POST-SLAVERY REFRACTIONS: SUBJECTIVITY AND SLAVE DESCENT IN A GAMBIAN LIFE STORY

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This article features the life story of Musa Jakite, a man in his early seventies living in a Soninke or Serahule village in the Upper River Region of the Gambia. Like many Soninke men of his generation, Musa left his village at a young age to go and look for fortune and adventure abroad. For forty years, he worked and traded in several countries in West Africa and, briefly, in Europe. In the mid-1990s, he finally returned home to stay with his family and to join the ranks of elders in his village community. Although Musa had always kept a foot at home, returning to his village meant immersing himself more fully in local forms of sociality, and, with this, in the hierarchical order that holds sway in the community. By birth, Musa was a member of the *komo* (singular: *kome*), 'slaves' in Soninke; these are people of slave descent occupying the lower rung of a three-tier social hierarchy composed of endogamous status groups: *hooro* or 'nobles', *nyaxamalo* or 'casted artisans' and *komo*. In addition to being relegated to the margins of society, slave descendants are expected to honour the relationship with their former masters on a number of ritual and mundane occasions, while also adopting an attitude of deference vis-à-vis people of higher status.

After providing the highlights of Musa's trajectory, this article seeks to make sense of how he positioned himself in relation to the legacy of slavery, especially after his homecoming. Numerous studies in Senegambia and the Western Sahel document the constraints that slave origins pose to people's self-realization, particularly as a stigma and as an excuse for exclusion from religious and political careers still controlled by the freeborn (see, among others, Botte 1994; 2000; Rossi 2009; Bellagamba and Klein 2013). Reasons for the persistence of slavery, despite the legal abolition of bondage, also lie in the fact that slave subjectivities have been cut from the same socio-cultural fabric as hegemonic notions of relatedness and personhood (Pelckmans 2011: 8–11). In particular, it has been shown that slave descendants often share, whilst failing to fully abide by, dominant codes of honour and shame (Soninke: *yaagu*) based on both pure origins and virtuous comportment. They thus figure variously as inferior, dependent and immature persons (Pollet and Winter 1971: 227, 255–59; Bellagamba 2005: 13; Klein 2005; 2009: 35).[1] This article endorses and pushes this line of inquiry further by describing not only the norms and ideals of respectability that are sustained by post-slavery, but also where and how slave descent applies in the process of pursuing, inhabiting and narrating dignified selfhood in everyday life.

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[1]Slavery and post-slavery have nevertheless provided forms of self-realization and upward mobility (Meillassoux 1991; McDougall 1998; Pelckmans 2011).

This is not, however, a story of a slave descendant striving to free himself from the shackles of slavery. Musa did not, or chose not to, have access to classic avenues of upward mobility among West African slave descendants, such as wealth, formal education and permanent migration. Upon his return, he complied with the requirements of his status and maintained relations with his former masters, while at the same time remaining perceptively critical and even dismissive of the dominant ideology of post-slavery and its stigmatizing effects. Reading Musa's ambivalent position as an interplay between submission and resistance may be productive but limited in scope. As feminist scholar Saba Mahmood (2005) has convincingly argued, assuming resistance and a drive for emancipation as analytical premises in the study of subaltern subjects may not do justice to the nuance of their experience and may thus cloud the very dynamics that we strive to reveal. I similarly suggest that much can be learned from Musa's life about the way in which post-slavery affects him, precisely by bringing into view his complex subjectivity beyond the fact that he is a slave descendant.[2]

Rather than simply being an ascribed, fixed identity which he then resists or negotiates, I show that status affiliation variously emerges and recedes in a processual way as Musa assumes particular subject positions.[3] This is a creative process in which different predicaments may coexist and compete with one another, at times generating contradictory demands (Moore 2007: 40–1), and, more specifically, refracting the shifting significance of slave descent not always in a foreseeable fashion. Musa's post-return period, which coincided both with the beginning of his life as a returnee and as a male elder and with his (re)integration into status hierarchies, aptly illustrates this process. Firstly, by seeking to inhabit senior masculinity, Musa directly confronted the issue of descent. What anchors Musa to his status identity is not solely, I shall argue, the genealogy of his slave origins, but also his attempt to celebrate his (free) ancestry and, more generally, the injunction weighing on him as a male senior to honour his family history and his commitment to local relations of belonging. Secondly, I will explore the 'awareness' (*wulliye*) or cosmopolitan know-how associated with (return) migration as a field of practical knowledge cutting across status boundaries. Musa was successful in earning credibility as a wise returnee, thereby diversifying his public roles and lifting his reputation above the stigma of slavery. At the same time, I will also describe ways in which accepting and performing activities as a *kome* became a conduit for the recognition of his knowledge.

Finally, Musa's story is significant simply as a passionate, subjective testimony of what slave descent means in the Gambian countryside and of how rural dwellers interpret the legacy of slavery. Haunted by stigma and marginality, accounts of (post-)slavery have often been silenced and even actively concealed by (ex-) slaves themselves, making it difficult for researchers to access them (Klein 1989; Rodet 2010). This article describes Musa's articulate reflections on such a difficult topic and attempts to unravel the nuances of interpretation and practice

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[2]In this sense, I use the term 'post-slavery' to refer to a critical problematization of the legacy of slavery that is not normatively centred on abolition or emancipation (see Lecocq and Hahonou 2015).

[3]I acknowledge, in this respect, the influence of feminist anthropology (Moore 1994; 2007; Mahmood 2005) and the anthropology of subjectivity (Biehl *et al.* 2007; Faubion 2011).

surrounding it, thus contributing to a growing scholarship that seeks out the oral, written and other sources on slavery and its legacy (for example, Ferme 2001; Greene 2011; Bellagamba *et al.* 2013).

I first met Musa in 2006 during my ethnographic fieldwork in the Upper River Region.[4] Through interviews, informal conversations and participant observation, I progressively consolidated my rapport with him as well as with his children, wife, relatives and former masters. In 2012, I told him I would like to write an account of his life with a specific focus on slave descent, a project which he generously endorsed. There followed extensive recording sessions and numerous other informal occasions in which I could fill the gaps in my field notes and further clarify his position on a number of issues. I am aware that this research agenda provided him with a stage to represent his singular persona (McDougall 1998; Rasmussen 1999), especially with respect to his progressive, cosmopolitan views. Still, I resist treating Musa's story merely as a 'narrative'; rather, I contextualize his position in the light of his social life and milieu as ethnographically observed by me. Even though Musa would not object to me using his real name, I have decided to use pseudonyms for him and for most of the people and places relevant to his story. As will become clear, identifying someone as a slave descendant has practical consequences, and once this is done in writing, it might at some point in the future turn against not only Musa but also his family members, some of whom loathe being known as people of unfree origins.

MUSA'S LONG JOURNEY

Musa was born in 1942 in Debe, a village in the southern Upper River, as the last of seven children – three sons and four daughters. His father, Ansumana Jakite, was a Jakhanke migrant from Dantila (a region in Eastern Senegal) who had come to the Upper River in the 1920s to look for work and land. At that time, Debe was an attractive destination for seasonal and permanent migrants hailing from the east. Founded only two to three decades earlier by Soninke nobles and Muslim clerics, together with the casted artisans affiliated to them, it was located on the burgeoning, southward-moving agricultural frontier of the Peanut Basin (Swindell and Jeng 2006). Ansumana thus decided to take up residence in Debe and look for a wife. He was a free migrant, but since he came as a stranger with no ties to the village freeborn families, he could marry only a slave woman – a fate shared by numerous other settlers (see Gaibazzi 2012). Dalla Balde, Musa's mother, was a slave girl brought up in a household of the Mangasi family, one of the largest descent groups in Debe. The family were members of the *garanke* or leatherworkers, one of the 'artisanal castes' among the *nyaxamalo*.[5] The Soninke were and are a patrilineal society divided into descent groups (*xabilanu*; singular: *xabila*), and especially into patrilocal

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[4]Fieldwork stretched over an aggregate period of eighteen months (2006–08, 2012, 2014), including stays in the coastal areas among the Soninke urban diaspora.

[5]The circumstances of the union between Ansumana and Dalla are unclear. One possibility is that the Mangasi hosted and/or patronized Ansumana, and by marrying their slave to him, ensured continued allegiance.

households (*kanu*; singular: *ka*). By contrast, slave descent was and is matrilineal: the children of a slave woman belonged to her masters (Pollet and Winter 1971: 248; Meillassoux 1975; Razy 2007: 71ff.). Formally not a slave, Ansumana was able to form an autonomous household for him and his wife, and his children bore his patronymic (*jamu*), Jakite. Yet Musa and his siblings belonged to the Mangasi family.

However, Dalla's children would experience something rather different from what she did. Since the late nineteenth century, the arrival of labour migrants such as Ansumana had made the control of slave labour less fundamental to the rural economy, and emancipation was under way even before the British established a protectorate in the Upper River in 1901 (Weil 1984). After a period of partial abolition and hesitant policy implementation, the colonial rulers abolished all forms of slavery in 1930, leaving slaves nevertheless to negotiate the terms of their social emancipation with their former masters (Bellagamba 2005). The speed and manner of emancipation varied, depending on the specific trajectory and conditions in which slaves found themselves. There was nonetheless a general move towards autonomy, with former slaves staying put more often than fleeing, and progressively being allowed to till their own land, rule over their households, pass on inheritance to their children, and arrange their own marriages (cf. Klein 2009). Since the area around Debe was still relatively forested, Ansumana cleared his own plots in the bush and thus gained rights to the land.

Despite emancipation, the memory of slavery remained. Regardless of their specific trajectories, all people descended from slaves, even those who had been formally manumitted, were lumped together in a status group still known as *komo* or slaves. Like other freeborn status groups, the *komo* have been endogamous. In addition, relationships with former masters were generally maintained, assuming the form of patron–client relations, or at least of ritual obligations and etiquettes of deference. Musa, who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s during the coda of slavery proper, recalls that his mother and sisters would occasionally go to the Mangasi household to pound millet and help the women with domestic chores. His elder brothers would instead work on the Mangasi fields on Saturday mornings (his father died when he was seven). For his family, work for former masters went on until the late 1950s, becoming increasingly sporadic. Thereafter, work for the Mangasi was carried out only during ceremonies, and then only against some form of payment (typically, *kome* men slaughter the sacrificial ram and fetch firewood; women pound grains, cook and haul water). Through this ritual work, former slaves acknowledge their servile origins and formal dependency on former masters.

However, Musa did not witness much of this transformation of slavery for, aged only fifteen, he ventured out of his village in search of fortune. Starting in the mid-1950s, a veritable 'travel fever' spread to the Upper River, enticing numerous young men away from their homes (Gaibazzi 2015: 39–41). Many men in Debe were already involved in regional short- and long-distance trade networks, but new routes had been forged, especially in diamond mining and trade in West and Central Africa, and in the African art business, primarily on the Gold Coast (cf. Steiner 1994; Bredeloup 2007). Musa would join Soninke traders a few years later, however, for his recently formed small household had neither the financial means nor a large network of contacts to help him pay for his travel (Gaibazzi 2012: 231). He left for the nearby Senegalese city of

Tambacounda, where he worked as a porter for a few months, to then continue along the railway to Bamako. He stayed in Mali for the following seven years, working as a houseboy for some families of the Malian elite, including a minister of the first Republic of Mali (established in 1960). Around 1964, his employer was posted to the Malian diplomatic mission in Ghana, and Musa followed him to Accra. When, three years later, the official was sent to another country, Musa left his job and entered the trade in African art objects. Upper River migrants whom he had met in Ghana helped him to make the transition. He spent another four years in Ghana, more precisely in Kumasi, during which he managed to visit his family in Debe for the first time since he had left home.

Upon his return from the Gambia, in around 1971, he liaised with S.S., a prominent Soninke trader from a village near Debe, and soon afterwards Musa moved to Lagos to work in his textile import business. Musa worked to raise the money for bridewealth, while his brothers and sisters back home looked for a suitable bride for him. In 1974, he travelled home to marry Kumba, a *kome* girl from a nearby village. Before he left Nigeria, S.S. had entrusted Musa with the supervision of some of his construction work and business in Serekunda, the urban area along the Gambia's Atlantic coast. Thus, after getting married, Musa and Kumba moved to Serekunda and lodged in their patron's family compound for the following five years. Their first two sons were born in this period. In 1981, Musa broke off from S.S., and after relocating his wife and children to his brothers' household in Debe, he left again for Nigeria. He stayed only the necessary time to make some money and leave for Spain, which was just beginning to become a popular migrant destination. Musa did odd jobs for various Spanish artisans and small firms. In 1985, he visited the Gambia, but he was then unable to return to Spain, which had just introduced an entry visa system.

With the route to Europe blocked, Nigeria became a suitable destination again. In 1986, Musa travelled to Ibadan and after a year he sent for his wife and newborn daughter, while his two sons stayed with his brothers. Over the following ten years, Musa and his wife lived alongside other traders from the Upper River. He dealt in African antiquities and aquamarine, while she took care of the family, which welcomed another three sons, two of whom were twins (one died at the age of two). In 1996, Musa and his family decided to go back to Debe, this time for good. In Debe, the family had two other boys and grieved the loss of the second twin in 2002.

Unfolding over a period of four decades, Musa's wide-ranging peregrinations defy any linear narrative of either emancipation or submission.[6] If his first years in Mali and Ghana seem to exemplify the trajectory of many West African slaves moving from slave labour to urban proletariat (cf. Rossi 2014a: 26–9), in the subsequent period reintegration in the village and ethnic networks prevailed. Nor did he simply proceed from slavery to dependency on patrons, although his temporary affiliation with S.S., a noble, was probably conditioned by the status difference between the two.[7] Not having conducted research in diasporic settings,

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[6]Rossi (2014b) provides a comparable case study of a Nigerien man's travels which shows how social origins are contextually negotiated in various places and networks.

[7]Partnerships of this kind often concern people of lower status (including casted artisans), since they are characterized by a certain degree of dependency that peer nobles would often consider too shameful for their own standing.

I can only trust Musa when he says, echoing numerous other migrants, that abroad 'o su ni fi baane' ('we are all one'): the shared condition of being strangers in a foreign land overrides differences for it is perceived as being bereft of honour and recognition (see also Whitehouse 2012b: 21).[8]

What Musa had achieved (or not) as a traveller was arguably more important for his reputation. Unlike a number of his age mates, he did not become wealthy enough to sponsor the pilgrimage to Mecca either for himself, his parents or his senior kinsmen; nor did he marry several wives or bear many children to refill his lineage (cf. Manchuelle 1989). He did not build a mansion in his household, let alone buy landed property in Serekunda. Musa was not, however, a failed migrant. In the first place, he had accumulated much experience and knowledge. In addition, from the late 1960s, food and cash crop cultivation began to slowly decline as a consequence of the worsening climate and ecology, as well as of market and policy constraints (Sallah 1990; Baker 1995). Like other village households, the Jakite had to rely more and more on the money sent by him and other migrant householders to supplement the dwindling harvests.[9] Finally, Musa had been a loyal traveller in several other respects, as shown by his siblings having arranged his marriage with Kumba, supervising her and rearing his sons in his absence, for example (Whitehouse 2012a). And, of course, this kept him linked to the village, where status positions apply. It was only after he returned home, however, that he began to fully participate in the sociality of status hierarchies.

'I AM OLD NOW …': RETURNING AND BECOMING AN ELDER

Musa framed his homecoming as a generational passage and an aspiration to settle down as an elder: '[In 1996] I said: if I go back to Gambia, I am staying. I'm tired of looking for money. I am old now. Let my children go [on a migration].' At the age of fifty-five, not having found much luck abroad despite his untiring efforts, it was time to pass on the incumbency of providing for the larger family to his (classificatory) sons. His first son was then around twenty years of age and ready to travel, while two sons of one of his brothers had already managed to emigrate to the US; one of these had met Musa in Nigeria and was helped by him to raise the money for the visa and plane ticket. Musa thus returned to his family compound, farmed on his family fields, and hoped that his sons would enable him to live a humble but peaceful life in his own village.

Musa's expectations were reasonable. Intensified male emigration had not disrupted the dominant family structure in Debe (cf. Gunnarsson 2011; Kea 2013). In households, parents and senior kinsfolk featured as givers of life and nourishment, as well as moral custodians of family values; in contrast, juniors featured as debtors striving to feed and care for their seniors (Meillassoux 1981). Although

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[8]Studies of (eastern) Soninke migrants in France highlight status relations to be at the centre of diasporic organization (Timera 1996; Sy 2000). However, this partly reflects adaptation strategies to the French context and integration policies, which are not necessarily found elsewhere, particularly in trading diasporas.

[9]For further details on the agrarian and migrant economy in Soninke villages, see Gaibazzi (2015).

many men like Musa had left and technically they no longer worked on the family farms managed by their household head, they continued, as hinted, to be under an obligation to send the latter money for food, and often for much more. Thus, senior men had remained at the helm of the household and of descent groups in Debe, playing a significant role in ritual transactions, family disputes and community affairs, and more generally as repositories of wisdom and knowledge.

Becoming an elder is not, however, an automatic passage. As Alice Bellagamba (2013) has shown, performing as male elders in contemporary Gambia entails painstaking diplomatic work in accumulating recognition for wisdom and authority, and, above all, it implies being able to attract financial flows from dependants. Gambians are certainly right in praising the cohesion of Soninke families, but problems affect the latter frequently enough to make Debe men hesitate about their ascent to patriarchy (Gaibazzi 2015: 134ff.). In particular, juniors strive for autonomy and various householders may compete over migrant resources, creating cleavages between household sections, and jeopardizing the material bases of male domestic authority, even when they uphold the dominant norms of masculinity and seniority. As we shall see, although Musa commanded respect as a family elder, both family problems and financial difficulties haunted his project of settling down as an elder.

In around 2000, Musa struck it lucky. An international charitable organization with a branch in the regional capital Basse Santa Su began to sound out the possibility of building an outstation in Debe in order to start small-scale development projects. The staff thus looked for an English-speaking villager who could teach them a little Soninke. In a village where education and knowledge of English were still very limited in those days,[10] Musa turned out to be a valuable resource. Thanks to his charming personality, he also earned the sympathy and trust of the foreigners. A year later, he leased out to them a plot of land he had inherited from his father on which the organization built residential and logistical facilities. At the end of the twenty-year lease, Musa would gain possession of the now developed property and until then he would earn a reasonable monthly rent. In addition, Musa remained an important trustee of the organization, charged with supervising some of their development projects.

While, on the one hand, this deal gave Musa a modest income and granted his children an auspicious inheritance, on the other it aggravated his situation. Musa's decision to lease out the plot of family land for his private interests displeased his brothers, and allegedly their wives, who reacted by excluding Musa from their resources. The descent group remained united, but Musa had to branch off and establish his own compound on a small parcel of land obtained from the village chief. Musa was now a full-blown household head, but by exiting his brothers' household, he de facto forfeited any prospect of sharing in the remittances sent by his classificatory sons, and, even worse, his own children saw their chance to receive support from their migrant agnates evaporate. Over the following decade, none of his grown-up sons managed either to travel abroad or to secure stable sources of income besides farming. Although they went to Serekunda in

[10]The first primary school in many villages such as Debe was built only in the mid-1990s. Religious education had been historically more developed than secular schooling in Soninke villages.

the dry season to look for work, they rarely obtained jobs that paid well enough to take care of the whole family. The difference between Musa's and his brothers' households thus became visually compelling. In 2012, Musa lived with his family in a small compound at the edge of the village fenced by millet stalks and punctuated by huts built cheaply from mud bricks and topped by thatch roofs. A few hundred metres away stood a large, colourful mansion with an iron roof constructed by his brothers' expatriate sons.

If Musa struggled to live up to the image of the autonomous household provider, he still earned respectability as a senior man able to handle not only family but also community affairs. By the late 1990s, brokering development initiatives, as Musa had done with the charitable organization, had become a vital resource for villages such as Debe (cf. Bierschenk *et al.* 2000). On account of his skills, Musa was thus asked to join the local village development committee (VDC), an institution first introduced by the Gambian government in the 1970s as a linchpin for development organizations (Davis *et al.* 1994) and revived in the early 2000s under the aegis of state decentralization reforms.[11] The Debe VDC mainly organizes public works, promotes development and civil initiatives, and coordinates other interest groups (youth, women, football association, etc.). The internal organization of the VDC mirrors the socio-political structure of the village and is thus made up of only adult men and is chaired by a member of the chiefly lineage. Musa was in charge of administering the *komonkaanu* (slave ward), a neighbourhood in which many of the slave descendant compounds are located. This involved broadcasting decisions taken by the VDC, ensuring attendance at public works, collecting local taxes, and other similar tasks.

That returning to the village meant knowing one's standing (*danbe*) in the social order became apparent to Musa outside the VDC as well. Forty years after he had left Debe, his siblings still maintained a relationship with their Mangasi former masters. His eldest brother was ageing and his other brother died shortly after his return. The responsibility to honour such relations thus fell on Musa's shoulders. Members of his former master's family often employed Musa as their emissary in marriage transactions. He would travel to other villages in the region and bring kola nuts to the bride's family to formalize marriage proposals on behalf of a given Mangasi man. He would then follow up the process, and mediate when difficulties arose. At the ensuing wedding and naming ceremonies of his former masters, Musa would perform his 'slave duties', such as helping with the slaughtering of the sacrificial ram and delivering bowls of food to the guests.

It was in such situations that the demands and stigma of slave descent impinged most on Musa's homecoming. While, during ceremonies, he would normally join the cohort of male elders and act as a moral authority celebrating the importance of family and traditional values, at Mangasi-*kunda* he assumed instead the role of servant and performed menial tasks otherwise reserved to male juniors. Musa experienced his lower, junior standing on more mundane occasions outside the Mangasi homes. I happened to be at informal congregations together with

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[11]Although the Gambian government was active in developmental policies in the late 1990s, migrants, hometown associations and, to some extent, NGOs were responsible for most of the development initiatives in the village.

Musa where he suddenly assumed a deferential posture towards people of higher status, such as leaving a chair vacant so that an incoming person of higher status could take a seat.

Of course, not all of Musa's village life was determined by his status. In many ways, Musa's life proceeded as that of an ordinary elder progressively dedicating himself to religion and family affairs.[12] By 2011, he told the VDC chairman, 'I am old now,' and left his position. His elder brother died in the same year, leaving Musa with the responsibility of governing the Jakite *xabila* (descent group), by dispensing advice and settling disputes in the family. Also retired from farming and domestic work, Musa spent his afternoons at a *kora*, a seating platform, to socialize with other male elders and deliberate over current events. Placed at an intersection of various neighbourhoods, this *kora* hosted elders from different status groups. I often spent time on this platform, chatting with the elders, or simply writing up my notes. As in other age groups, sociality among elders is characterized by friendly, egalitarian relations. I never had the impression that Musa was addressed in a derogatory manner by the nobles, nor even in a different manner.

In sum, Musa's homecoming was not a straightforward trajectory of either re-socialization into status hierarchies or outright emancipation. Lack of economic success as a migrant and post-return poverty may have constituted reasons for him not to refuse *kome* tasks. These earned him some money and gifts and at least granted him the possibility of turning to his former masters in case of need. However, economic considerations are only one side of the story (Klein 2009: 35).[13] Musa's trajectory towards eldership highlights social ambits in which slave descent appears more or less relevant in mediating his standing in Debe society. This becomes even clearer, as well as more puzzling, when we heed Musa's reflections on being and becoming a *kome* elder in the light of his life experiences, aspirations and responsibilities. It is to such intersections of status dynamics with other social dimensions emerging from Musa's self-positioning that I now turn.

THE DOUBLE BIND OF DOUBLE DESCENT

The issue of descent is crucial for understanding Musa's position. As we saw, his aspiration to eldership rested on substantiating his entitlements as a man

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[12]As moral authorities and people closer to death, elders assiduously cultivate religiosity. In this respect, slave descendants have long suffered from exclusion from religious education and offices, and are even thought of as impious subjects prevented from entering paradise because they were born in captivity (Bellagamba and Klein 2013). Such barriers and beliefs, however, have been relaxed during the course of the past three to four decades, paving the way to a fuller integration of lower-status people in the Muslim community. As I detail elsewhere (Gaibazzi forthcoming), access to knowledge and piety has been significantly democratized in the Soninke milieu, owing in part to the spread of reformist Islam.

[13]Some of the Mangasi viewed economic interests as an incentive for the Jakite siblings to remain attached to them – a view certainly informed by the freeborn ideology that depicts slaves as dependants (in turn, *garanko* are viewed as dependants of the nobles). It does not seem the case that Musa earned so much from his activities as a slave descendant to justify continued submission. Other factors, such as the prestige of the master's family (cf. Pelckmans 2011), do not play an important role here, because the Mangasi belonged to a lower-ranking status group.

occupying a senior position in the Jakite patrilineage. He did not differ, in this respect, from other freeborn elders. At the same time, his identity and role as a *kome* depended on the slave genealogy traced through his mother's line, which distinguished him as an elder of lesser worth in some situations. Musa's narrative clearly highlights the frictions produced by the coexistence of these modes of reckoning social origins and hence respectability. However, far from solely attempting to remove the memory of his servile origins, Musa was also led to accept his *kome* status by the very act of consolidating, as an elder, patrilineal descent and upholding family honour.

'My father was not a slave,' Musa said plainly to me in early 2007 during our first semi-formal interview, when I asked him about the history of his family and before any reference to slavery had been made. He repeated this on several other occasions thereafter and furthermore added that he resented being called a slave because his father had been a noble person:

> when someone says 'Musa you are a slave', anyway, I cannot say anything, but I don't like it because I am not a slave. In Dantila, over there, my grandfather was a chief. He had slaves, more than fifty. And they fought for my grandfather and they worked for my grandfather. He had slaves, many, many, many.

Once Musa's father arrived in Debe, nobody knew where he came from, either geographically or socially. Ansumana was thus lumped together with the *komo*. A very different fate awaited, for instance, another immigrant from Dantila who came to Debe around the same time as Ansumana. Being a knowledgeable Islamic scholar – back then, a distinctive marker of nobility – he was able to marry a noble woman while retaining his Jakhanke ethnicity; his presence and scholarly work eventually enabled other Jakhanke immigrants to settle down and even form a small enclave in Debe.

Although Musa might have been especially frank and critical with me – an outsider seeking knowledge of the past – his account of his father's free origins, which he mainly gathered from his siblings, had some social currency in the village. Based on a written family history (*tarika*),[14] the son of the Jakhanke scholar told Musa about his grandfather's families and villages. Musa preserved the piece of paper with the name of this grandfather's village written by the scholar in Arabic letters. Indeed, I once heard the scholar publicly stating at a ceremony taking place in Jakite-*kunda* that their two families came from the same place, although the scholar did not go as far as pleading that Jakites should be treated as nobles. Furthermore, some descendants of his former slave masters conceded that Ansumana might have been a free person. Apparently, this is even a topic openly discussed between Musa and his former masters. As he once related: 'I used to say that, by [way of] joking: "You are my master, but if we go to Dantila, you will be my slave." He laughed, I laughed. But he knows that it's true.'

Although it is plausible, Musa's story lacks authority and is essentially of no use in determining his status origin. Similar claims to free patrilineal ancestry are relatively common among the Upper River slave descendants, especially those whose

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[14] *Tarikas*, which presuppose mastery of the Arabic alphabet, are primarily used by nobles and more specifically by clerical families, and constitute valuable proofs of status origins.

forebears, like Ansumana, settled in Soninke villages as free migrants. But slave descendants rarely make these claims publicly, for they lack access to the means of historical production: that is, to the genealogists and oral narrators who maintain the memory of migration and settlement of freeborn descent groups and the myths attached to their patronymics.[15]

What is actually remembered about the Jakites is their integration among the *komo*. Ansumana and other immigrants might have been freeborn, some Debe freeborn observe, but by marrying a woman of slave descent, their children inherited slave status from their mother. This irrevocable act of submission erased all previous memory of Ansumana's geo-social origins, and sanctioned that, from that moment onwards, the Jakites would be able to marry only other *komo*. Every marriage in Jakite-*kunda* implicitly evokes and reproduces this memory and categorization.

Musa was not only aware of this harsh reality; paying tribute to his father's line also involved, crucially, accepting it in the same way his father and his successor had done before him:

> *PG*: Have you protested being a *kome*?
>
> *Musa*: No, I can't protest because my father did not refuse/protest [*bara*] it; my elder brother did not refuse it. If I refuse now, it won't lead to any good. They [people] will say: 'You refuse now?' [I would reply:] 'Yes, I refuse.' [They would rejoin:] 'For which reason do you refuse? Your father accepted it, your elder brother accepted. Why do you do that?' Even if I explained myself, they wouldn't believe me. They would say: 'You merely refuse, but you refuse for nothing! You're a *kome*.' That's it. Thus I keep quiet. But if I would like not to be a *kome*, I would go to Dantila: over there, nobody will say, 'Musa is a *kome*.' Because the household of my grandfather is there, his village is there. If I were to go there, they'd say, 'Jakite, Jakite … Jakite, Jakite. [He performs customary welcoming cheers and praise-singing.] Eh, that's a chief!' But here, I am *kome*! [He laughs.] If I leave this place and I go to Dantila, I would be a chief … a chief!
>
> *PG*: A chief … Why didn't you go then?
>
> *Musa*: I didn't go. Now my whole family is here: my mother is here, she died here. My father died here. My elder brothers died here. If I leave this place in order to go to Dantila, ah, there's no benefit.

In this passage, Musa clearly acknowledges the impossibility, or at least his inability, to change the status quo in Debe. While long disconnected from it, Dantila represents, for him, a utopian homecoming to a place of dignified social origins, a heterotopia (Foucault 1984) in which his current position is reversed – a chief with many, many slaves. At the same time, his reasons for staying put in this geographical and social place are also couched in a discourse of family heritage. It is not only his mother's line that identifies him as a *kome*, but also the patrilineage and seniority that, through moral authority, weigh on him like an injunction.

Musa's self-image as an unwilling yet compliant slave descendant must be viewed against the backdrop of his attempt to achieve recognition as a family

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[15]For details about this cultural politics of ancestry and its contestation, see Gaibazzi (2013).

elder, and, later, as the leader of the Jakite *xabila* as a whole. It is in his capacity as a patriarchal authority that he had to lead by example and follow 'our fathers' path' (*o faabanun kille*) – as Soninke speakers put it – walking in the footsteps of his father and elder brothers, and honouring the place in which they are buried.[16] Indeed, the growth in size and, at least for Musa's brothers, in wealth of Jakite-*kunda* is attributed, implicitly, to the sweat shed by its founders and the blessings (*barake*) that they bestowed on their descendants, which Musa in turn is expected to pass on to the next generation.[17]

That cultivating a sense of descent, belonging and family responsibility involves accepting slave origins and relationships with former masters was also evidenced by Musa's reference to *laada*, 'tradition' or 'custom':

> *Musa*: Nowadays, [slavery] is a question of *laada*: when our naming ceremony arrives, we give [the *garanke*] meat [from the sacrificial ram]. And when they have a naming ceremony, they give us meat.
>
> *PG*: How do you view that?
>
> *Musa*: Ah, the elders settled those arrangements …
>
> *PG*: Do you like it or not?
>
> *Musa*: No, I don't like it. Because maybe my mother was a *kome*, but I am not a *kome*. But anyway, if you see your family doing something, you also do it. I did it, but I don't like it. Nowadays, no *garanke* will say, 'Musa, let's go and work' … That was a long time ago, nobody says that anymore. This '*kome, kome, kome*', they only say it [i.e. it is only a word], but it's actually nothing.

Both former masters and slave descendants sometimes speak of their bond as a *laada* in the same way that nobles and casted artisans do. This is a more neutral, less stigmatizing way of framing such unequal relationships while preserving hierarchies of status. As Musa makes clear, he accepts such customary relationships because he follows the arrangements made by his forebears, to which he is also bound. As Pelckmans has similarly observed among Fulbe slave descendants in Central Mali: 'There is a discourse about respect for ancestors. People are supposed to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors and to respect "what is found", i.e. to respect their ancestors' example' (Pelckmans 2011: 159).

Musa's reference to the onus of descent and tradition is not merely an excuse for accepting his *kome* identity despite his claims to free ancestry. As noted, not only had he remained loyal to his family and village when he was abroad, but he also married a woman of slave descent from his social milieu chosen with the help of his

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[16]The imperative to follow custom is ubiquitous in social interactions across the region (Davidson 2009), where the term 'path' provides a common metaphor (Kea 2013: 109).

[17]It is also believed that (former) masters conferred, and still confer, blessings on their (former) slave descendants, as well as the possibility of cursing them. This ideology plays a role in the maintenance of slave–master relationships in some parts of Muslim West Africa (Hardung 2009). In Debe, this is not necessarily the case any longer, and certainly not for Musa. In the village, blessings are primarily associated with parents and family elders.

siblings. Marital indications of senior relatives, in particular the parents, are often binding, at least for the first bride; these usually recruit spouses from among relatives and familiar circles (Sommerfelt 2013). Like some of his fellow travellers, he could have made a different choice and married a stranger. Some slave descendants deliberately use exogamy as a strategy to disperse the memory of their past and/or to seek upward mobility elsewhere. But Musa had witnessed some children born to their foreign mothers defecting from their fathers, and he wanted his children to follow in his footsteps instead.

Both as a father and as a *xabila* head, Musa has not prevented other Jakites from partially straying away from the 'fathers' path' as far as marital choices are concerned. Musa received a great deal of respect from his agnates, not least for his progressive views (discussed in the next section). Some of his classificatory sons openly said that they were not *komo* and some eventually married stranger women.[18] His second son married a woman in Serekunda. Musa did not oppose the marriage, for he believed the bride to be a modest and well-educated girl. It must be said that, at least for Musa's own sons, slavery had become more nominal than for their father. Their mother came from a different village and only an old woman from her former masters' family has lived in Debe. Although Kumba visited her on a very occasional basis, her children performed no ritual work for their former master, to my knowledge; nor did they entertain any customary exchange with her family. Whether Jakite men's marital choices will have a longer-term impact on their status is an open question. For now, none of Musa's agnates have deserted their families in search of new beginnings elsewhere, and they have generally paid their dues to their families in economic and other social terms.

AWARENESS AND COSMOPOLITAN SKILLS

Soninke speakers often say that 'if a traveller does not find money abroad, he will at least bring back knowledge [*tuwaaxu*]'. Few other persons in Debe would exemplify this maxim better than Musa himself. Not only did he travel widely, he also made the most of his experiences abroad, and, once he returned home, he spared no opportunity to cultivate his image as a polyglot and an open-minded citizen of the world. I have already mentioned that his skills helped to broker development projects in Debe. In this section, I further reflect on how Musa's conduct as a cosmopolitan mediated his position as a wise, respectable family and community elder. In the process, I note the complex ways in which Musa's *kome* status appears or fades, further demonstrating the dynamism of subject positions in post-slavery contexts. As will be shown, his travel experience made him known in the village for qualities other than his servile origins; paradoxically, this was also because he was asked to deploy them in his capacity as a slave descendant.

It is common in the sub-region to associate travel with knowledge acquisition and cosmopolitan exploration (see, for example, Diouf 2000; Cassiman 2012).

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[18]In the Gambia, the Soninke have a reputation for their endogamous orientation as an ethnic group, and especially for being reluctant to betroth their women outside their familial circles. Jakite brides were no exception to this trend.

Among the Soninke, travelling is often compared to a form of schooling, through which the person has an opportunity to acquire knowledge, and more generally to become aware of how the world works and how things could be done differently. The traveller (especially men, but also women) is said to *wulli*, to awaken or open his eyes, in the sense of 'seeing the world' and 'opening his mind'. *Wulliye* is thus a type of awareness that entails receptiveness to new experiences and visions that may serve to improve the home society. Therefore, while travellers are expected to respect the village tradition, they are also viewed as a potential source of change and innovation. Their *wulliye* might even lead them to question established practices.[19] In Musa's case, this is directly reflected in his views on slavery:

> *Musa*: Slavery will go [away] little by little. I know one day it will go. I don't know when, but I know it will go.
>
> *PG*: But now people talk about *hoore, kome* …
>
> *Musa*: That is now. But in the future, sooner or later, you will never hear of that slavery here in the Gambia … Because me, I travelled: in Nigeria, no slavery there. Ghana, no slavery. Mali, in some parts of Mali, there is no slavery, in some [other] parts of Mali, they have slavery. In the whole of Africa, we want to move [on from] this slavery problem.

Slightly modernist in flavour, Musa's progressive vision of the future of slavery may have been influenced by his audience: an educated researcher from (modern) Europe. But it also drew on his direct experience of important West African cities, which from a rural perspective represent icons of development and modernity as well as places where status identities are less accentuated. This representation is also reinforced by the ideology of diasporic egalitarianism mentioned above.

While Musa did not preach his vision openly, his knowledge and awareness did have important effects on his actual social standing. In the first place, his cosmopolitan flair and knowledge lifted his reputation way above the stigma of unsophistication and ignorance which is often attributed to slave descendants. A Mangasi elder went as far as counting him among the most intelligent people in the village. His travel stories, which he willingly shared with the villagers, were replete with cross-cultural encounters, from Malian state officials, to Ghanaian chiefs, to Nigerian Islamic scholars, to various other travellers and autochthones. More than as a progressive ideology, in fact, Musa's *wulliye* was manifest as a practical experience of how to conduct oneself across socio-cultural boundaries, complete with a set of linguistic and interpersonal skills. As noted, I was not the only foreigner who was charmed by Musa's persona, his cordiality and persuasive manner of conversation, not to mention his joviality. His working knowledge of English, among the various languages he spoke, had been instrumental in his linking up with the staff of the international charity whose arrival and subsequent projects in Debe were partly attributed by the villagers to Musa's ability to connect with the wider world outside the community. The

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[19]A paradigmatic example of this is Islamic reformism and the related insistence on formal education (Gaibazzi forthcoming).

VDC, as a liaison between the village community, the Gambian government and international organizations, also recruited Musa on account of his knowledge and diplomatic qualities. As Musa recalls: '[The VDC chairman] called me and said: "Musa, you have not studied, but you have travelled. *Wallahi*, join the VDC."'

The hybrid, ambivalent nature of Musa's VDC role hints at the fact that, in Debe as much as in the wider region, rural communities often preserve tradition by innovating it (Barber 2007; Wooten 2009: 16–7; Kea 2013). In more ways than one, Musa's knowledge and skills served not as a way for him to contest his role as a slave descendant, but to better interpret that role. Diplomatic and resourceful, Musa was held in high repute by his former masters. The Mangasi could entrust their marriage negotiations and other diplomatic missions to numerous *komo* other than Musa, but the latter was certainly among their preferred ambassadors. For instance, a Mangasi friend of mine once engaged Musa to mediate a stalled marriage process with the family of his future bride. I knew my friend had rather liberal views on the topic of slavery and asked him confidentially how he saw Musa's involvement. Although he admitted that, as a junior family member, he had to follow the convention of 'custom' and asked 'our slaves' to intercede on behalf of his family, he insisted that he needed somebody like Musa to accomplish the mission. Furthermore, he stressed that, in his view, Musa would not necessarily feel demoted by the assignment; to him, Musa seemed rather flattered because of being asked to do this favour. In fact, as far as diplomatic tasks in which he could make use of his resources were concerned, Musa had less negative feelings towards his former masters' demands than with more degrading tasks such as slaughtering rams. As he once proudly remarked: 'Diabugu Bataba, Baniko, Kumbija … in so many places I arranged for a *garanke* bride!'

CONCLUSIONS

The complex, shifting and at times contradictory configurations of slave descent emerging from Musa's story are indicative of the fact that status is not a fixed, static social position. There is no doubt that classification and ascription have powerful effects in their own right; despite contesting the ideology of slave origins, in practice Musa has little choice but to tactically manoeuvre within social boundaries that he cannot transcend. Yet slave origins have no uniform, sweeping effect across the board; we must rather describe when and how exactly they affect people's lives. In addition, although I admit that my very questions to Musa sometimes reveal a bias towards issues of slavery and emancipation, describing him solely as a resistant or reluctant slave descendant would not do justice to the complexity of his views and experiences. I thus found it more analytically fruitful to describe his nuanced perspective and subjective understanding of post-slavery, but also how he constructs a sense of social worth by responding to various predicaments of the self.

This article has therefore followed the ramifications of slave descent across wider social and cultural fields. Multiple processes of subject-making other than birth status shape Musa's experience and, in turn, delineate the space in which he positions himself vis-à-vis status hierarchies. His homecoming has been foregrounded, in this regard, as a sort of double 'fresh contact', to evoke Mannheim's famous concept; that is, by means of both socio-spatial and

generational change, as an encounter with one's socio-cultural heritage and the development of 'a novel approach in assimilating, using, and developing [it]' (Mannheim 1972: 293). After his return, Musa shared the joys and troubles of eldership with the cohort of his age mates, for whom dealing in 'tradition' is both a prerogative and an obligation. Attentiveness to masculinity and age has enabled me to make sense of how Musa handled the heritage of slavery and to gain insights into the socio-cultural dynamics through which slavery keeps haunting slave descendants. Musa resists being solely identified as the son of a slave woman, and refutes the elision of his free patrilineal ancestry operated by dominant social memory. At the same time, the need to comply with the demands of male seniority forces him to accept the memory of his social origins and honour the relationships that stemmed from it. This suggests that, in the attempt to establish and dignify their descent groups and to wield patriarchal authority over their families like the freeborn do, male slave descendants have incidentally reproduced the hegemonic canons of relatedness and selfhood that, indirectly, anchor them to past slavery (cf. Pelckmans 2011: 8).

Upon his return, Musa nevertheless developed new perspectives on the path of 'tradition'. This is evident in his use of cosmopolitan skills for serving his community and for reinforcing his image as a wise, progressive returnee and family authority. Considered as valuable resources and virtues in themselves, awareness and knowledge acquired through travelling place emphasis on conduct and achievement, which further qualify Musa's position vis-à-vis status hierarchies. He assumes public roles in which the salience of slave descent is arguably less accentuated. If this shows that slave descent can be situationally subsided in favour of other modes of reckoning social standing, it is significant that his knowledge acquired social currency partly because he acted as a *kome* for his former masters. It is by paying attention to these contradictory processes of positioning and self-realization that Musa's complex, ambivalent experience has been contextualized, and the settings in which his slave descent assumes significance as an axis of differentiation have been delineated.

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ABSTRACT

The article draws on the life story of Musa, a Soninke man from a Gambian village, to shed light on the experience and subjective dimension of slave descent in West Africa. After spending most of his life abroad as a migrant, Musa retired to his home village and came to terms with his status identity as a slave descendant. Rather than by status hierarchies alone, however, Musa's social position was modulated by other aspirations and obligations, particularly those inherent in becoming an elder and a returnee. These predicaments of the self, constructed on the basis of age, masculinity and cosmopolitan knowledge, shaped his life and delineated the space in which he variously interpreted and navigated the legacy of slavery. By foregrounding the ways in which slave descent is dynamically refracted by this broader process of self-making, this article thus goes beyond a framework centred primarily on fixed status identities and on the dynamics of resistance/submission, highlighting instead the multifaceted, even contradictory, positioning of slave descendants in post-slavery Senegambia.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article s'appuie sur l'histoire de la vie de Musa, un Soninké d'un village de Gambie, pour apporter un éclairage sur l'expérience et la dimension subjective de la descendance d'esclaves en Afrique de l'Ouest. Après avoir passé l'essentiel de son existence à l'étranger en tant que migrant, Musa est revenu dans son village natal et s'est accommodé de l'identité liée à son statut de descendant d'esclave. La position sociale de Musa a été modulée par des hiérarchies de statut, mais aussi par d'autres aspirations et obligations inhérentes, notamment, au fait de devenir un ancien et un émigré rentré au pays. Ces difficultés du soi fondé sur l'âge, la masculinité et un savoir cosmopolite, ont façonné sa vie et délimité l'espace dans lequel il a interprété l'héritage de l'esclavage et composé avec lui. Cet article, en mettant en avant la manière dont ce processus plus large d'auto-réalisation réfracte dynamiquement la descendance d'esclaves, va au-delà d'un cadre essentiellement centré sur des identités figées liées au statut et sur la dynamique de résistance/soumission, mettant en lumière le positionnement multiforme, voire contradictoire, des descendants d'esclaves en Sénégambie post-esclavage.