the consequences of the battle that Mussa Moloh had fought against the Guinea Bissau village of Bijini.

That account mentioned the enslavement of Bijini women and children and their incorporation into Mussa Moloh's family. I tried to make inquiries into this topic over a number of years only to find that my interlocutors on Fuladu history were reluctant to recollect this part of the story on the grounds that it was too conflictive.⁵⁰ The answer was in a cassette, lying in a rusty file in a dusty room, which even mentioned some of the names of those slaves and of their descendants:

From the day Musa fought against Bijini, any Firdu Fuladu of the surname Sanne, Faati, Camara or Ceesay is the descendant of a slave. Mussa enslaved all of them. I do not want to touch the topic that much. I have an aunt called Sireng. Her mother was captured in that war. And many others as well. He, (Mussa) married Sireng's mother and Ali Buri's mother too. She bore him Lamin Jaiteh and Ali Buri. Sireng's mother, Mariama bore him Sireng and Kadi Baldeh. That Kadi Baldeh begot Manlafi Ceesay and Yahya Ceesay

⁴⁹ B. Sidibé, *A Brief History of Kaabu and Fuladu (1300–1930). A Narrative Based on Some Oral Traditions of the Senegambia (West Africa)* (Torino, 2004).

⁵⁰ A. Bellagamba, " 'The Little Things that Would Please Your Heart ... ' . Enslavement and Slavery in the Narrative of Al Haji Bakoyo Suso (The Gambia)," in A. Bellagamba, S. E. Greene and M. A. Klein (eds.), *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade. Vol. 1: The Sources* (Cambridge, 2013), 39–46.

and a woman who is married to Sheik Ibraahim of Farafenni. Her mother was Musa's daughter. All were descendants of Bijini.⁵¹

These two examples show that, although they have not been recorded directly, the experiences of enslaved men and women can be nested in accounts that deal with different topics. Thus, the archives and compilations of oral history, like the NCAC in The Gambia, may contain rich information on slavery. Besides, they contribute to the building up and circulation of knowledge of pastness.

Historians of Africa have known, since David Henige's early remarks on the influence of literacy on Fante oral tradition, that oral sources "are the product of an ongoing conversation between the oral and the written."⁵² This is a consequence of their dynamic and relational nature, and of the fact that in many parts of Africa oral sources were first recorded before the colonial conquest. In colonial times, the collection of these materials increased thanks to the interest of missionaries, colonial officials and educated Africans. Oral sources served to support chieftaincy claims, colonial policies and territorial divisions. This continued after decolonization because historians of Africa, African intellectuals and even governments agreed that the history of the new African nations needed to be constructed from African sources by breaking away from the stereotypic vision of the African past inherited from the colonizers.

⁵¹ Al Haji Kawsu Sillah, 475, Recorded on 9/5/1978, Niani-Kunting, Sami, The Gambia, born in 1918.

⁵² D. P. Henige, "The Problem of Feedback in Oral Tradition: Four Examples from the Fante Coastlands," *The Journal of African History* 14:2 (1973), 223-235; J. Thornton, "The Origins and Early History of the Kingdom of Kongo, c. 1350-1550," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (2001), 89-120; J. M. Cinnamon, "Fieldwork, Orality, Text: Ethnographic and Historical Fields of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Gabon," *History in Africa* 38 (2011), 61.

Bakoyo Suso, one of the elderly men who taught me the most over the years, often visited the NCAC to refresh his knowledge of important nineteenth-century events. Similarly, many of the elders I met in the Senegalese town of Kolda in 2014 were former civil servants, and referred to academic publications when narrating the establishment of Fuladu. For researchers, the possibility of accessing earlier oral sources opens up the opportunity of discussing how knowledge of pastness lives, dies or temporarily goes underground to resurface later in a different guise. Was it easier to listen to Gambian recollections of slavery in the 1970s and 1980s? Why did the creators of the NCAC archive never think of addressing such an important topic? Have the initiatives of the 1990s on the heritage of Atlantic slavery stirred up memories of internal enslavement?

Clearly, the early collections of the NCAC had a nationalist intent, especially since Sidibeh was among the founders of the political party that brought the country to independence. He and Galloway could get research funds from the government by winding the idea that they were recovering Gambia's past from a Gambian point of view. Two other strategies helped them expand the collections. One was to support foreign scholars doing research in the country and the other to find external donors, like the IOWA genealogical society, which in the early 1980s sponsored the project on family histories and genealogies that brought out the account of Essa Camara. Research topics and objectives were in both cases negotiated with the sponsors. Only in the 1990s did initiatives associated with the heritage of the Atlantic slave trade make slavery an

interesting topic. Unfortunately, by that time the resources and the commitment that allowed for the establishment of the archive were no longer there.

Beside officialdom: knowledge of pastness in daily life

As curators of the archive of oral sources, Sidibeh and Galloway drafted methodological guidelines to identify the major oral historians in the region and to judge the depth of their historical knowledge. Their suggestions merged the methodological tendency typical of early debates on African oral history to identify privileged informants with local ideas about the people that should be entitled to make public historical statements. These were the griots (the bards belonging to an endogamous professional group, one of whose prerogatives is that of keeping track of the past and narrating oral history), elderly men, who as family heads knew genealogies and stories of migrations and settlement, and religious scholars. Being able to read and write in Arabic, the latter had often kept a record of important past events.⁵³

Inspired by Sidibeh and Galloway, I also sought to stimulate the memories of these three categories of people. After all, the first rule for fieldworkers is to respect the hierarchies and values of the host society.⁵⁴ When these hierarchies and values systematically suppress the historical visions of

⁵³ W. Galloway, *The Oral Traditions of Gaabu. An Historiographical Essay on Some Problems Connected with Their Findings, Collection, Evaluation and Use* (Banjul, 1980); B. Sidibeh and W. Galloway, *The Collection and Processing of Oral Traditions* (Banjul, 1980).

⁵⁴ J. Copans, *L'enquête ethnologique de terrain* (Paris, 1998), 26.

some sections of society, however, a new route needs to be found, which does not hurt people's feelings or offend against etiquette. I used Cohen's idea of diffuse historical knowledge to question what lay beside and beyond Sidibeh and Galloway's three categories of official oral historians.⁵⁵

Between 1992 and 1998 I carried out fieldwork in Bansang, a commercial settlement along the Gambia River established in colonial times not far from the village where Mussa Moloh spent the last part of his life. This first research focused on the foundation of the town, its relationships with the descendants of Mussa Moloh, and the commercial activities of the first part of the twentieth century. While collecting oral histories on these topics I learnt that alongside the accounts of griots, elderly men and religious scholars, knowledge of pastness circulated informally. Valuable sources of information included elderly men and women chatting about earlier periods of their lives with grandsons and granddaughters, explaining the meanings of words and proverbs and narrating their experiences of the events and the famous men and women that touched their lives. There were songs that continued to exert their evocative power as much as proverbs, rumors and gossip. Folktales reinforced either the stereotypic view of the slave created by slaveholders or gave voice to slave women's capacity to endure hardship in marriage.⁵⁶ Each of these oral sources had the

⁵⁵ D. W. Cohen, "Reconstructing a Conflict in Bunafu: Seeking Evidence Outside the Narrative Tradition," in J. C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past*, 206.

⁵⁶ K. Pfeiffer, *Mandinka Spoken Arts. Folk-Tales, Griot Accounts and Songs* (Köln, 1997). One folktale is particularly interesting and involves a theme found in Malian oral repertoires: the Mansa's daughter and the *jongo* (slave woman). See S. P. Belcher, "Empire of the Mind: New Work in Mande Studies," *Research in African Literatures* 34:4 (2003), 129–144. For another example that recalls the harsh treatment reserved to slave women married to a freeman, and the success they could achieve late in life through the deeds of their children, see D. Gamble, *Mandinka Stories, Dictated, Written, Or*

potential to open a potential window onto issues that griots, elderly men and religious scholars would avoid discuss in the public contexts where their historical knowledge was most often displayed. One of these issues was the ingrained prejudices against people of slave ancestry.

I constructed the basis of my historical knowledge of Bansang and Fuladu thanks to elderly women on the margins of public life. That kind of voice was poorly represented in the NCAC archive, because local conceptions of history denied women's capacity to tell stories about the past or confined it to household matters. The first time I met Bakoyo Suso in 1996, he asked me about my Bansang and Fuladu sources. I duly quoted the town chief and Mohammadou Fally Baldeh, the official oral historian of the Fuladu former ruling family. I also mentioned my Bansang female friends. Bakoyo dismissed what I learnt from them by stating that "women had no memory." However, when questioned in more informal settings about his own life trajectory, he referred as did other oral historians to the contribution of women, whose memories he accessed not through publicly expressed narratives but mostly through casual conversations, late at night when household chores were over.

Paulo Moraes Farias has suggested looking at oral historians like Bakoyo Suso as both critics and knowledge producers.⁵⁷ The themes and motives typical

Recorded (San Francisco, 1977). In a comparative perspective: A. Brivio, "Tales of Cowries, Money, and Slaves," in A. Bellagamba, S. E. Greene and M. A. Klein (eds.), *African Voices*, 47–53; E. D. Fomin, "Slave Voices from the Cameroon Grassfields: Prayers, Dirges, and a Nuptial Chant," in A. Bellagamba, S. E. Greene and M. A. Klein (eds.), *African Voices*, 137–146.

⁵⁷ P. Moraes Farias, "The Oral Traditionist as Critic and Intellectual Producer: An Example from Contemporary Mali," in T. Faloha, K. Robbins and S. Caunce (eds.), *African Historiography: Essays in Honour of Professor JFA Ajayi* (London, 1992), 20–44.

of Fuladu oral traditions did not just offer a script for the less formal recollections of Bansang people; griots, elderly men and religious scholars continually tapped the stores of informal knowledge about the past in order to expand their own knowledge or to assess episodes of which they had heard multiple and conflicting versions.

It is common knowledge that oral traditions are learned by heart.⁵⁸ In many African contexts this is the case, though learning by heart does not mean that the performer of that narrative has not tried to enrich what was handed over to him or her by searching for different versions and sources of historical knowledge. “Liptako’s wise old men,” Paul Irwin has observed, “respond consciously to traditions, testing them against the wisdom of their different experiences and the dictates of various interests, accepting some of what they hear and rejecting some, gradually building up their ideas about the past.”⁵⁹ This kind of approach applies to the griots, the religious scholars and the elderly men I met over the years. Mohammadou Fally Baldeh was very explicit about his Fuladu sources. Part of what he knew depended on the fact that he grew up near his grandfather, Mussa Moloh Balde, and Mussa’s oldest sons and daughters. Part of his knowledge was the result of personal initiative as he traveled across the former territories of Fuladu and kept listening to people’s recollections. Like other skilled oral historians, he knew quite well that the historical knowledge

⁵⁸ For instance, M. Diawara describes the schools of oral traditions of the Malian region of Nioro. In Kita, where Jan Jansen has long carried out research, the training of the performer’s memory skills passed through the gradual and informal learning process. Diawara, *La graine*, 94–111; J. Jansen, *The Griot’s Craft: An Essay on Oral Tradition and Diplomacy* (Hamburg, 2000).

⁵⁹ P. Irwin, *Liptako Speaks. History from Oral Tradition in Africa* (Princeton, 1981), 30.

people were ready to share in a public context, where their version could be challenged and their words could spread far beyond the original audience, was one thing; and that the circles in which people shared gossip, personal reminiscences and alternative versions of public accounts were another thing.

I began looking systematically at the legacies of slavery along the Gambia River in 2000. By then, my Bansang research had taught me the reasons that prevented men and women from recollecting some parts of their individual and collective past.⁶⁰ I had also come to understand the virtues of confidence, patience and curiosity that, according to Mohammadou Fally Baldeh and other oral historians, were the currency of their historical ability. Close relationships with elderly men and women helped develop confidence. Patience meant appreciating the fact that learning was a gradual process, in which pieces of information were slowly transmitted, while the capacity of the learner to handle that knowledge without producing major social disruption was tested. Curiosity helped sustain the on-going effort of searching for different versions of the same story.

Public, less public

Even when whispered beyond closed doors,⁶¹ oral accounts are always public.

Researchers should map the different environments of memory in which these

⁶⁰ A. Bellagamba, "Reasons for Silence: Tracing the Legacy of Internal Slavery and Slave Trade in Contemporary Gambia," in A. L. Araujo (ed.), *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (New York, 2012), 35–53.

⁶¹ S. E. Greene, "Whispers and Silences: Explorations in African Oral History," *Africa Today*, 50:2 (2003), 41–53.

accounts circulate to see whether the less public ones provide the context for the sharing of officially censored knowledge. If public oral accounts tend to hide the memories of slavery, are there less official contexts of interaction that allow this kind of past to surface?

By drawing on the dramaturgical model of society of Ervin Goffmann,⁶² the anthropologist William P. Murphy has explored the dynamics of display and concealment in Kpelle social and political life. What Kpelle individuals and groups did and said in public to feed a skillfully managed illusion of consensus and unity was different from their private commentaries. The overlapping of the two levels of communication created orders of meaning for different audiences and contexts, rather than a uniform “public/secret opposition within society.”⁶³ As with archival records, oral accounts have their policies of “classification” and built-in silences.⁶⁴ Three examples from Fuladu help expand on this point. The first shows that silences can result from what Vansina called “the social surface of oral tradition,” the fact that oral traditions need insider’s cultural and social competence to be understood.⁶⁵ The second speaks to the reservoirs of knowledge of pastness that people use should the need arise.⁶⁶

⁶² E. Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 1959); W. P. Murphy, “Creating the Appearance of Consensus in Mende Political Discourse,” *American Anthropologist* 92:1(1990), 24–41.

⁶³ W. P. Murphy, “Creating the Appearance of Consensus,” 26.

⁶⁴ Examples of this type abound in the literature on African oral history. For instance, Vansina reports that before narrating the codified and lengthy oral traditions that were the bulk of the Kuba knowledge of the past, notables used to hold a meeting – the *kuum* – that served to reassert consensus on what they would or would not disclose. J. Vansina, *The Children of Woot. A History of the Kuba People* (Madison, 1978), 19 and ff.

⁶⁵ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 95 and ff.

⁶⁶ R. Roberts “Reversible Social Processes, Historical Memory, and the Production of History.” *History in Africa* 17 (1990, 341-349).

In contexts where social origins are thought of as significantly shaping the qualities and capacities of the person, knowing the background of renowned historical personalities is an important piece of social intelligence. The third example reminds us that oral accounts are first of all a social performance, the by-product of “living speakers, who speak and remember at need.”⁶⁷ Gestures and postures are essential parts of it. The teller was a slave-descendant, who disclosed his ancestry by the way he sat near his “master.”

Example 1: no need to mention it because everybody knows

Even the most codified oral account, which is narrated across generations without major variations, needs background to be understood. Background consists of knowledge of places, people, meanings of words and social experiences, and it changes across generations. Thus, the audience may find itself giving a meaning to an oral account, which differs from the one it had for the people who initially assembled and shared it.

Fuladu oral history is relatively recent, and it is possible to reconstruct the social world in which it started to circulate. In the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, Mandinka griots began piecing together the deeds of Mussa Moloh and his father Alpha Molo. Apparently, Mussa Moloh himself played a role in the process. These narratives became an important part of colonial griots’ repertoire. Gambia River society originated in the ashes of Fuladu

⁶⁷ Tonkin, “Investigating,” 207.

and the past of that polity had a wide and affectionate audience. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, Fuladu oral accounts started to be recorded and written down systematically, and to be kept in the NCAC archive. This corpus of knowledge tells about Alpha Moloh, the internecine conflicts that brought Mussa Molo to power after his death, and the way he negotiated with the colonizers.

In 1997, Amadou Bansang Jobarteh, a knowledgeable elder and one of the most renowned *kora*⁶⁸ players of twentieth-century Gambia, helped me broaden my knowledge of Fuladu. At the time, he had retired from his public activities. In the middle of a narrative about the military activities of Mussa Moloh, he stopped to ask me: “you do know there were slaves, don’t you?”

He had been narrating for a while, probably assuming that I was familiar with the broader social context. Then, he looked at me, a young and foreign lady, and realized I needed further explanation. For his generation, born at the beginning of the twentieth century, slavery was a concrete reality. He grew up alongside captives of late nineteenth-century Fuladu wars and heard his mother lament the departure of her domestic slaves after the colonial abolition of slavery. Amadou’s silences here were not a matter of concealment but of not seeing the problem as crucial. That world had long gone but its traces were alive in his mind and in those of the people who had long been his audience. There was no need to talk about slavery, as everybody knew that late nineteenth-century military leaders like Mussa Moloh pillaged villages and sold captives and that like all the big-men of the time they lived surrounded by slaves. There

⁶⁸ The *kora* is the harp-liute typical of Senegambian Mandinka griots.

was no need to recollect the suffering of enslavement, as the early audience of Fuladu oral history had experienced it directly. A simple reference to a place like Bijini was sufficient to help the audience to envision what happened when Mussa Moloh's men attacked, and to stir up the emotions associated with their brutality as slavers. What looked like censorship was thus a matter of an open secret, so widely known by the audience that it need not to be mentioned.

Example 2: better keep it, should the need arise

In colonial times. Fuladu historical narratives were a potential source of conflict. Men and women who were fighting each other a few years before had now to establish communal life and to foster collaboration. In the process of healing the moral and social wounds of was,, events that caused resentment were pushed out of the limelight, as resentment against the military campaigns of Mussa Molo was already so strong that it did not need to be propelled. Background knowledge continued to circulate anyway, as there were living witnesses of the events narrated and so personal reminiscences that could easily supplement public accounts.

Bakoyo Suso had a background story on the ancestry of Mamadou Fatima Jawla, a late nineteenth-century military leader, often referred to as a "bastard" but actually the son of a slave woman. I heard him narrating about Mamadou Fatima time and again, and each time Bakoyo was able to give voice to the kinds of oppression and humiliation Mamadou Fatima endured because of his slave

ancestry. But the disclosure of this detail clearly depended on the audience: Bakoyo would never mention it during a ceremony of people associated with the Jawla family, while he often mentioned it when he was with his brothers and close friends at his place in the capital city,⁶⁹ that is the more informal context in which he shared his historical knowledge with me. In many years of research, I came across many similar stories, which existed in the margins (or background) of public oral accounts, and like an expansion of the story came out in the appropriate performing and listening context if further information was required by the audience. From colonial times, allegations of slave ancestry have been used to delegitimize unpopular local chiefs, and issues of origins have continued to be relevant at the time of marriages, whose negotiation is one of the skills of elderly men like Bakoyo. The fact that this shaded historical knowledge has an enduring political and social importance explains why it has not withered away in spite of public censorship. It could be actually argued that public censorship has been the very strategy of its preservation.

Example 3: talking through body language

In 1992, thanks to the help of a Fula elder from Bansang, who knew the surrounding villages through his farming and religious activities, I reached the little village of Sare Madi Ghente. There I was welcomed by Jakatu Baldeh and his family. I asked questions on Fuladu colonial and precolonial history. I then mentioned slavery. Jakatu, who was narrating, stopped and sent one of the

⁶⁹ A. Bellagamba, "The Little Things," 39–46.

young men to look for another elderly man, Pa Baldeh. When the latter arrived, he sat on the floor by the side of Jakatu. It was a clear sign of his subordinate status. But this status did not prevent him explaining his view of slavery. The audience listened carefully. The chances of hearing Pa Baldeh discuss this kind of issue were rare. In daily life, he would not mention slavery, as this kind of discourse would seem to be a challenge to his relationship with Jakatu. Jakatu, in turn, would avoid the topic, as local etiquette deemed it rude to remind a person of his low social origins.

By that time some of our children would go to the bush to collect fruits. Some were captured. Childless people could give some of their animals in exchange for a child. These children would be considered as slaves but they were not....

We are all slaves of God but when you enforce power and capture someone to sell him that is "power and sale". During the time of the religious wars [second half of the 19th century], some people were captured and sold as slaves. At that time it was (not) necessarily slavery but survival of the fittest, the jungle law. Powerful people could capture children. Those who had money or animals could have children in exchange. By then people were not very aware and they could not reason out why they should not give out their children to be slaves in exchange for other goods. But because of material benefits, they did it. At times, you would see someone who had no children and he had a lot of animals and he

needed a child to look after them. So he would pick some animals to exchange for a child to look after his animals. But he would use this child as a worker and not a slave. Even if you use your power or influence, or money to acquire the child, that one is a worker and not a slave. Because he works for you only and should enjoy some benefit. So this was what was happening.⁷⁰

Pa Baldeh insisted on the difference between real slavery and other relations of subordination that people tended to classify as very close to slavery. This is a recurrent discussion throughout Fuladu: should the term “slave” be applied only to captives and chattel slaves, or does it include given-away children, people who agreed to serve in order to gain the support of a powerful patron or those that have a slave as a remote ancestor? By stating “all men are slaves of God,” Pa Baldeh gave voice to the equality discourse that Islamization spread throughout the Senegambia in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Most possibly behind the image of the child given by his parents to a rich cattle-owner was his personal experience.

Christine Hardung has observed how descendants of slaves among the Borgu Fulbe talked of slavery as a collective past not directly related to their ancestors.⁷¹ In this way, they distanced themselves from that difficult past. In Fuladu, I have seen other strategies at work. For instance, the descendants of

⁷⁰ Jakatu Baldeh and Pa Baldeh, Sare Madi Ghente, Fuladu West, January 16, 1993, and January 17, 1993. The narrative contains information on the colonial history of Fuladu, on the establishment of Bansang regional hospital, on forced labor and on chiefs of the colonial period.

⁷¹ C. Hardung, “Everyday Life of Slaves in Northern Dahomey: The Process of Remembering,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15:1 (2002), 35–44.

masters rarely mentioned in public personal details of the former slaves of their families. Slave descendants, in turn, tended to expose the cultural, social and historical causes of enslavement: rather than describing it as a taken-for-granted human condition as master descendants often did, they targetted it as the consequence of power abuse, greed and hardship.

Place, people and generation

It is rare that a researcher does not change his or her methods while doing research. In my case, three interwoven notions have emerged as the key to understanding the changing contours and contents of the environments of memory linked to the I of slavery: place, people and generation. I did not have them in mind when I started; but I now see their potential in the light of future research.

Several Gambian villages established before colonization have today the reputation of sticking to old status distinctions. On the Senegalese side of Fuladu entire communities were censused in the late 1950s as populated exclusively by freed slaves and people of slave ancestry.⁷² To be sure, these are not places where purportedly “pristine” and “authentic” legacies of slavery and the slave trade have been preserved in spite of the social, political and economic transformations of the last century, but places where a long history of both conflict and mutuality

⁷² *Les villages du Fouladou en 1959. Recensement socio-démographique des cantons. Document produits dans le cadre des études préparatoires au Premier Plan de Développement du Sénégal* (Dakar, 2011) (accessed at www.histoire-ucad.org/archives/index.php/remository.html?func=fileinfo&id=358, August 8, 2014).

between slave and master descendants remains to be assessed in the context of continuous rural impoverishment. Research done so far in the Senegambia and other parts of West Africa has shown that the families of slave descendants had versions of their position in the community and of their origins, which, though different from those of the freeborn, nonetheless led them to cultivate the same ideas of rank and hierarchy.⁷³ In some cases, slave descendants' commentaries on the precolonial past challenged hegemonic representations, while in others the core of the recollection was pride in having established their own families and independent communities.⁷⁴

The notion of place is important for other two reasons. First, oral accounts are linked to past geographies, and the name of localities, whether they are still included on maps or disappeared from them, can work as hooks for the memory.⁷⁵ The name of the little village of Kesserekunda, where Mussa Moloh Baldeh spent the last part of his life as a British subject, is inevitably associated with recollections of his military deeds throughout the former territories of Fuladu. Second, people may have acquired their knowledge about slavery by living in specific places. This was the case of many of my elderly men and women interlocutors, who spent other period of their lives in places where memories of slavery were important. Even if an environment of memory

⁷³ P. Gaibazzi, "Diaspora without Homeland: Slave Descendants and the Cultural Politics of Ancestry in the Upper Gambia River Valley," *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 29:1 (2013), 23–43.

⁷⁴ M. Rodet, "Mémoires de l'esclavage dans la région de Kayes, histoire d'une disparition," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 197:1 (2010), 263–291.

⁷⁵ For example: B. J. Peterson, "History, Memory and the Legacy of Samori in Southern Mali, c. 1880–1898," *The Journal of African History* 49:2 (2008), 261–279.

disintegrates, the recollections associated with it may remain alive.⁷⁶ In Gambian Fuladu, griots' households provided such an environment but so also were chiefly families, especially for the generations born in the years between about 1910s and 1940s, as chiefs' entourages hosted a variety of people that talked, listened to local oral historians and exchanged ideas on a variety of topics.

Fally Kurubally, for instance, whom I met several times in his house on the outskirts of the capital city, hailed from such a context. Son of a rural chief, who was in turn the descendant of a Bambara migrant, who reached the Gambia River in the second part of the nineteenth century, Fally described enslavement and the conditions of slaves in ways that recalled both the Bambara background of his ancestors and the recollections of the Bambara seasonal migrants who in colonial times visited his father's compound. Colonial traders' shops were another context where social and historical knowledge was shared, as traders needed to know the social background of their customers in order, for instance, to develop the confidence needed to give credit. This was the case of Fode Sidibeh, born in the 1920s, and the son of an important trader. The young Fode spent his time helping his father, which provided the opportunity to learn about people's problems and social trajectories.

This brings me to my second notion, that of people. People are memory carriers, and their family histories and personal biographies, as shown by the examples just quoted, are combined with their knowledge of pastness. Before the

⁷⁶ For example, I. Hofmeyer, *'We Spend Our Years as a Tale that Is Told': Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (London, 1994).

colonial conquest, Mussa Moloh Baldeh's headquarters were in the little village of Hamdallay, which is on the Senegalese side of Fuladu, not so far from the Gambian border. Mussa set Hamdallay on fire when he fled into British territory in 1903, forcing thousands of his captives and retainers to follow him. The slaves who managed to stay were freed by the French and resettled in the newly established administrative headquarter of Kolda. In 2014, I found the descendants of Mussa's retainers in the settlement of Kounkané, on the eastern Senegalese side of Fuladu. There I heard stories about precolonial Fuladu, which some contemporary inhabitants of Hamdallay could not narrate, as they were recent settlers who carried with them different memories.

The third notion I mentioned is that of generation. African notions of slavery were already undergoing a deep semantic change in the 1960s and 1970s, many African nationalist leaders having used locally embedded memories of slavery and emancipation as metaphors to feed the struggle against colonialism.⁷⁷ Old nuances of meaning were still accessible through linguistic analysis and a generation of men and women born at the time of slavery and the slave trade: these included the experiences of the relation between slavery and other institutionalized forms of subordination, the association between genealogical impurity and slavery, the strategies of invisibility developed by historically

⁷⁷ For example, S. M. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, 1990), 214 and following; A. Bellagamba, "After Abolition. Metaphors of Slavery in the Political History of the Gambia" in B. Rossi (ed.), *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* (Liverpool, 2009), 63–84, J.-G. Deutsch, "Memory, Oral History and the End of Slavery in Tanzania: Some Methodological Considerations," in P. Lane and K. MacDonald (eds.), *Slavery*, 343–360.

raided stateless societies and their own engagement with slavery.⁷⁸ Is the same information circulating today?

There is no single answer to this question. Some scholars have pointed to the enduring relevance of orality in African social life. Others have shown that over generations the accounts of the same events tend to become shallower. Allen and Barbara Isaacman have studied the Chikunda of Mozambique, former slaves of Portuguese settlers who built for themselves an identity as frontiersmen and hunters after the abolition of slavery. The oral accounts of the 1960s and 1970s were richer in detail than more recent ones.⁷⁹ Since then, African environments of memory have changed significantly: late colonial and postcolonial migrations have set young people apart from their elders; the radio and other media have offered a wider audience to oral historians; and education has spread Western notions of history and historical causality.⁸⁰ Oral historians have been continuously fighting against time, striving to collect information before the death of their interlocutors, and describing the importance of their task precisely in terms of its urgency. Though this sounds romantic, disintegration, loss and oblivion are part of the picture along with the emergence of environments of memory in which a pivotal role is played by global and

⁷⁸ E. Isichei, "On Being Invisible: An Historical Perspective of the Anaguta and Their Neighbors," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24:3 (1991), 513–566; see also R. Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia* (Oxford, 1999).

⁷⁹ A. F. Isaacman and B. Isaacman. *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-Central Africa, 1750–1920* (Portsmouth NH, 2004).

⁸⁰ R. Roberts, "The Possibilities of Precolonial West African History," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32:1 (1998), 164.

national narratives, media and images. Research itself is part of the process.⁸¹ Over the years, I have found myself in the odd position of becoming a source of information for Fuladu youths interested in local history. I have shared the oral accounts collected in the early 1990s, and handed over the view of slavery and the slave trade that I learned from elderly men and women born in the first half of the twentieth century. The transcription and translation of these accounts has prompted my assistants – young and not so young – to consider episodes they witnessed in a different light. While listening to the rather explicit narrative of an elderly woman hailing from a prestigious religious family that described the prejudices against people of slave ancestry, my assistant jumped on the chair. He had a sense of this never considered the issue deeply. The vicissitudes of the life one young man, a youth leader, and actually of slave origin, acquired new nuances in the light of this narrative. After translating the accounts of slavery given by a skilled griot of the Upper Gambia, a young Soninke intellectual who had a tense relation with some conservative aspects of his own culture (like the fact that marriages between the elite and people of professional endogamous groups were despised) associated the griots' observations on slave ancestry with the episodes of discrimination against slave descendants that he had the opportunity to witness while working as teacher for a renowned Soninke urban association.

⁸¹ Portelli, "What Makes"; Frisch, *A Shared Authority*.

Contemporary voices of slave descendants

Something may be unsaid because its memory has been actually repressed – by trauma, contrast with the present, conflicts of individual and collective nature – or because the conditions for its expressions no longer (or do not yet exist). Sometimes the change in these conditions may break the silence and allow memories to be expressed, while at other times silence can last for so long and under such conditions that it may contribute to the effacing of memory, and induce oblivion. At the same time, however, silence can nourish a story and establish a communication to be patiently saved in periods of darkness, until it is able to come to light in a new and enriched form.⁸²

Each oral history project has its own dynamic: there are the political, social and economic factors that constrain the dialogue between the researcher and his or her interlocutors in some periods but not in others and there is the conjuncture, that special mixture of chance and serendipity, which makes each inquiry unique. The way in which present concerns remold representations of the past is one of the most discussed aspects of oral history among historians of Africa, and anthropologists, because opponents of oral history have used this argument to deny its historical relevance. The methodological legacy of Vansina, Henige and Miller helps deal with the effects of “telescoping” (the compression of more

⁸² L. Passerini, “Memories between Silences and Oblivion,” in R. Hodgkin and S. Radstone (eds.), *Memory, History, Nations: Contested Pasts* (New Brunswick, New York, 2006), 238.

recent historical periods onto earlier ones, which is typical of many African oral traditions), with the manipulation of genealogies for political ends, with the use of cliché to structure both codified historical narratives and personal reminiscences and with the ever present risk of anachronism (reading the past from the standpoint of the present).

One interesting example is the version of the Malian epic of Sunjata, which stemmed from the collaboration between the Malian oral historian Wa Kamissoko and the anthropologist Youssouf Tata Cissé in the 1960s. This version attributes the abolition of slavery to Sunjata.⁸³ Not having found this mentioned in any other version, scholars of Malian oral traditions have concluded that it was a creation of Wa Kamissoko linked with the rapid changes that Malian social structures were undergoing at the time when he was telling the story.⁸⁴ Although historiographical debates of the 1990s have led scholars to develop strategies that turn silences, lies and fabrications into historical sources,⁸⁵ the problem of establishing how events probably did happen is still a challenge for the contemporary study of African slavery at a time in which the topic is increasingly popular both in Africa and around the world.⁸⁶ In the words of the

⁸³ Y. T. Cissé (avec Wa Kamissoko), *La grande geste du Mali- Tome 2, Sounjata la gloire du Mali* (Paris, 1991).

⁸⁴ P. F. de Moraes Farias, "The Oral Traditionist." There is a debate about Mande griots and their strategic and skillful handling of knowledge about the past: B. Hoffmann, "Secrets and Lies: Meaning, Context and Agency in Mande," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 149 (1998), 197-207; D. Schultz, "Seductive Secretiveness: Jeliw as Creators and Creations of Ethnography," *Mande Studies* 2 (2000), 55-80.

⁸⁵ L. White, "Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History," *History and Theory* 39:4 (2000), 11-22.

⁸⁶ O. Leservoiser, "Enjeux des traditions inventées chez des groupes d'origine servile: les Harâtîn de Mauritanie," in D. Dimitrijevic (ed.), *Fabrication des traditions. Invention de modernité* (Paris, 2004), 163-174.

Senegalese historian Ibrahima Thioub “when memory grows it becomes difficult to do history.”⁸⁷ The past turns into a battleground crossed by the interests and aspirations of a variety of individuals and groups that compete for voice and recognition.

Revising his argument on the invention of tradition, Terence O. Ranger has maintained that representations of the past are never created out of whole cloth but follow themes, images and styles that accord with culturally and socially given sensibilities.⁸⁸ Only a careful analysis of the contexts in which knowledge of pastness surfaces and circulates provides clues to its historical significance. Even in the case of blatant fabrications, researchers can address the circumstances in which they emerged, the individuals and groups involved and the goals they pursued. This information may not help to advance knowledge of past African slave systems; but it speaks to the historical reasons why issues of enslavement and slave ancestry gain currency at some moments and not at others. Ralph Austen has discussed the interlacing of heritage policies and the construction of local memories of slavery on Gorée Island, and Donald Wright has argued that cultural initiatives linked to the valorization of the Gambian village of Juffureh as home to Kunta Kinteh, the protagonist of Alex Haley’s novel *Roots*, have produced fictive though famous narratives of the workings of Atlantic slavers along the river. Comparable remarks have been made by

⁸⁷ I. Thioub, *Slavery and the Slave Trade: Euro-African Memory of a Global History*, Guest Lecture, Re.Work, Humboldt University, Berlin May 13, 2013.

⁸⁸ T. O. Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa,” in T. O. Ranger and M. Vaughan (eds.), *Legitimacy and the State in Africa* (London, 1993), 62–111; T. Spear, “Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 44:1 (2003), 3–27.

Katharina Schramm with regard to Ghana, another country where Afro-American tourism has played a growing cultural and economic role in the last decades.⁸⁹

New fieldwork on slavery has to confront the by-products of the rising popularity that this topic has enjoyed since the development of Roots tourism, of the launch of the UNESCO slave routes project in 1993 and the more recent UNESCO initiatives in the field of intangible heritage. The latter includes both: the ensemble of practices, representations, expressions and the knowledge and skills that a group of people or community considers part of its historical legacy.⁹⁰ In some parts of Africa, politics has fueled debates on the political and social significance of the legacies of slavery.⁹¹ In Northern Nigeria, the minority groups once raided by Hausa and Fulani horsemen have long used their historical role of victims to challenge political dominance in postindependence times,⁹² while in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Bénin the post-abolition trajectories of freed slaves and people of slave ancestry have entered the realms of public memory through the life histories of contemporary antislavery activists and the

⁸⁹ R. A. Austen, "The Slave Trade as History and Memory: Confrontations of Slaving Voyage Documents and Communal Traditions," *The William and Mary Quarterly* (2001): 229–244; D. R. Wright, "The Effect of Alex Haley's Roots on How Gambians Remember the Atlantic Slave Trade," *History in Africa* 38 (2011), 295–318; K. Schramm, "The Slaves of Pikworo: Local Histories, Transatlantic Perspectives," *History & Memory* 23: 1 (2011), 96–130.

⁹⁰ UNESCO AT 60, Definition of Intangible Heritage (accessed at: www.unesco.org/services/documentation/archives/multimedia/?id_page=13&PHPSESSID=99724b4d60dc8523d54275ad8d077092 on July 14, 2013)

⁹¹ For example, D. H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars: Peace Or Truce* (Bloomington, 2011); J. M. Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (Philadelphia, 2011).

⁹² R. Blench, "The Present in the Past: How Narratives of the Slave-Raiding Era Inform Current Politics in Northern and Central Nigeria," in P. Lane and K. MacDonald (eds.), *Slavery*, 361–392.

production of documentary films on the legacies of slavery.⁹³ Meanwhile, a new abolitionist agenda, which targets human trafficking and new forms of slavery and indirectly questions the vestiges of old slave systems, has challenged the people of Africa to examine their perception of ties of personal dependence traditionally conceived as different from slavery, like child adoption and forced marriage.⁹⁴ Some of the hubs of the nineteenth-century Saharan slave trade – like the oasis of Kufra in the Libyan Desert – have gained an international reputation as places where thousands of migrants have undergone inhumane treatment and harsh exploitation in the last twenty years, while trans-Saharan migration flows have alerted public opinion to the position of blacks in North-African societies.⁹⁵ Inevitably, these discussions impact the ways in which African societies look at their slave-dealing and slaveholding past, and thus on the oral sources that researchers collect today. Slave voices are cropping up in a way that was not imaginable even twenty years ago. Biases are unavoidable as they were for earlier generations of scholars. For instance, too much emphasis on slave descendants might end up erasing from the overall picture the post-abolition condition of former hegemonic groups and transform their dominance into an

⁹³ For example, the documentary films of E. Komlavi Hahonou and C. Strandsbjerg, *Yesterday's Slaves: Democracy and Ethnicity in Benin* (2011), of I. Thioub and A. N'gaide, *Endam Bilaali (les descendants du Bilal)*, that refers to Futa Toro (Senegal) (2013), and of M. Rodet, *The Diambourou: Slavery and Emancipation in Kayes* (2014).

⁹⁴ B. N. Lawrance and A. P. Ruby, "Neo-Abolitionist Trend in Sub-Saharan Africa-Regional Anti-Trafficking Patterns and a Preliminary Legislative Taxonomy," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 9 (2010), 599–678.

⁹⁵ O. Pliez, "Vieux réseaux et nouvelles circulations entre les deux rives du Sahara," *Méditerranée* 99 (2002), 3–4: 31–40; S. Poussel (ed.), *Noirs au Maghreb: enjeux identitaires* (Paris, 2012); A. Bensaâd, "L'immigration en Libye: une ressource et la diversité de ses usages," *Politique africaine* 1 (2012), 83–103; H. Bahri, "Race and Color in North Africa and the Arab Spring," in M. Enhaji (ed.), *Multiculturalism and Democracy in North Africa: Aftermath of the Arab Spring* (New York, 2014), 135–155.

unexplained research assumption; the very notion of slave descendant has to be questioned historically. Marginal groups have their own strategies of social reproduction, and people who live today among the slave descendants, and identify with their struggles, may not have even a remote connection with slavery in their family history.

Final thoughts

In the 1960s and 1970s scholars met people enslaved in the late nineteenth century, who lived through captivity and colonial emancipation. They could access the children of late nineteenth-century slaves and raise questions on the place of that relatively recent past in the history of new African nations. Today, after decades of discussion on the best methods to tackle the voices of marginal groups, the people who could tell the stories that circulated in the 1960s and 1970s are dead. The interlocutors of oral history too are human – they live and they think – so they change, along with the perspectives that scholars develop to understand their experiences and lives. No positivist effort can mitigate this intrinsic partiality. Throughout this chapter, I have maintained that the only way to handle the struggle with the dynamic and relational nature of oral history is to cultivate a reflexive gaze that scrutinizes both the legacy of previous generations of scholars and the development of the inquiry.

As part of a turbulent and unsettled past, slavery is not a topic for apprentices. In focusing on background historical knowledge, I do not mean to

encourage the mystification of researchers initiated into esoteric circles of cognoscenti hidden behind the masks of public life. In some contexts, “the appearance of having secrets accords more prestige than the telling of a good story,”⁹⁶ and the “secret” of secrets is that there is not much beyond the screens of censorship apart, of course, from the screens themselves. Rather, the idea is to engage with oral sources as an intersubjective field of layered and overlapping interactions of which the researcher may or may not become part. Robert Baum’s study of Diola religion in the lower Senegambia is exemplary in this respect.⁹⁷ Initially, his elderly interlocutors refused to acknowledge the past involvement of Diola communities with slavery and the slave trade apart in their role as victims. Gradually, Baum came to understand that there were multiple versions of the same past, some preserved to be displayed openly and others reserved for people deemed by local elders to be capable of handling the sensitive historical knowledge associated with the enslaving activities of some of the local lineages. Researchers themselves can thus become “actors of memory”: their willingness to listen provides marginal subjects and subordinate groups with the right to talk and be heard.⁹⁸ This is what happened to Carolyn Besteman, who has pioneered the historical study of the former Bantu slaves of the Somali that lived in the middle Juba valley.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Jansen, *The Griot’s Craft*, 32.

⁹⁷ Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade*; R. Baum, “Secrecy, Shrines and Memory: Diola Oral Traditions and the Slave Trade in Senegal,” in A. Apter and R. Derby (eds.), *Activating the Past: Historical Memory in the Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, 2010), 139–155.

⁹⁸ G. Feindt, F. Krawatzek, D. Mehler, F. Pestel and R. Trimçev, “Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 53:1 (2014), 36; Tonkin, *Narrating*, 134.

⁹⁹ C. Besteman, *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Class, and the Legacy of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1999).

Michael Carrithers has used the expression “agency cum patience” to describe the engagement between anthropologists and the societies they study.¹⁰⁰ The same expression can be echoed like a recommendation for the use of oral sources in addressing the legacies of African slave systems and the slave trade: there is need for agency to overcome silences but also great patience. Though it may take time, the effort to become robustly ethnographically embedded in local ways of handling historical knowledge is a clue to a successful oral history project. Naturally, once researchers have understood the cultural and social reasons that keep the past of slavery apart from public discussion, they may find it difficult to insist on the topic. After twenty years of research on Fuladu, I can identify with relative certainty the descendants of yesterday’s slaves and not only in the villages where they overtly accept their ancestry; but if they are not ready to come spontaneously forward, why they should be put in a position in which they feel they must acknowledge that past? Oral historians like Amadou Bansang taught me that “it is good to know all, but you must be careful of what you say,” as you may hurt people. The relevance of this principle, which ruled the relations of Amadou with knowledge of pastness, goes beyond the oral history of Fuladu. Digging up the legacies of slavery has ethical consequences not captured by the informed consent forms required by contemporary funding agencies. This kind of inquiry interacts with people’s lives and feelings, and can significantly shape their future. Memories of enslavement and life in slavery

¹⁰⁰ M. Carrithers, “Anthropology as a Moral Science of Possibilities,” *Current Anthropology* 46:3 (2005), 433–456.

often go along with remembrances of violence, betrayal and broken confidence. They evoke quarrels between relatives, family disputes and episodes of defeat and loss.

I have stressed the need to include into the analysis archives and compilations of oral sources, both for their content and for the methodology that brought about the establishment of the collections. With regard to my fieldwork, I have distinguished between, on the one hand, that knowledge of pastness that was widely shared and relatively easy to grasp and, on the other hand, that which was in the shadows and required time. The survival of knowledge in the shadows – of the type displayed by Amadou and Bakoyo – depends on social interaction, and disappears more easily than the public side of the story that has often been recorded or written down.

Time is a crucial variable in any research with oral sources in several ways. First, as I have repeated throughout the chapter, time means long-term association with people and contexts. Second, time refers to the time of a person's life in which, for a number of reasons, some recollections are more easily expressed. Amadou was a busy and highly respected elder, but like many old men he spent his last years off-stage. Bakoyo, and other elders I met, were slipping into the margins of public life. Lucid but aware of the approaching threshold of the hereafter, they enjoyed handing over their view of life to whoever had the patience to sit and spend the day chatting with them. Last but not least, time is a tyrant when historical knowledge lives in people's minds and hearts. More than a hundred years separate us from the last great battle that

produced captives in Fuladu, in 1901. I doubt that the reminiscences of those enslaved men and women – which were never turned into public historical narratives – can be found today, although further inquiries into family histories might help identify their descendants, who are probably unaware of forebears' story. Other, equally interesting, aspects of the long history of slavery have come to light recently, like the ways in which the social category of slave descendants has reproduced itself and even that it grew after abolition by incorporating dispossessed and lonely immigrants. In the 1960s and 1970s, many interesting accounts of colonial Africa were lost because scholarly attention was focused on the precolonial period. While we discuss the possibility of retrieving slave voices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we risk losing sight of what is unfolding under our eyes.