

Bellah Histories of Decolonization, Iklan Paths to Freedom: The Meanings of Race and Slavery in the Late-Colonial Niger Bend (Mali), 1944–1960*

By Bruce S. Hall

Duke University (bh71@duke.edu)

The standard story of the decolonization process in French-ruled West Africa involves race in a very direct and obvious way. Beginning with the Popular Front government in France (1936–38), and again with the Brazzaville Conference in 1944, a new reformist imperialism was outlined that would, in theory, be universal in its application to all people in the Empire. The implications of such rhetoric were latched onto by many Africans who increasingly formulated political demands based on principles of non-racial universality. Among the best-known examples is the strike in 1947–48 on the Dakar-Bamako railroad in which workers demanded a single pay scale (*cadre unique*) for all employees, European and African alike.¹ In this and other well-known cases, African leaders learned, as Tony Chafer put it, “that they could turn the French language of assimilation to their own advantage, by using it to justify the demand for equality between Africans and Europeans in the socio-economic field.”²

The language of racial equality was made particularly potent in the immediate post-war period because of the experience of Vichy rule in West Africa and the extensive demands made by wartime French administrations upon Africans at this time.³ In an interview in 1965, Mali’s first president Modibo Keita explained that he had been motivated to join the anti-colonial movement by French racism during the war: “I can still recall that gathering of the population, called by the governor of Soudan in Bamako, to

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¹ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 242.

² Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France’s Successful Decolonization?* (New York: Berg, 2002), 69.

³ Frank Gregory Snyder, *One-Party Government in Mali: Transition Toward Control* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 38. The Vichy regime invested considerable effort in the empire, and in exporting its particular racial idea of “national revolution” to the colonies. As Eric Jennings has argued, this harsher brand of illiberal French colonialism fueled indigenous nationalism across the empire. See Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 2. See also, Vincent Joly, *Le Soudan Français de 1939 à 1945: Une colonie dans la guerre* (Paris: Karthala, 2006); Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

hear an envoy of Maréchal Pétain. That evening, even though the white civil servants had not been able to occupy all the empty chairs and benches, we were invited as blacks, dressed in white, to sit on the red ground.”⁴ Such indignities served as reference points for many anti-colonial activists, providing a racial gloss to the political struggles of the late colonial period.

The larger story of decolonization in French West Africa, and the racial basis of colonial rule, is well known. What is not properly understood by historians of this period is the extent to which European-African racial dynamics, so central to late-colonial politics, sometimes sat uncomfortably on top of more local racial formations. In the arid regions along the southern edge of the Sahara Desert where Arab, Tuareg, and Fulbe pastoralist groups were concentrated, and where slavery had been most durable and long lasting, ideas about intra-African racial difference played an important role in orienting political responses to colonial reforms and eventual independence. For many representatives of the colonial state, and certain anti-colonial activists, the visibility and continued servility of darker-skinned slaves in places such as northern Mali, northern Niger, and Mauritania, made race an important problem to be addressed in the post-World War II period. It also provided a racial idiom for the much more widespread—and usually non-racial—political struggles between the often conservative representatives of established chiefly and prominent families and the proponents of more radical social change. These Sahelian ideas about race grew in importance after political independence was achieved in 1960. In postcolonial Mali, race has been at the center of the relationship between the Malian state and the Tuareg and Arab populations of the Saharan borderlands. According to Baz Lecocq, racial arguments have played a significant role in the two civil wars fought in northern Mali in 1963–64 and 1990–95: “The conflict between the Malian state and the [Tuareg and Arabs] forms part of a problem that haunts all of the Sahel, a problem often seen by foreign experts as one of ethnicity, but locally phrased in terms of race.”⁵

I contend in this article that in order to understand the racialized conflicts in the postcolonial Sahel, we must attend to the local history of racial ideas and practices that produced them.⁶ One of the reasons that racialized conflict has become so prolific in the postcolonial Sahel is because the first generation of leaders who brought Sahelian countries to independence deployed one set of racial arguments drawn from the larger French imperial context (Europe-Africa) to deal with problems in local settings where race meant very different things. By offering an account of a particular racial formation in the Niger Bend region of French Soudan, and in particular, the history of the struggles for emancipation by servile people known as the Bellah-Iklan, I show some of the ways that

⁴ “Une Interview du Président Modibo Keita (Réalisée en 1965 à son cinquantenaire)” in Amadou Seydou Traoré, ed., *Modibo Kéïta: Une référence, Un symbole, Un patrimoine national* (Bamako: Librairie Traoré, 2005), 17–18.

⁵ Baz Lecocq, “‘That Desert is Our Country’: Tuareg Rebellions and Competing Nationalisms in Contemporary Mali (1946–1996)” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2002), 301.

⁶ Gregory Mann, “Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa,” *American Historical Review* 110, 2 (2005), 412.

local realities intruded into the larger politics of decolonization, shaping the postcolonial outcomes in important ways.

Racialized Social Status and the Bellah-Iklan

Race worked on at least two different registers in the Niger Bend in the late colonial period. On the one hand, very old Sahelian ideas about blacks and non-blacks—expressed in the frequent dichotomy made in the Arabic writing of the area, over many centuries, between “sudan” (“blacks”) and “bidan” (“whites”)—were codified and given legal and administrative meaning in the ethnic categories created by colonial rule. As such, ethnic labels in the Niger Bend gained a racial gloss as “white” or “red” (for the Arabs, Tuareg, Fulbe), and “black” (for the Songhay, Bambara, Dogon). On the other hand, race acted as a marker of inferior social status connected to slavery and servility. One finds reference to this set of ideas in the use of color-coded terminology to refer to socially inferior people as black in each ethno-linguistic group in the Niger Bend.⁷ This was true even among people whom the colonial state labeled as black, such as the Songhay. Among Songhay-speakers, lower-status people, including freed slaves, have historically been labeled as blacks (*gaa-bibi*, *har-bibi*),⁸ whereas Songhay-speaking elites claimed to be non-black based on genealogical links to North Africa and Arabia.⁹

The most important racial label that marked social inferiority in the colonial Niger Bend was the term “Bellah,” which was used by the French administration to refer to “black” slaves and former slaves among the Tuareg. This is a word of Songhay origin,¹⁰ and it was not commonly used in Tamashek, the spoken language of the Tuareg.¹¹

⁷ On the particular ethno-linguistic uses of color-coded social labels, see the following: Urs Peter Ruf, “Ending Slavery: Hierarchy, Dependency and Gender in Central Mauritania,” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Bielefeld, 1998), 38; Catherine Taine-Cheikh, “La Mauritanie en noir et blanc. Petit Promenade linguistique en Hassaniya,” *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 54 (1989), 90–105; Lecocq, “That Desert is Our Country,” 12; Hallasy Sidibé, Mamadou Diallo, and Coumbel Barry, “*Pulaaku* et crise d’identité: Le cas des *Fulbe wodeebe* (Peuls rouges) de la région lacustre de l’Issa-Ber au Mali,” in Mirjam de Bruijn and Hans van Dijk, eds., *Peuls et Mandingues. Dialectique des constructions identitaires* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 226–28; Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts et conceptions songhay-zarma* (Paris: Nubia, 1982), 144.

⁸ Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts et conceptions songhay-zarma*, 144. When the American anthropologist Horace Miner carried out research in Timbuktu in 1940, he found that these terms were still in use. See Horace Miner, *The Primitive City of Timbuktoo*, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 54–62.

⁹ Ahmad Bul-`Araf al-Tikni, *Izalat al-rayb wa-l-shakk wa-l-tafrit fi dhikr al-mu`allifin min ahl al-takrur wa-l-sahra` wa-ahl shinqit*, ed. al-Hadi al-Mabruk al-Dali (Benghazi: Dar al-kutub al-wataniyya, 2000), 53–54. For a fuller discussion of the changes in Sahelian ideas about race, see Bruce S. Hall, “The Question of ‘Race’ in the Pre-colonial Southern Sahara,” *Journal of North African Studies* 10, 3–4 (2005), 339–67; James Webb, *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600–1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). Roger Botte argues that such racial designations of slaves and former slaves are widespread across West Africa. See Roger Botte, “De l’esclavage et du daltonisme dans les sciences sociales,” *Journal des Africanistes* 70, 1 (2000), 11–12.

¹⁰ Baz Lecocq, “The Bellah Question: Slave Emancipation, Race, and Social Categories in Late Twentieth-Century Northern Mali,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 39, 1 (2005), 48–49.

¹¹ Except of course when Tamashek-speakers use Songhay or French.

Different terms can be used to refer to slaves and former slaves in Tamashek, but the most important remains “iklan,” which means (male) slaves.¹² Like iklan, which has a popular etymology connecting it to blackness,¹³ the term Bellah became a catchall word that acquired racial meaning by conflating servility with the idea of blackness, rendering all those labeled black in Tuareg society as Bellah, and assigning to all Bellah a slave origin.¹⁴

For anti-colonial activists after World War II, the continuing servility of the Bellah-Iklan was evidence of the colonially supported “feudal” structure of Tuareg society, and the falseness of colonial rhetoric of paternalism and development.¹⁵ The anti-colonial movement in French Soudan came to see its task as more than just throwing off the colonial yoke; it would also have to transform the social organization in the new nation that was being created.¹⁶ In the Niger Bend, one of the most important pieces of social

¹² I use the masculine plural form “iklan” for convenience. A single male slave is an “akli,” a single female slave is a “taklitt,” the feminine plural form is “tiklaten.” Jeffrey Heath glosses these terms as “Bellah.” See Jeffrey Heath, *Dictionnaire touareg du Mali: Tamachek-anglais-français* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), 287. The terms for (male) freed slaves in Tamashek are “iderfan” (sing. male: “edaraf”), and “ighawelan” (sing. male: “eghawel”).

¹³ Annemarie Bouman, “Benefits of Belonging: Dynamics of Iklan Identity, Burkina Faso” (Ph.D. thesis, Universiteit Utrecht, 2003), 66n. Bouman quotes Ramdane Achab, who suggests that the Tamashek root “K-L,” which is the basis for iklan, is the same as the semantic complex for “black.” Jeffrey Heath suggests however that the Tamashek root for “blackness” (tekkewelt) is instead “K-W-L.” See Heath, *Dictionnaire touareg du Mali*, 333.

¹⁴ Although not the focus of this article, this racialization of servile people was not unique to the Tuareg. It is worth noting that not all of those defined as Bellah were of slave origin. On the different status categories and the patriarchal ideology of master-slave relations in Tuareg society, see Pierre Bonte, “Esclavage et relations de dépendance chez les Touareg Kel Gress,” in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *L’esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris: Maspéro, 1975), 49–76; Hélène Claudot-Hawad, “Captif sauvage, esclave enfant, affranchi cousin. La mobilité statutaire chez les Touaregs (Imajaghen),” in Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, ed., *Groupes serviles au Sahara. Approche comparative à partir du cas des Arabophones de Mauritanie* (Paris: CNRS, 2000), 238–41; Claudot-Hawad, “Identité et altérité d’un point de vue touareg. Eléments pour un débat,” in Claudot-Hawad, ed., *Touaregs et autres Sahariens entre plusieurs mondes. Définitions et redéfinitions de soi et des autres* (Aix-en-Provence: CNRS, 1996), 14. Bouman argues, unconvincingly in my view, that Iklan should not be understood as slaves because there are multiple social positions that can be encompassed by this term. This is of course true of all slave systems. See Bouman, “Benefits of Belonging,” 84–85.

¹⁵ Lecocq, “The Bellah Question,” 48–51. We need not accept these analyses to appreciate their rhetorical power. See Jean Suret-Canale, “La fin de la chefferie en Guinée,” *Journal of African History* 7, 3 (1966), 463.

¹⁶ Similar analyses were made in Guinea and Niger. On Guinea see Suret-Canale, “La fin de la chefferie en Guinée,” 459–93; Elizabeth Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939–1958* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), 105. On Djibo Bakary’s Sawaba movement in Niger, see Klaas van Walraven, “From Tamanrasset: The Struggle of Sawaba and the Algerian Connection, 1957–1966,” *Journal of North African Studies* 10, 3–4 (2005), 510; Finn Fuglestad, “Djibo Bakary, the French, and the Referendum of 1958 in Niger,” *Journal of African History* 14, 2 (1973), 313–30.

reorganization was the emancipation of the slaves.¹⁷ Modibo Keita often spoke of the necessity to decolonize Malian “mentalités,” and he described the struggle for Malian independence as against both French colonial power and his more conservative African opponents, whom he argued had based themselves on “feudal authority, supported by the French colonial administration.”¹⁸

As in other parts of Africa where the idiom of race became important in local political struggles associated with decolonization, the postcolonial consequences in Mali have included racialized violence.¹⁹ In northern Mali, postcolonial development strategies aimed—at least rhetorically—at the empowerment of socially subordinate people and the elimination of purported feudal and racial privilege for noble Tuareg in particular. This politics led quite directly to a perception among many Tuareg (and Arabs) that they would have no place in the new postcolonial Republic of Mali which, from their perspective, was going to be run by blacks for the benefit of blacks. A political campaign was launched in the late 1950s to separate the Niger Bend from the Soudan. Led by a Timbuktu intellectual named Muhammad Mahmud ould al-Shaykh (d. 1973), many Arab and Tuareg notables in the Niger Bend supported the idea of a new Saharan territory that would not be governed by “blacks.”²⁰ The failure to achieve a separate territory, and the distrust that this provoked

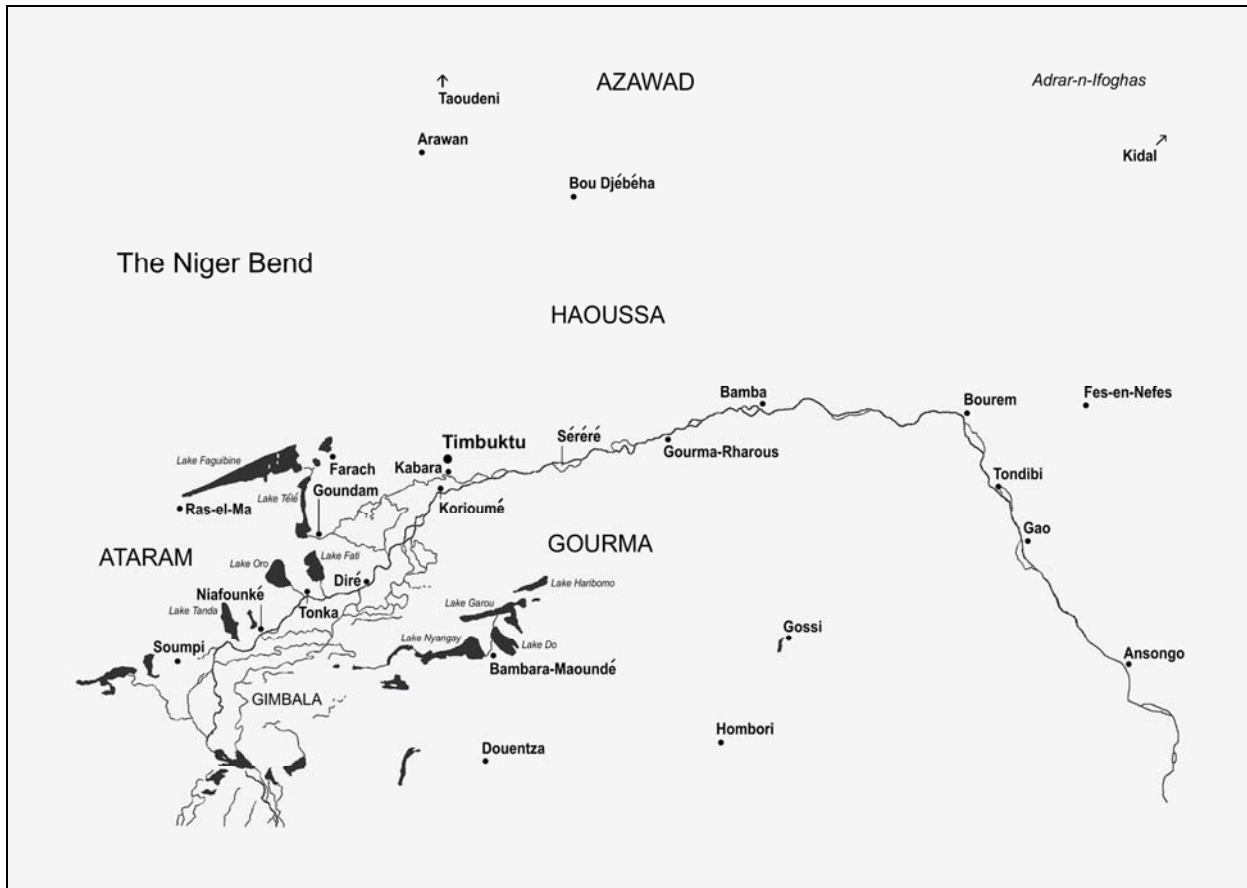
¹⁷ Naffet Keïta, “De l’identitaire au problème de la territorialité: L’OCRS et les sociétés Kel Tamacheq du Mali,” in GEMDEV and Université du Mali, eds., *Mali-France. Regards sur une histoire partagée* (Paris: Kathala, 2005), 104–105; Pierre Boilley, “Un complot français au Sahara? Politiques françaises et représentations maliennes...” in GEMDEV and Université du Mali, eds., *Mali-France. Regards sur une histoire partagée* (Paris: Kathala, 2005), 168–69.

¹⁸ Modibo Keita, *Modibo Keita: Discours et Interventions* (Bamako: [n.p.], 1965), 29, 103–104.

¹⁹ On the East Africa Coast, see Jonathon Glassman, “Sorting Out the Tribes: The Creation of Racial Identities in Colonial Zanzibar’s Newspaper Wars,” *Journal of African History* 41, 3 (2000), 395–428; “Slower Than a Massacre: The Multiple Sources of Racial Thought in Colonial Africa,” *American Historical Review* 109, 3 (2004), 720–54; James R. Brennan, “Realizing Civilization through Patrilineal Descent: African Intellectuals and the Making of an African Racial Nationalism in Tanzania, 1920–1950,” *Social Identities* 12, 4 (2006), 405–23. Mahmood Mamdani summarizes the emergence of race in Rwanda. See Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 76–102. On Sudan see Amir Hasan Idris, *Sudan’s Civil War: Slavery, Race and Formational Identities* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2001), Heather Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

²⁰ Muhammad Mahmud ould al-Shaykh was the leading proponent for the separation of the Niger Bend from Soudan so that it could be incorporated into a new French-ruled Saharan territory called the Organisation commune des régions sahariennes (OCRS). On this project, see Pierre Boilley, “L’Organisation commune des régions sahariennes (OCRS): Une tentative avortée,” in Edmund Bernus, Pierre Boilley, Jean Clauzel, and Jean-Louis Triaud, eds., *Nomades et commandants: Administration et sociétés nomades dans l’ancienne A.O.F.* (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 215–39; André Bourgeot, “Sahara: Espace géostratégique et enjeux politiques (Niger),” in Emmanuel Grégoire and Jean Schmitz, eds., *Afrique noire et monde arabe: Continuités et ruptures* (La Tour-d’Aigues: Aube, 2000), 40; Bourgeot, *Les sociétés touarègues. nomadisme, identité, résistances* (Paris: Karthala, 1995), 356. For a slightly different take on this, see Héléne Claudot-

among Malian political leaders, led quite directly to a highly racialized civil war that broke out in 1963 in the largely Tuareg Adrar-n-Ifoghas region.²¹ A generation later, the same region was torn apart by another conflict known as the “Tuareg rebellion” (1990–95) that resulted in the “racial cleansing” of much of the non-black Tuareg and Arab populations of northern Mali.²² In important ways, these Sahelian racial conflicts continue to intrude into the realm of national politics, disrupting more comfortable nationalist binaries of Europe/Africa, colonizer/colonized, and white/black.



Map 1. The Niger Bend.

Hawad, *Le politique dans l'histoire touarègue*. *Cahiers de l'IREMAN* (Aix-en-Provence: CNRS, 1993), 81–82.

²¹ On this conflict and its causes, see Lecocq, “That Desert Is Our Country”; Pierre Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes: du Soudan français au Mali contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 1999).

²² On the “racial cleansing” in northern Mali, see Robin-Edward Poulton and Ibrahim ag Youssouf, *A Peace of Timbuktu: Democratic Governance, Development and African Peacemaking* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1998), 62.

Violence and the Bellah-Iklan

Violence, or its threat, was the means by which Bellah-Iklan were kept in servile positions in the Niger Bend region. This violence took different forms, as masters and local representatives of the colonial state sought to enforce Bellah-Iklan dependence and subordination. In what follows, I use colonial criminal records as a means of accessing some of the ways that violence was used by masters and the colonial state against Bellah-Iklan.²³ The racial category of Bellah-Iklan was reproduced and given meaning by the forms of violence that were sanctioned by local officials in the colonial state and by masters who defended their authority over slaves. Judging by the local criminal records, it was only in the 1940s that significant numbers of Bellah-Iklan began to act more assertively in response to the violence directed at them by taking their grievances with masters to the colonial justice system.

In the Niger Bend, the French administration had been more successful than in many other regions of West Africa at ensuring that slaves remained in servile relations with their masters long after the advent of colonial rule. Unlike other areas of the Soudan, there was no dramatic exodus of slaves in the Niger Bend in the first decades of colonial occupation.²⁴ The percentage of the overall population that was servile in this region at the time of colonial conquest has been estimated at more than 50 percent. However, most slaves were second generation or at least culturally assimilated into their host societies.²⁵ This was an important reason for the fact that the structures of slavery and servility began to unravel so much later in the Niger Bend than in other places, only becoming a serious issue of colonial concern after the end of World War II.

Bellah-Iklan can be broadly understood as divided into four social types in the colonial period. There were those who practiced agriculture at least part of the year and

²³ Although I have not done any quantitative analysis of the court data from the Niger Bend, it is clear that property and labor were very important “trouble spots” in court cases involving Bellah-Iklan after 1940. See Richard Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), 6–13.

²⁴ Richard Roberts, “The End of Slavery, Colonial Courts, and Social Conflict in Gumbu, 1908–1911,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34, 3 (2000), 684–713; Roberts, “The End of Slavery in the French Soudan,” in Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, eds., *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 282–307. On the few cases in the Niger Bend, see Martin Klein, “Slavery and French Rule in the Sahara,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 19 (1998), 73–90.

²⁵ The French sent out questionnaires on the number of slaves in each administrative district in Soudan in 1894 and again in 1904, and this produced census data for the Niger Bend indicating a slave population ranging from 40 percent in the district of Bamba to 82 percent in the district of Ras-el-Ma. Sixty-one percent of the population of the district of Timbuktu were counted as slaves, and 75 percent of the population of the district of Gao. See Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 252–54. For the Tuareg and Arab pastoralist groups present in the Niger Bend, the percentage of slaves was close to 50 percent judging from the colonial census records. On the question of the percentage of slaves in different Tuareg societies, see Edmond Bernus and Suzanne Bernus, “L’évolution de la condition servile chez les Touaregs sahéliens,” in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *L’esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris: F. Maspéro, 1975), 28–29.

owed their masters a share of the harvest (iklan n egef). These Bellah-Iklan were officially taxed and administered by their masters unless otherwise stipulated by the colonial administration. It was only in 1949 that the French government introduced a policy of taxing Bellah-Iklan directly, rather than indirectly through their masters.²⁶ Other Bellah-Iklan constituted autonomous groups of herders (iklan n tenere), which were usually under the control of a larger confederation led by non-slaves. The third type of Bellah-Iklan was those who lived with masters in domestic settings (iklan daw ehan).²⁷ It was these domestic slaves who were the most likely to remain the longest in relations with their masters.²⁸ There was also a fourth type of Bellah-Iklan who had left their masters to settle in towns such as Timbuktu.²⁹ The colonial administration feared that these people acted as advocates for other Bellah-Iklan to leave their masters. In a report on the Tuareg Kel Sidi Ali in 1950, the French administrator Henri Leroux indicated that, “the emancipated and settled elements [of the Bellah-Iklan] in Timbuktu rapidly become the champions of Bellah emancipation and the counselors for their brothers still in the tribe. It is they who give the first asylum and assure the subsistence of the new fugitives.”³⁰

Although the colonial state ended the slave trade in the first decades of its occupation, it only reluctantly interfered with the existing systems of slavery in the most egregious cases of abuse. For example, an important Tuareg (Igawaddaran) chief named Sakib ag Assamsamo (d. 1936) was arrested in 1909 after a complaint was lodged against him by a person identified in the colonial record as a “Bellah” by the name of Borazza, who belonged to the Tuareg Kel Ulli. Borazza testified that Sakib had had his eyes burned out by hot irons.³¹ When Sakib was brought to Timbuktu to answer these charges, he acknowledged having ordered this grizzly procedure; but he also justified it because the victim was, according to Sakib, an inveterate thief. Such punishments were, he said, customary among the Tuareg for rebellious or disobedient slaves.³² The case was judged

²⁶ Lecocq, “The Bellah Question,” 52.

²⁷ Paul Galloy, “Le Problème des Bellahs,” 19 February 1957, Centre de hautes études d’administration musulmane (CHEAM), “Archives,” Cercle de Tombouctou, Timbuktu, Mali (hereafter ACT).

²⁸ Jean Planté, “Rapport de la tournée effectuée du 9 mars au 10 avril dans les tribus des Igouadaren de l’Est,” Subdivision of Gourma-Rharous, Cercle de Tomboutou, 15 April 1950, “Archives,” Région de Tombouctou, Timbuktu, Mali (hereafter ART), 1E 13.

²⁹ Masters often followed their Bellah-Iklan to the towns and demanded services and remuneration from them. See Jean Gallais, *Pasteurs et paysans du Gourma. La condition sahélienne* (Paris: CNRS, 1975), 93–94.

³⁰ Henri Leroux, Cercle de Tombouctou, “Rapport de la tournée effectuée dans la tribu Kel Sidi Ali du 9 avril au 3 mai et du 11 au 14 mai 1950,” ACT.

³¹ Letter from Capitaine Staup, commandant, Cercle de Bamba, to the commandant, Région de Tombouctou, No. 227, 8 June 1909, Archives nationales du Mali, Bamako, Mali (hereafter ANM), Fonds anciens (hereafter FA), 1E 21–22.

³² Région de Tombouctou, “Rapport politique,” June 1909, ANM FA 1E 78–81.

by the tribunal of the district of Bamba, and Sakib was released with a fine of twenty head of cattle.³³

Colonial violence was fundamental to maintaining the status of Bellah-Iklan. In the Niger Bend, recruitment for overseas military service fell exclusively on blacks, both Songhay-speakers and pastoralist servile populations. Two incidents reveal the extent to which the local colonial administration in the Niger Bend used racial criteria to fulfill their demands for military recruits. In the first, several “white” pastoralists who had presented themselves for military service in 1918 were rejected for racial reasons; amongst the Tuareg population, military recruitment for overseas service fell exclusively upon the Bellah-Iklan. The colonial administration feared that enlisting “white” Tuareg might instigate further Tuareg resistance to French rule.³⁴ In the second, a small colonial scandal occurred in 1918 because of the brutality of Bellah-Iklan recruitment into military service. Ten Bellah-Iklan recruits were drowned crossing the Niger River at Iloa (20 km from Timbuktu) because the canoe that was transporting them sank. The recruits had been tied together in groups of five by a rope around their necks as they were being transported to Timbuktu by a French officer. After investigating the affair, a colonial report concluded with an indictment of the way Tuareg leaders delivered Bellah-Iklan “recruits” to colonial posts, comparing it to the slave trade within West Africa before colonial rule had been established. It did not punish the French officer who had been responsible for the incident.³⁵

It is clear from a number of cases recorded in the colonial judicial records that violence was used by masters against Bellah-Iklan as a means of enforcing existing master-slave relations, or to punish Bellah-Iklan transgressions. In one case, three Tuareg Irreganatan were robbed on 15 May 1943 in the vicinity of the village of Koura (southwest of Timbuktu). They immediately suspected that the thieves were local Bellah-Iklan, and after an informant in Koura indicated those whom he thought were responsible for the robbery, the group seized two men and beat them over a two-day period. One man named Attino Bagary was killed as a result of the abuse he suffered and the other, named Tabago ag Arhahialla, only survived because his master rescued him. The three Tuareg Irreganatan were led by a man named Arhounou ag Assouhourou, who fled after the killing and managed to evade the colonial police for almost two years. He was finally arrested and brought to Timbuktu on 18 March 1945, where he was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to perpetual hard labor.³⁶

Tabago, the surviving victim, was identified in the colonial record as a fifty-one-year-old slave of Muhammad ag Taka (Tuareg Kel Hawsa). He testified that,

it was at night and I was sleeping in my hut near the village of Koura. I was abruptly awoken and seized by four Tuareg Irreganatan [he lists their names]. They led me to their camp and I understood that they were wrongly accusing me of theft.

³³ Cercle de Bamba, “Rapport politique,” September 1909, ANM FA 1E 21–22.

³⁴ Région de Tombouctou, “Rapport Politique,” 2ème trimestre, 1918, ANM FA 1E-78–81.

³⁵ “Rapport de L’inspecteur Général Demaret,” 1919, ANM 1E 2361, Num. Sér. III.

³⁶ Cercle de Tombouctou, “Procès-verbal,” 9 July 1945, “Archives,” ART, 1M-16.

Near the camp beside a branch of the river, they maltreated me, beat me, half strangled me with a rope around my neck which I choked on because they had also put some cloth over my head. They also pushed my head underwater and held me there until I fainted. Then, they left me tied up in their camp overnight. In the morning my master came to the camp and reclaimed me....

The next evening, a little after nightfall, the four Tuareg came back and took me again, tied me up, and led me to their camp where they confined me. They left and I saw them come back after a certain time with a person named Attino Bagary whom they had also tied up. They brought him to the same spot beside the branch of the river, and they put him through exactly the same treatment that I had suffered the previous evening. I saw this from a camp which was a couple of kilometers away.³⁷

The two Bellah-Iklan were then taken to the village of Koura where they were brought before the chief of the village and accused of having stolen, among other things, a sword, a band of cotton cloth, money, and some butter and milk. The chief reportedly told the four kidnappers: "You should have taken them to their masters. If they really stole from you, their masters will reimburse you."³⁸ However, the kidnappers refused this advice and took their two prisoners back to their camp. Tabago was finally retrieved again by his master, but Attino remained and was beaten to death.

Cases such as that of Attino Bagary were not uncommon. Less than two years later, another Bellah-Iklan man named Ichirache ag Zenguina (Tuareg Iforas Irreganatan), was killed in grim circumstances in the village of Kabeika by a clan chief named Ahmad ag Muhammad. The victim was part of a group of sedentary Bellah-Iklan (iklan n egef) living in Kabeika and practicing agriculture. Each year, they paid their masters a tribute in grain. In February 1945, Ichirache refused to turn over the tribute that he owed to Ahmad ag Muhammad, insisting that he would only give it to his individual master. This made Ahmad ag Muhammad so angry that he tied a rope around Ichirache's neck, attached it to a horse, which he then made gallop away. Ichirache was dragged to his death.³⁹

Other cases in the late 1940s indicate that the tensions in continuing master-slave relationships often centered on masters' demands for Bellah-Iklan labor. In 1946, the tribunal of the district of Goundam, condemned two Tuareg Kel Taharojen (Kel Hawsa) masters named Oumar ag Mahamane and Abdallah ag Ouandaya to three months in prison for robbery of the goods of a Bellah-Iklan man who was living in a seasonal agricultural settlement. The sentence was light because of the extenuating circumstances recognized by the tribunal. The victim, Bania Ibrahima,⁴⁰ testified as to what had happened:

³⁷ "Audience publique du Tribunal Criminel du Cercle de Tombouctou," 15 January 1945, ART, 1M-16.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Télégramme-lettre from the Subdivision de Gourma-Rharous, to the Cercle de Tombouctou, 6/C, 1 June 1945, ART, B44.

⁴⁰ Bania (bañña) is a common given name for slaves in the Niger Bend. It is a Songhay word for male slave.

My two masters Oumar and Abdallah took my two daughters from me to be servants. Just recently at Kanei, they took my son whom they use as a herder. The child ran away and came to Goundam. On 14 May, I was coming back from the fields of Lake T  l   when I met my masters who suspected that my son was hiding near me. They beat me, then they stripped me of my possessions, and they returned to their camp.”

The colonial official asked the victim about the nature of his relationship with his masters, and about whether there was any agreement between them allowing his masters to take Bania’s children as servants. Bania responded that there was such an accord with the mother of one of his aggressors. He said that it had lasted for five years: “It is the mother of Oumar who raised my children and every time I needed them, she lent them to me to help me with the harvest.”⁴¹

The two accused in this case did not deny that they had taken Bania’s possessions, although they did deny that they had beaten him. Instead, they explained their actions as consistent with custom and obligation in the Tuareg-Iklan relationship. In his testimony, Oumar ag Mahamane described his actions as necessary when faced with Bania’s lies:

I left Goundam to go and look for Bania. I met him at Gorb  l when he was coming back from the fields of Lake T  l  . I asked him why he had recalled his son who had been herding our goats. He responded to me that he had not seen him for several days. I did not believe his declarations and to force him to bring back his son, I took his goods and told him that we will go to see the chief of the tribe. I did not hit him or harm him.

The other defendant in the case, Abdallah ag Ouandaya, explained the motivation for their actions in his testimony:

The servants of our tribe are required to alternately provide the herders for the nomad school of Lake Oro. It is in this way that Bania sent us his young son Alkassan. Since he was too young, we kept him and replaced him with another one. A few days later, Alkassan escaped, abandoning our herd of goats. Oumar and I were part of the search party for his father at Kanei. His wife told us that he was at Tondia. We came back to Goundam. Then one evening we took the road [around] Lake T  l  . Arriving at Gorb  l, we crossed paths with Bania who was coming back from the fields. We asked him why he had recalled his son. Bania responded to us that since he had sent us his son, he had not seen him again. In order to force him to look for his son and to deliver him to us, we took his possessions.⁴²

Such cases are fairly typical in the records of the colonial tribunals of the Niger Bend after World War II.⁴³

⁴¹ Register of the Tribunal of Goundam, 1945–46, No. 23, 18 May 1946, f. 45, “Archives,” Cercle de Goundam, Goundam, Mali (hereafter ACG).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Subdivision de Gourma-Rharous, Cercle de Tombouctou, “Rapport de tourn  e,” No. 1110, 30 April 1949, ART, 1E 10.

Violence against the Bellah-Iklan gained new meanings in the 1940s and 1950s when anti-colonial activists associated it with colonial unwillingness to devolve power to Africans. Local colonial officials and indigenous chiefs used the violence to argue that decolonization would result in chaos and therefore should be reconceived or slowed down. For everyone in the Niger Bend, the violence reinforced the racial distinctions that would play such an important part in the politics of decolonization.

Colonial Reform and the Problem of Bellah-Iklan Autonomy

By the time that World War II had ended, it was clear to colonial officials in the Niger Bend, and to their superiors in Bamako, Dakar, and even Paris, that the continuing servility of the Bellah-Iklan would have to be addressed. The debates within the colonial administration that are discussed in what follows, and the policy changes that were made, did lead, in fits and starts, to greater autonomy for Bellah-Iklan. But it was the initiative taken by Bellah-Iklan themselves that forced colonial officials to adjust policy and administrative structures to realities that were being created by action on the ground.

The colonial officials in the Niger Bend did not react well to the changes in administration promised at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944. In January 1945, the governor general of French West Africa sent a circular to all the administrative districts in the colonies explaining the reforms that were imminent after the war, and soliciting local responses.⁴⁴ In his reply, Jean Raynaud, the commandant of Goundam, highlighted the problem that slavery would pose for political reforms in the Niger Bend:

This issue of the servants also deserves our attention, because evidently the present system, about which we have not brought any real change in over fifty years, cannot last forever, even if the administration doesn't intervene directly. A slow evolution is occurring. Numerous are the Bellah who have left their masters to seek refuge first in the freedom villages (villages de liberté) and then later in the districts far to the south. It is my opinion that we have an interest in avoiding as much as possible the crisis that will explode any day now among the servants, a crisis which could provoke the total disintegration of the nomadic tribes. To avoid this, it is necessary that the evolution of the Bellah be made to take into account their aspirations as well as the vital needs of the nomadic tribes.⁴⁵

Raynaud then listed the objectives of French policy towards the Bellah-Iklan, which he said should include a strict colonial surveillance and control, and an insistence that the Bellah-Iklan be registered and taxed according to the Tuareg clan to which they belonged, even if this meant splitting up families so that the wife and children would be registered and taxed in one clan, and the husband in another. Where an individual Bellah-Iklan belonged was entirely dependent upon the identity of his or her master.

⁴⁴ Governor-General of the A.O.F., "Circulaire," 17 January 1945, ART, B44.

⁴⁵ Télégramme-Lettre, Cercle de Goundam to the Governor, Soudan Français, 1 March 1945, No. 13/C, ACG. Lest there be any doubt about the terms used in local languages, in the Arabic correspondence of the French administration in the Niger Bend, the term "slaves" (*ʿabid*) was still being used to refer to Bellah-Iklan in the 1940s. See Télégramme-lettre from Brigadier Ahmad ould Sidi to the commandant, Subdivision de Diré, 24 February 1943, ACG.

Raynaud's hope was that the changes in the status of the Bellah-Iklan would occur slowly and within Tuareg society, under "white" Tuareg supervision. Others were less sanguine. The commandant of the district of Timbuktu replied to the proposed post-Brazzaville changes by saying that, "whether they remain in their tribes, or they are freed, the Bellah make up a population of little interest and with very base instincts. They are completely dishonest and every Bellah who has the chance is a thief."⁴⁶ This kind of colonial rhetoric had its critics even within the French regime,⁴⁷ but it reflected longer-term pessimism about the economic prospects for the Niger Bend.⁴⁸

The larger political context of the post-war period figured into most discussions within the colonial administration about the so-called "Bellah question." For example, in a letter written to the governor of Soudan in 1949, the commandant of Timbuktu made a direct connection between continuing Bellah-Iklan servility and the potential use to which this fact might be put by anti-colonial forces:

I suggest that it is essential for our administration to take the Bellah question, and even the issue of whether they should evolve within the [larger] tribes, directly in hand. This is because it really constitutes very easy prey for certain political parties who would not fail to exploit this issue one day for their sole benefit, even though the claims of the servants are often legitimate.⁴⁹

To head off such a political eventuality, the administrator suggested that the condition of the Bellah-Iklan be improved to encourage the constitution of nuclear families, respect for Bellah-Iklan rights to own and inherit property, and the creation of autonomous sub-groups or even independent Bellah-Iklan factions.

While the colonial administration debated the appropriate reforms that should be implemented in the Niger Bend after World War II, a number of Bellah-Iklan groups began to take matters into their own hands. Martin Klein has suggested that a revolt of some Bellah-Iklan in the area of Meneka in 1946 was decisive in the breakdown of Tuareg

⁴⁶ Bedo, commandant, Cercle de Tomboutou, "Propositions au sujet du plan d'action de reforme et de mise en valeur de l'A.O.F.," 9 March 1945, ART, B44.

⁴⁷ Paul Laïne, "Rapport au Gouverneur: La situation dans la Subdivision de Gourma-Rharous," Koulouba, 17 April 1944, No. 25/AA, ANM, Fonds récents [hereafter FR], 2D15.

⁴⁸ Colonial sentiment began to change after World War II, in part because Bellah-Iklan labor had been crucial in the conception of two large agricultural development projects that involved irrigation and resettlement of families as laborers. The first was at Diré where a cotton colonization scheme had been initiated in the early 1920s by the Compagnie de culture cotonnière du Niger. See Jean Filipovich, "Destined to Fail: Forced Settlement at the Office du Niger, 1926–45," *Journal of African History* 42, 2 (2001), 248n; Richard Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in French Soudan, 1800–1946* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 118–62. The other major irrigation scheme was run by the Office du Niger on Lake Oro. Work began in 1940 on a dam at Tonka, where Lake Oro connects to the Niger River, and the first agricultural season on the irrigated land was in 1942. As at Diré, labor was provided by a system of sharecropping in which whole families of Bellah-Iklan and other subalterns established households near the new lands. See Joly, *Le Soudan français de 1939 à 1945*, 314–17.

⁴⁹ Letter from the commandant, Cercle de Tombouctou to the Governor, Soudan Français, "Sur la situation politique actuelle des Tribus du Gourma Ouest," No. 31/C, 6 May 1949, ART, 1E 10.

control over their former slaves there.⁵⁰ It appears to have hastened Bellah-Iklan migration to the south in order to find better pasture lands and avoid their masters. But in most other areas of the Niger Bend, struggles between Bellah-Iklan and their masters were less dramatic and more complex. Bellah-Iklan sometimes played on the assumptions of the colonial administrators in pursuit of their own interests, whether by aligning themselves with their masters or by making claims against them. One arena where these different strategies are evident is in the lake region of the Gourma. Between 1933 and 1948, the lakes of the Gourma did not receive water from the annual flood of the Niger River. When these seasonal lakes began to receive water again in 1949, conflicts followed over ownership and payments of land-use fees among the major chieftaincies in the region, in particular between the Tuareg Irreganatan and the largely Fulbe villages of Bambara-Maoundé and Sareyamou. The conflicts involved the Irreganatan Bellah-Iklan who cultivated these seasonal lakes along with Fulbe Rimaybe and other Songhay-speaking cultivators from the western end of the Niger Bend around Sarafere and Sareyamou.⁵¹

The Bellah-Iklan could appear to be pawns of their masters. In 1950, 147 Irreganatan Bellah-Iklan refused to pay the Fulbe chief and rights-holder of the land they were cultivating around Lake Niangaye, citing the authority of the Irreganatan chief Marouchett.⁵² However, they could also act on their own. One year later in 1951, another group of sedentary Irreganatan Bellah-Iklan (Kel Kaiguru) from the seasonal agricultural settlement of Arsi came to Gourma-Rharous to make apparently false claims of abuse (thefts of goods and kidnapped Bellah-Iklan children) by some of their masters. If we are to believe the local colonial administrator, the accusations were untrue and “speculative,” designed solely to allow the accusers to get out from under the administrative authority of Marouchett.⁵³ Bellah-Iklan had sent presents to the canton chief of Sarafere in hopes of becoming his subjects, and therefore under his responsibility for taxation. They wanted to integrate themselves as sedentary people under a Songhay chief, with no further links to their Tuareg masters. Although they were unsuccessful in this attempt because the colonial state refused to permit the change,⁵⁴ Bellah-Iklan groups that did gain administrative independence or changed masters were often subjected to violent reprisals. In one such

⁵⁰ Klein, “Slavery and French Rule in the Sahara,” 81; Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*, 234.

⁵¹ The most important concentration of Bellah-Iklan was along the shores of Lake Niangaye where there were 1,500 Irreganatan Bellah living in twelve villages in 1951. See André Genies, Subdivision of Gourma-Rharous, Cercle de Tomboutou, “Rapport de la tournée effectuée en avril et mai 1951 dans la tribu des Irreguenaten,” 1 August 1951, ART, 2E 40.

⁵² Jullien Vieroz, Cercle de Tomboutou, “Convention No. 4,” 8 June 1950, ART 2E 40.

⁵³ In this sense, they were appeals to colonial adjudication on the basis of what Richard Roberts calls “speculation,” in which people with little to lose appeal to the justice system in hopes of making important gains. See Roberts, *Litigants and Households*, 16.

⁵⁴ They were forced to move to a new site on Lake Niangaye from where they could cultivate nearby land at Lake Dô or Lake Isseye (André Genies, Subdivision of Gourma-Rharous, Cercle de Tomboutou, “Rapport de la tournée effectuée en avril et mai 1951 dans la tribu des Irreguenaten,” 1 August 1951, ART, 2E 40).

case, the Irreganatan chief Marouchett reported an attack by the Tuareg Kel Affallah on a former (now autonomous) Bellah-Iklan faction in March of 1951, in which ten cows, ten goats, foodstuffs, cloth and jewelry were stolen.⁵⁵

It was only at the very end of the colonial period, well into the process of decolonization and Africanization of the administration, that steps were finally taken to address the division and allotment of property between masters and Bellah-Iklan. Local French administrators hoped that Bellah-Iklan families could be constituted within the framework of continuing relations with Tuareg masters, and that Bellah groups would slowly accumulate property which would give them greater autonomy. The administration began to give identity cards to Bellah-Iklan families rather than list them as dependants of their masters, and this meant that Bellah-Iklan could be taxed separately. But by far the thorniest problem was the provision for Bellah-Iklan property rights. The colonial administration arrived at a formula for providing Bellah-Iklan herders with a small number of animals from their masters' herds (three head of cattle and thirty goats), and for an annual remuneration for Bellah-Iklan who continued to work for their masters as herders (a heifer for every twenty head of cattle, ten sheep for every hundred herded).⁵⁶ But in practice, relations between masters and Bellah-Iklan could not be fully managed directly by the colonial state.

Philippe Loiseau, the deputy commandant of Timbuktu, noticed in 1956 that there were two conditions that had to be met by masters in order to keep their Bellah-Iklan working for them. Masters could not beat or abuse their slaves, and masters had to be rich. If one of these conditions was not met, the Bellah-Iklan would leave:

I was able to notice that rich but brutal masters have seen their Bellah lost in the bush and disobeying them, sometimes taking with them all the animals confided to them. This is what happens in the family of the chief of the tribe who does not manage to make contact with more than half of his slaves. It is the same with financially ruined families.⁵⁷

Loiseau wrote that there was a fundamental problem in attempting to assign property to Bellah-Iklan because they are slaves: "In effect, the strict rule is that the animals belong to the master and the Bellah, being a thing, can not possess anything. If the Bellah becomes a person, the animals must all return to the master, who forces them to do this in any case."⁵⁸ This was a misunderstanding of slavery in the Niger Bend, and of the Islamic legal regulations that supported it. Slaves are theoretically permitted to own property under

⁵⁵ Letter from Jullien Viero, Commandant, Cercle de Tombouctou, to chef de subdivision, Subdivision de Rharous, 26 March 1951, No. 435, ART 2E 40.

⁵⁶ Lecocq, "The Bellah Question," 51–52.

⁵⁷ Letter from Philippe Loiseau, commandant, Cercle de Tombouctou, to the subdivision de Gourma Rharous, 4 July 1956, Archives de la Ministère de l'Intérieur, Bamako, Mali (hereafter AMI), sér. BO. For Loiseau's postcolonial perspective of his time in the Niger Bend, see Philippe Loiseau, "L'administration et les rapports nomades/sédentaires," in Bernus et al., *Nomades et commandants*, 159–66.

⁵⁸ Letter from Loiseau, commandant, Cercle de Tombouctou, to the subdivision de Gourma Rharous, 4 July 1956, AMI, sér. BO.

certain conditions; the slaves of the Niger Bend were not juridically “things.” One of the most highly-respected Muslim scholars in the Niger Bend in the early twentieth century, the Kunta jurist Shaykh Bay al-Kunti (d. 1929), wrote a legal opinion that laid out these ideas. He stated that slaves were permitted to keep the part of their property that they earned on their own time. “[The slave’s] property is that which he possesses on the day of his freedom by the work of his own hand, or that which he obtained himself from his wages.” As a didactic tool, Shaykh Bay cited a saying: “What [the slave] does with his hand or by wages in the day of his master is for the master; but what he gives to him, or the alms that he receives, or in the case of the female, the dowry she receives, this is not for the master.”⁵⁹ Again and again during the 1950s, Bellah-Iklan groups claimed that significant portions of herds that they were looking after belonged to them, and not to their masters. These claims were often challenged by masters, but it seems clear that Bellah-Iklan believed that they were legitimate property owners, just as the dictates of Muslim law made clear.

Whether as slaves or freed slaves, there was no right to bequeath—the property of a slave or freed slave was inherited by his master. This was true across the region in servile communities among all linguistic groups. Because the colonial state sided with masters in cases of inheritance from slaves, it represented one of the biggest grievances against the colonial regime by servile people.⁶⁰ Shaykh Bay had called the idea of slaves bequeathing their property to their own descendants “buffoonery and the agitation of donkeys.”⁶¹ Loiseau proposed a compromise as part of the colonial administration’s attempt to constitute Bellah-Iklan families: “As for what concerns the attribution of property of livestock at the death of the Bellah, it is for the tribunal to leave one part of the goods of the deceased for his children, the other part returns to the master. The Bellah family will therefore be entirely established in this second stage.”⁶² The possibility of bequeathing property to descendants was the key to the long-term possibilities of autonomy and economic independence for those servile people who remained in the Niger Bend. But it was only in the postcolonial period that the state recognized this right and denied the claims of masters to their slaves’ property. In the late-colonial period, Bellah-Iklan actions to defend claims to ownership of property put them in conflict with masters and forced the local agents of the colonial state to develop policies that could manage these on-going disputes.

Bellah-Iklan Politics and the Politics of the Bellah-Iklan

Bellah-Iklan-Tuareg conflict was a ready-made issue for the anti-colonial political forces associated with the Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (US-RDA),

⁵⁹ Shaykh Bay al-Kunti, “Nawazil Shaykh Bay,” Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherche Islamique Ahmad Baba, Timbuktu, Mali (hereafter IHERIAB), ms. 124, #880, f. 55–56.

⁶⁰ Jeremy Berndt, “Closer than Your Jugular Vein: Muslim Intellectuals in a Malian Village, 1900 to the 1960s” (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 2007), 288–91.

⁶¹ Shaykh Bay al-Kunti, “Nawazil Shaykh Bay,” IHERIAB, ms. 119, #352, f. 391–92.

⁶² Letter from Loiseau, commandant, Cercle de Tombouctou, to the subdivision de Gourma Rharous, 4 July 1956, AMI, sér. BO.

the party that would eventually lead Mali to independence in 1960. US-RDA activists used the continued existence of slavery during the post-World War II period in their local struggles by appealing to Bellah-Iklan voters, and by attacking both the colonial administration, which continued to support Tuareg slaveholders against Bellah-Iklan, and their political opponents in the more conservative Parti Progressiste Soudanais (PSP).⁶³ Beginning with the founding of the French Union in 1946, there were a series of elections throughout Soudan that eventually culminated in the “yes” vote on the 1958 referendum to remain inside the French Community proposed by French president Charles de Gaulle. Initially, there was a very limited franchise with a double electoral college, but at each step, more and more people were permitted to participate. Full electoral franchise was not achieved until 1956.⁶⁴ In a racialized setting such as the Niger Bend, the expanding franchise over the course of the post-war elections meant that the party that better mobilized the larger part of the population was likely to be ultimately victorious. Since the US-RDA made appeals to the lower status majority in the Niger Bend, it succeeded in the end. This political appeal was initially very threatening to the colonial administration.

The first round of elections for the Assemblée Territoriale du Soudan was held in Goundam in May 1948. The election was won by a wealthy merchant, Adama Traoré, who represented the PSP. According to André Michel, the French commandant at Goundam, Traoré was loyal to the French administration, and even “takes pleasure in saying in public that it is thanks to the French that he was able to make his fortune in peace.”⁶⁵ The PSP was the party favored by colonial officials. Traoré beat the candidate for the Union Soudanaise (later US-RDA), a merchant from Diré named Mamadou Diallo, by 874 votes to 446.⁶⁶ But here André Michel, who frequently sent angry and sarcastic letters to the governor about his opposition to the post-war political reforms,⁶⁷ made a mistake. He had

⁶³ The Niger Bend region did not witness significant rebelliousness from returning veterans as elsewhere in French West Africa, but the issue of the Bellah-Iklan, and the challenge this posed to wider social stability, was very significant. On the returning veterans, see Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 120–21; also Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 50–52.

⁶⁴ Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa*, 147; Ruth Schachter Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 55–56.

⁶⁵ André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Compte-rendu des opérations électorales du 30 mai 1948,” 5 June 1948, ACG.

⁶⁶ André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Revue des évènements du 2ème trimestre 1948,” 7 July 1948, ANM FR, 1E 18.

⁶⁷ For example, in a letter which he entitled “Observations à la suite de la lecture de la lettre no. 9145 du 25 septembre 1947, de Monsieur le Ministre de la France d’Outre-mer,” he wrote the following about the undermining of African chiefs: “The chiefs, whose resources run lower day after day cannot count any more on the product of their land and on their pay. The principal cause of this state of things is the brutal instituting of our political habits without any preparation.” He went on to propose that the chiefs become paid agents of the colonial state because they can no longer obtain the resources necessary to maintain themselves from their position as chiefs. He then continued, sounding like Jan Smuts or Frederick Lugard: “To summarize, the chiefs from whom we demand so much service should be the object of our constant concern. No complaint, no claims should be received by the commandant of the district before it has been first brought before the

Mamadou Diallo arrested for voter fraud immediately after the election. The fraud was apparently centered on the voting office of the Association Agricole Indigène de Diré (A.A.I.D), where Mamadou Diallo had worked, and from where his allies had passed out voting cards to ineligible electors who were Bellah-Iklan. Two Bellah-Iklan named Chérif ag Sikabar and Akli ag Ikattahit were accused of having taken voting cards issued to other voters and having voted fraudulently for Mamadou Diallo.

Diallo had made speeches denouncing the chiefs, the French administration, and André Michel himself. Michel claimed that other Bellah-Iklan were involved in the fraud, and that these were past employees of the A.A.I.D. According to Michel, fraudulent Bellah-Iklan voting was elicited by promises of gifts of food, cloth, sugar, and money, and the pledge that their living conditions would completely change.⁶⁸ Michel had described Diallo elsewhere as “a dubious merchant and a bitter enemy of our administration. Under cover of being interested in the poor, he supports all the shady elements of the population.”⁶⁹ In the report on his arrest, Diallo was accused of basing himself politically on the “detrribalized Bellah without a defined occupation who have left their Tuareg masters.” According to Michel, Diallo had promised them all the best land in the district.⁷⁰ Forced to release Diallo by his colonial superiors in Bamako, Michel watched as Diallo won the second round of voting on 20 June 1948, by a count of 1109 votes to 996.⁷¹ Michel reported that “His release from detention, and the fact that he continues to sit in the Conseil Général, despite the proven fraud, has strengthened the [former slaves’] belief in his all powerfulness.”⁷²

Colonial officials in the Niger Bend thought that the US-RDA was the party of social revolution. French allies such as the leadership of the most important Tuareg groups in the region shared this view and actively collaborated with the local administration in efforts to monitor their activities. In Goundam, the chiefs of the two most important Tuareg confederations, the Kel Entsar and Tengeregif, were important members of the

chiefs and a solution found that conforms with custom. We must always treat them with a lot of deference in front of those they administer, even when they do not deserve it, and only admonish them in private. So that they would be absolutely independent and not considered to be like bureaucrats, they should receive suitable remuneration which they would receive only by us giving it to them so that they would not need to beg for presents from those they administer.” Three years later, Michel carried out a detailed study of the customary rights of chiefs among the different ethnic groups of the district (André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Revenus coutumiers des chefs,” 5 June 1950, ACG).

⁶⁸ André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Rapport sur l’affaire Mamadou Diallo,” 14 June 1948, ACG.

⁶⁹ André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Compte-rendu des opérations électorales du 30 mai 1948,” 5 June 1948, ACG.

⁷⁰ André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Revue des évènements du 2ème trimestre 1948,” 7 July 1948, ANM FR, 1E, 18.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Revue des évènements du 1ère trimestre 1949,” ANM FR, 1E 18.

local leadership of the PSP.⁷³ In a letter written to André Michel in 1949 by Muhammad al-Mukhtar ag Attaher, the brother of the Kel Entsar chief Muhammad al-Mahdi, it was reported that a Tuareg Tengerigif Bellah-Iklan by the name of Mohammad ag Elkaya was involved in spreading “bad propaganda” amongst the Bellah-Iklan villages (tidbeyy; sing. tadebay) on the north shore of Lake Faguibine. He was reported to have held meetings in these villages that criticized European rule as corrupt, promising that the paying of tribute to Tuareg masters would be ended when they were forced to leave the country.⁷⁴ The local French administration was finally able to unseat Mamadou Diallo by invalidating his election. With an electorate properly cleansed of Bellah-Iklan voters, the PSP won the election to replace him in January 1950 by a wide margin.⁷⁵

Bellah-Iklan Trafficking to Arabia

The issue of continuing slavery became politically important throughout Soudan, and even in the French metropole, during the 1950s when accusations were made that Bellah-Iklan were being trafficked to Saudi Arabia and sold as slaves. These sensational accusations were first published in the Dakar-based weekly newspaper *Afrique Nouvelle* in 1954. Awad el Djoud, a young Bellah-Iklan man from the town of Gourma-Rharous, claimed that he had been sold as a slave in Saudi Arabia, after having performed the pilgrimage in 1948 with the former chief of the Tuareg Kel Entsar confederacy, Muhammad Ali ag Attaher. After remaining in slavery in Saudi Arabia for several years, Awad escaped and made his way back to Soudan. His story brought the issue of slavery to the forefront of politics in Soudan, and it helped to focus international attention on the trafficking of Africans into slavery in Saudi Arabia.⁷⁶

In Awad’s story, he had worked for Muhammad Ali as a boy and was brought along when Muhammad Ali left for the pilgrimage in 1948. He had been treated well and had even eaten “out of the same bowl” as Muhammad Ali during the long overland trip across Africa to the Red Sea. However, after performing the pilgrimage in 1950, Awad was sent to the house of Prince Abd Allah Faysal so that he could work to pay off the cost of his trip. Instead of earning money, Awad learned that he had been sold as a slave to the prince. Four of his Bellah-Iklan companions on the trip were also sold as slaves. After three years, in 1953, Awad alleged that his Saudi master “turned me over to his assistant in order to sell me on the slave market of Jeddah. They drove me there in a truck and made me enter a large, dark room where there were many men and women. I stayed there for many hours but then I decided to escape.” After asking to be allowed outside to smoke a cigarette, Awad fled. Eventually, he stowed away on a boat leaving Jeddah for Port Sudan,

⁷³ They had created a sub-committee of the PSP to represent pastoralist interests (Letter from François Perhirin, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, to the Governor, Soudan Français, 46/C, 8 June 1955, ACG).

⁷⁴ Letter from Muhammad al-Mukhtar ag Attaher to the commandant, Cercle of Goundam, 17 November 1949, ACG.

⁷⁵ André Michel, commandant, Cercle de Goundam, “Revue des évènements du 1^{er} trimestre 1950,” 4 April 1950, ANM FR 1E 18.

⁷⁶ Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 116–27.

from where he managed to return to French Soudan overland. He was asked by the *Nouvelle Afrique* reporter whether he had been maltreated by his master. His response was that “if you are docile and do not try to escape, you are not maltreated. But I saw my master use a club to beat a slave to death who was suspected of theft and wanting to escape.”⁷⁷ In another article published in the French magazine *Paris Match* nine months later, Awad explained that before his transfer to the slave market and his escape, he had been well-treated by his Saudi owner, and had been married to one of the prince’s female slaves named Farah.⁷⁸

Two weeks after its initial article, *Afrique Nouvelle* published a follow-up piece on the overland slave trade to Saudi Arabia from the Spanish Sahara and Mauritania. The article revealed that the Tibesti region in northern Chad had become an important gathering point and market where black slaves taken from West Africa, Cameroon and Uganda were sold. According to the article, a rifle could be exchanged there for three female slaves and a box of ammunition for two mature male slaves. From the Tibesti, smugglers then took the slaves across the Red Sea in small boats that could evade the authorities, and once in the large towns of the Hijaz, sold them to local buyers.⁷⁹ The *Paris Match* article in 1955 connected the slave trade to Saudi Arabia with the continuing servility of many people in French-ruled West Africa. It reported that there were “hundreds of thousands of black men who are not entirely slaves but they are called servants.” The article singled out the Bellah-Iklan as the worst case: “Closest to the slave is the Bellah, the do-it-all man of the Tuareg. In an agreement made between two tribes one frequently finds enumerations of this kind: The tribe of X..., cedes to the tribe of Y..., ten male camels, ten female camels, and six Bellah. A camel is exchanged today for ten to twelve Bellah.” If the colonial administration was not entirely responsible for this state of affairs, the *Paris Match* article made clear that it was well aware of the issue: “The French administrators have chosen to favor a policy of important chiefs in Black Africa, and as such they discreetly close their eyes to these facts.”⁸⁰

In November 1954, the issue of the African slave trade to Saudi Arabia was raised in the *Assemblée de l’Union Française*. Inquiries were launched in the Niger Bend, and Awad el Djoud brought a complaint against Muhammad Ali to the labor tribunal in Bamako, seeking unpaid wages of more than one million francs for the entire period of his service between 1940 and 1952.⁸¹ The colonial administration in the Niger Bend worried

⁷⁷ “La route des esclaves noires commence à Villa Cisneros et aboutit à la Mecque,” *Afrique Nouvelle*, 4 August 1954.

⁷⁸ Georges de Caunes, “Il y a encore des marchands d’esclaves,” *Paris Match*, 25 June 1955.

⁷⁹ “Le Tibesti, gare de triage,” *Afrique Nouvelle*, 18 August 1954.

⁸⁰ De Caunes, “Il y a encore des marchands d’esclaves,” 96.

⁸¹ The case was heard by the Tribunal du Travail in Bamako on 30 November 1955. He claimed unpaid wages of 83,304.55ff for work between 1 April 1940 and 30 April 1952, with an additional 1,000,000.00ff for damages and interest. His total claim was for 1,083,304.55ff (Letter from François Perhirin, commandant, Cercle de Goundam to the Governor, Soudan Français, 105/C, 10 November 1955, ACG).

that if Awad won his case, “every Bellah would be in his rights to formulate the same kind of claims against the chief of the tent that he lives in.”⁸²

As early as 1953, the colonial administration suspected that Muhammad Ali and other Tuareg pilgrims had been involved in trafficking slaves from the Niger Bend for sale in Saudi Arabia. French consuls in Jeddah and Khartoum were asked about the whereabouts of the five Bellah-Iklan, including Awad, who had left with Muhammad Ali in 1948. The commandant of Goundam reported that the information that he had gathered suggested that Muhammad Ali had indeed sold these Bellah-Iklan as slaves, although he also pointed out that in the case of Awad, he had been able to send money and clothes to his mother in Gourma-Rharous.⁸³ According to a series of interviews with returned pilgrims in Goundam, there were many black Africans living in difficult circumstances in Saudi Arabia, but everyone denied—or claimed not to know anything about—a slave trade there.⁸⁴

Muhammad Ali did not return to Soudan to face these charges, but he did defend himself in letters by claiming that Awad was a liar and an opportunist. Because a number of his letters were intercepted by the French administration, it is possible to understand his defense against these accusations, and the extent to which race and slavery were still connected in the thinking of Tuareg elites in the 1950s. Writing to one of his brothers named Muhammad al-Mukhtar in January 1955, Muhammad Ali said, “a friend in Bamako wrote to me last August after having read in a newspaper that a certain Awattan [Awad] claimed that I have been selling slaves in Mecca. I was astonished.” Muhammad Ali argued that such an action was impossible because of the colonial government’s close involvement with the Muslim pilgrimage: “[E]very year the government sponsors its friends among the Muslim scholars and chiefs to make the pilgrimage. Here is the story of the slave (`abd) Awattan [Awad]. All the pilgrims saw him. He was paid by the Saudis. His master al-Hajj ag Hakunkun saw him himself when he was in Rharous.” The real reason that Awad had left Saudi Arabia, Muhammad Ali argued, was because he had had an illicit sexual relationship with a concubine of the sultan. Awad’s wife became jealous and she threatened to inform her master about it: “How could I have forced Awattan [Awad] to leave Goundam or Bamako without him lodging a complaint against me? How could anyone believe that I sold him such a long time ago and that he never lodged a complaint with the French consulate? How could anyone believe that I sold him when on our way to Mecca, he sometimes stayed a month behind me?”⁸⁵ It is important to notice

⁸² Letter from François Perhirin, commandant, Cercle de Goundam to the Governor, Soudan Français, 105/C, 10 November 1955, ACG.

⁸³ He also pointed out that he had received completely contradictory information. Four of the five Bellah-Iklan were reported to have left Muhammad Ali’s service in Khartoum in 1952. The other four were two married couples: 1. Ousman ag Hameye, 33 years old, Sittelher oualet Aljoumarat, 30 years old; 2. Banhassan ag Alhad, 25 years old, Mamma oualet Oumarou, 25 years old (Letter from the commandant, Cercle de Goundam to the governor, Soudan Français, 13/C, 26 February 1953, ACG).

⁸⁴ Letter from François Perhirin, commandant, Cercle de Goundam to the governor, Soudan Français, 109/C, 27 November 1955, ACG.

⁸⁵ Letter from Muhammad Ali ag Attaher to Muhammad al-Mukhtar, 31 January 1955, ACG.

that in Muhammad Ali's defense of himself, he referred to Awad as a slave (ʿabd) and made no effort to deny his slave status, only the circumstances of his purported sale.

In another intercepted letter written in October 1955 to his brother Muhammad al-Mahdi, chief of the Kel Entsar, Muhammad Ali claimed that Awad had been working in Mecca and earning money. Awad's master al-Hajj ag Hakunkun, who was a Tuareg Igawadaran from Gourma-Rharous, had come to Mecca on the pilgrimage and stayed with Awad, who gave his master money to help with the costs of his trip. Muhammad Ali wrote that the first time he had even seen Awad was when he came to him as a beggar. At that time, he didn't have proper clothes or shoes, and his hair was unkempt. Muhammad Ali's son Mustafa al-Kayri took pity on him and they decided to look after Awad and feed him. Because Awad could make the children laugh, they called him General Awad instead of his real name, which was Awattan. When Muhammad Ali was preparing to go to Mecca in 1948, Awad asked to accompany him as far as Gourma-Rharous so that he could see his mother. When the boat that they were traveling on reached his destination, Awad hid on the boat and was not discovered until Gao, where he was made to get off. But he took advantage of a colleague of Muhammad Ali's and managed to get himself to Niamey where he begged Muhammad Ali to take him on the trip to Mecca. He promised that once in Mecca, he would find work and pay Muhammad Ali back for the price of the trip. Afterwards, he went and worked for the Saudi minister of the interior.

Muhammad Ali told his brother that he had read the article in *Paris Match*:

I do not want to respond because if I ever reply, I will be forced to write in the magazine and many nations will have a bad impression of France. I have some conventions from my grandfather and Commandant Joffre⁸⁶ allowing us to own the Bellah who were with us, and freeing those who were not. They were freed but then they came back to us on their own account. I do not understand how I have been accused [of this action] because of my Bellah who are outside of French territory. There are more than 100 Bellah who have come by themselves and there are more Bellah who work for us. They have come by different routes.... These Bellah have visited different countries and they know that they are French, but nevertheless they call themselves slaves and work for the owners. I do not understand why I stand accused because it is sufficient to say to a Bellah that you are free, after which he can go where he wants.⁸⁷

Awad el Djoud's case against Muhammad Ali was eventually sent to the labor tribunal in Gao, which ruled in May 1956 that Awad had not proven that he had been enslaved in the Niger Bend or in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁸

Whether Awad's story was entirely true or not, it made the issue of slavery politically important in French-ruled West Africa. In March 1956, the US-RDA newsletter

⁸⁶ Joseph Joffre, who led the French conquest of the Niger Bend in 1893–94.

⁸⁷ Letter from Muhammad Ali ag Attaher to Muhammad al-Mahdi ag Attaher, Mecca, 19 October 1955, ACG.

⁸⁸ "Extrait des minutes du Tribunal du Travail de Gao, Aouat Aliou contre Mohamed ag Attaher," 23 May 1956, ACG.

L'Essor, published an article reporting that slave trading continued in Goundam: "Is the only existing slave market in Africa found in Goundam? The sinful slave trade continues to operate there. The most recent case is that of a young Bellah and his sister who belonged to the same master who had just sold her against her will."⁸⁹ The commandant of Goundam carried out an inquiry into this case and reported that it was simply an instance of Bellah-Iklan changing the family to which they were attached. He could find no proof of a sale of slaves.⁹⁰ However, his report hardly dispelled the notion, held by many, that the Bellah-Iklan had little control over their own lives.

The passing of the *loi cadre* in 1956 gave a certain level of autonomy to Soudan within the French Union; it also paved the way for the definitive victory of the US-RDA in legislative elections that year. As decolonization proceeded, the colonial administration came under pressure to act against trafficking to Saudi Arabia. In response, French officials agreed to forbid the emigration of Bellah-Iklan from the Soudan if there was any indication of coercion, and the colonial administration became increasingly suspicious of pastoralist requests to make the pilgrimage. For example, the Tuareg Kel Essuk were suspected of involvement in the slave trade. A number of their members had migrated to Arabia at the beginning of the colonial period. The emigrants had assimilated into Arabian society, but they maintained links with their fellows back in the Niger Bend. The commandant of Gao reported that there were many clandestine departures of Kel Essuk pilgrims. He wrote that the relations with people in Saudi Arabia "seems to have incited some [Kel Essuk] to give themselves over to the fruitful commerce in unfree persons."⁹¹ In February 1958, a Kel Essuk man named Ismail ag Mohamed Lamine was arrested by the police in Maradi (Niger) while he was attempting to illegally cross the Nigerian border in a truck, bringing Bellah-Iklan with him headed to Mecca. Among them were six women and eighteen children, of which a number were less than six years old.

Slavery remained an important issue after high administrative positions were opened to Africans in the late 1950s. The principal African official who reported on the question of the slave trade in Saudi Arabia was an Arabic-speaker who worked for the Ministry of the Interior named Abdoul Wahab Doucouré. He had studied at Zaituna University in Tunisia and later worked for the Ministry of the Interior.⁹² In his job accompanying the annual pilgrims from Soudan, he reported that he had learned in 1958 about the sale of a man named Zoubéirou Bakrou who was originally from Dori in what is today Burkina Faso, but who had lived in Mecca for twelve years. He had been sold three years before by another man from Dori. Zoubéirou Bakrou protested to the Saudi

⁸⁹ "Vente d'esclaves à Goundam," *L'Essor* no.1977 (29 March 1956).

⁹⁰ Letter from the commandant, Cercle de Goundam to the governor, Soudan Français, No.49/C, 9 May 1956, ACG.

⁹¹ Letter from J. Bertin, commandant, Cercle de Gao, to the Ministeur de l'Intérieur, No. 119/C, 26 March 1959, AMI, sér. BO.

⁹² Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 104; Benjamin Soares, *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 226.

authorities that he was not a slave and that no member of his family was a slave. The Saudi officials demanded that the seller provide proof that Zoubéirou was his slave. When the seller returned to Dori, he sent the testimony of twelve people saying that Zoubéirou was indeed his slave. When Abdoul Wahab Doucouré met with him, Zoubéirou said that he knew the names of others who had been sold as slaves as recently as a month before the discussion took place. All of those who had been sold were no longer in Mecca; “in Mecca, there are other sellers who are usually Moors or Tuareg who claim the right of property over all the blacks from French West Africa who are abandoned here in Arabia for a long time.”⁹³

In 1958, Muhammad Ali ag Attaher was again accused of trading in slaves in Saudi Arabia. This time, the Saudi government demanded to see proof of the slave status of those people he was holding. Because Muhammad Ali was unable to provide it, the prisoners were released.⁹⁴ One of those imprisoned in this way wrote a letter to Modibo Keita, the head of the US-RDA government in Soudan.

We address our complaint to you after having first addressed it to God. We are originally from the district of Goundam. We came to carry out our religious duty in 1957. We met Muhammad Ali who promised us assistance; he would provide us with a place to stay for free, he said. He brought us to a house belonging to Abdel Aziz Haidani where we were kept, and he demanded our passports. We refused and we then rented a house in the Dara`a neighborhood. A few days later, Abdel Aziz Haidani, Muhammad ben Saleh, the representative of Muhammad Ali, and the men of the police came to arrest us. We were taken to prison in Mecca where they submitted us to all sorts of atrocities. The goal of this torture was to make us admit that we are slaves. Over seven months, they dispersed us. Some were sent to the prison of Jeddah. They prevented us from doing the prayer. We did not eat or drink and we were forbidden from saying “la ilah illa-llah.” (“there is no god but God,” part of the Muslim credo.)⁹⁵

The letter-writer said that he knew the names of twenty-three victims of Muhammad Ali’s slave trading. During his trip to the Hijaz in 1960, Abdoul Wahab Doucouré reported that there were hundreds of people from Soudan, almost all of them from the Niger Bend, who were held as slaves in Saudi Arabia.⁹⁶

Conclusion

As decolonization reached its final stages in the late 1950s, US-RDA government officials and newly installed African administrators, saw the Bellah-Iklan as an indictment of the

⁹³ Letter from Abdoul Wahab Doucouré, fonctionnaire du Ministère de l’Intérieur, to the Ministre de l’Intérieur, 19 July 1958. AMI, sér. BO.

⁹⁴ Abdoul Wahab Doucouré, “Rapport sur le trafic d’esclaves,” 1 July 1960, AMI, sér. BO.

⁹⁵ The letter is attached to Abdoul Wahab Doucouré, “Rapport sur le trafic d’esclaves,” 1 July 1960, AMI, sér. BO.

⁹⁶ Abdoul Wahab Doucouré, “Compte-rendu de la Mission effectuée en Arabie Saoudite au cours du pèlerinage 1960,” AMI, sér. BO.

backwardness of the Niger Bend and the malevolence of the French colonial occupation there.⁹⁷ As Baz Lecocq has argued, there was a fundamental perception among those who led Mali to independence that the Tuareg especially were both inveterate racists and slaveholders.⁹⁸ It was also true that for the new rulers of postcolonial Mali, the Niger Bend was seen as a backwater whose development had been retarded. When Abdoul Thierno Diallo took up his post as the first African “chef de subdivision” in Gourma-Rharous in 1959, he remarked that “the first impression that one has arriving here is that the nationals of the subdivision are politically behind by at least ten years. While everywhere else in Soudan, one speaks about unity, independence and human investment, here one is still in the stage of opposition, a systematic and narrow-minded opposition that rests on no political ideology. It is a patriarchal politics in all its rigor.” Worse than this, the people who lived in Rharous, “live in a world absolutely closed against an opening to the outside. For them the cry ‘Soudanese nation’ has no significance and the terms Mali ... or independence, are only political jargon without any relation to reality. That which they consider to be reality is the chieftom of the village, the burgu paddies,⁹⁹ and the struggles between clans.”¹⁰⁰ A similar impression was left in some of the first encounters between Tuareg chiefs and Malian administrators. In a meeting with Tuareg leaders in 1959, the first African commandant of Timbuktu, H. Sangare, felt compelled to tell his interlocutors that the colonial period had ended and that from now on, the US-RDA government of Mali would guarantee the right to property of every individual, without distinction for social status. It would not return lands to noble Tuareg that had only recently been assigned to sedentarized Bellah-Iklan by the colonial administration. Local Tuareg would have to adapt to this new reality.¹⁰¹

I began by making the argument that there was an alternative, more local, history of race in the Niger Bend that did not correspond with the larger imperial history of racial politics. The article has demonstrated that the struggles associated with the on-going practices of slavery produced structural violence between masters and Bellah-Iklan. From the colonial administration’s point of view, potential social upheaval from slaves in pastoralist societies posed a threat to the political-economic stability of the Niger Bend, and it provided a ready-made political issue for anti-colonial activists in the US-RDA. The high profile that accusations of slave trading to Saudi Arabia achieved in the late 1950s brought the issue of race and slavery in the Niger Bend to the forefront of the transition to African rule, and it conditioned the new Malian administration to see the people of the Niger Bend through a particular lens of backwardness and feudalism that required reform. I

⁹⁷ This view was widespread among the party leaders of the US-RDA. See Cheick Oumar Diarrah, *Le Mali de Modibo Keita* (Paris: Harmattan, 1986), 135.

⁹⁸ Lecocq, “That Desert Is Our Country,” 51–52.

⁹⁹ *Echinochloa stagnina*. “Burgu” is a Songhay word, but the French administration adopted it, as “bourgou,” to describe this grass. It also employed the term “bourgouthière” to describe the areas where burgu grew. The grass is also known as “hippo grass” in some other places in the world.

¹⁰⁰ Abdoul Thierno Diallo, chef de subdivision, Subdivision de Gourma Rharous, Cercle de Tombouctou, “Rapport politique mensuel,” July 1959, AMI, sér. BO.

¹⁰¹ Cercle de Tombouctou, “Procès-verbal de la séance de travail,” 23 November 1959, AMI, sér. BO.

want to conclude by quoting two of the principles in this drama, Muhammad Ali and Modibo Keita, in order to show how discordant the language of race had become by the end of the decolonization process.

From his exile in North Africa, Muhammad Ali was very active in opposing the inclusion of the Niger Bend in what would become postcolonial Mali. In a typed and xeroxed letter that he sent to many notables in the Niger Bend in 1959 from Tripoli in Libya, he wrote,

I have heard that the blacks (zunu) of Mali have demanded independence from France because the time of French rule in our country has been completed. However, the day of freedom and independence will only come when all the nations (shu`ub) know the principles of freedom and are able to reach self-rule themselves with their own state. I do not understand how you could accept from France that you should be incorporated with the idolatrous blacks of Mali. I inform you that in my capacity as representative (wakil) of our country before my emigration, I never accepted that the government of Mali be placed above us because that would be something strange for he who was below us in the past, and with whom we share no religion or customs or parentage, that he should be raised [above us] by French colonialism.... I have written to the president of their government Modibo Keita informing him that I do not agree to live in this huge tumult (dajja) if he does not leave our country to rule over itself.¹⁰²

This is not the racial language of Europeans vs. Africans, of colonizer vs. colonized; it is instead an argument that notables of the Niger Bend are noble, and that the blacks are by definition morally unfit to govern because they are slaves. That Modibo Keita and the vast majority of his colleagues in the US-RDA were Muslims did not trump, for Muhammad Ali, the even more important fact that they were black.

We do not possess Modibo Keita's response to this letter, if indeed he made one. It is known however, that he comprehensively rejected the irredentist project of Niger Bend intellectuals such as Muhammad Ali and his rival Muhammad Mahmud ould al-Shaykh in the late 1950s. On a visit to Timbuktu in 1957, Modibo Keita refused to accept a petition from Muhammad Mahmud advocating the creation of a separate Saharan territory that would include the Niger Bend.¹⁰³ Modibo Keita had both Muhammad Mahmud and Muhammad Ali imprisoned once Mali achieved its independence.¹⁰⁴

But Modibo Keita did make use of racial ideas in defining the newly independent nation of Mali, especially when he spoke about what he thought of as authentic African culture, what he called "la personnalité africaine."¹⁰⁵ Tuareg and Arab pastoralists of the

¹⁰² Letter from Muhammad Ali ag Attaher, Tripoli, Libya, 1959, AMI sér. BO.

¹⁰³ Délégation de la Boucle du Niger, Territoire du Soudan Français, "Bulletin Mensuel de Renseignements," September 1957, ACG.

¹⁰⁴ Muhammad Ali remained in exile in Morocco until 1964 when he was extradited to Mali where he was imprisoned until 1977. He died in 1994.

¹⁰⁵ Diagouraga, *Modibo Keita*, 154. On this point see also Francis G. Snyder, "The Political Thought of Modibo Keita," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 5, 1 (1967), 83–84.

Niger Bend were not accorded a place in the “black-African” civilization that Modibo Keita sought to make the basis of the Malian nation.¹⁰⁶ In a speech in 1961 to the National Assembly, he remarked that

Mali, which was a melting pot of African, Berber and Arab cultures, will continue to carry out the role of connecting link without losing its own qualities. We shall thus build the solid core of a well-rounded civilization. Cultural decolonization can only be accomplished, however, through an unshakable resolve to affirm ourselves as Africans, to observe and judge the men and the institutions of Africa solely with African eyes and brains.¹⁰⁷

This is a racial rhetoric directed at the former colonial metropole, at Europeans and those who might imitate them. Such sentiments fit easily into a racial narrative of colonial emancipation that is familiar to most. But from the standpoint of the Niger Bend, this had different meanings. For those Malians of explicitly Tuareg and Arab culture, such rhetoric was exclusionary. It suggested to them that to be Malian was to be African, and to be African was to be black. For Bellah-Iklan, who were culturally Tuareg even if racially black, Modibo Keita’s language offered little that fit the lives that they were living at the end of colonialism. Bellah-Iklan struggles for autonomy would continue.

¹⁰⁶ The goals of Keita’s newly independent Malian government were, among other, to “achieve African unity and independence ... that will permit the irresistible extension of the Black African culture.” See Diagouraga, *Modibo Keita*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Keita, *Modibo Keita*, 33.