

## *Child Slavery and Guardianship in Colonial Senegal*

In the immediate aftermath of the French abolition of slavery in 1848, many previously enslaved children suddenly became wards of the colonial state. The colonial administration in Senegal created an institution called *tutelle*, a form of guardianship or wardship, that aimed to both prevent the loss of labor from liberated minors and safeguard the children's welfare. Drawing from extensive archival research, Bernard Moitt uncovers the stories of these liberated children who were entrusted to Africans, Europeans, institutions such as orphanages, Catholic orders and the military, and, often, their former owners. While the literature on servitude in French West Africa has primarily focused on the period before 1848, Moitt demonstrates that *tutelle* allowed slavery to persist under another name, with children continuing to be subject to the same widespread labor exploitation and abuse. Using a range of rich case studies, this book offers new insights into the emancipation of enslaved people in Senegal, the tenacity of servility, and children's agency.

BERNARD MOITT is a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. Born and raised in Antigua, his research focuses on slavery in French West Africa, primarily Senegal, and the French Antilles. He has previously published *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848* (2001) and edited *Sugar, Slavery and Society: Perspectives on the Caribbean, India, the Mascarenes and the United States* (2004).

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# Child Slavery and Guardianship in Colonial Senegal

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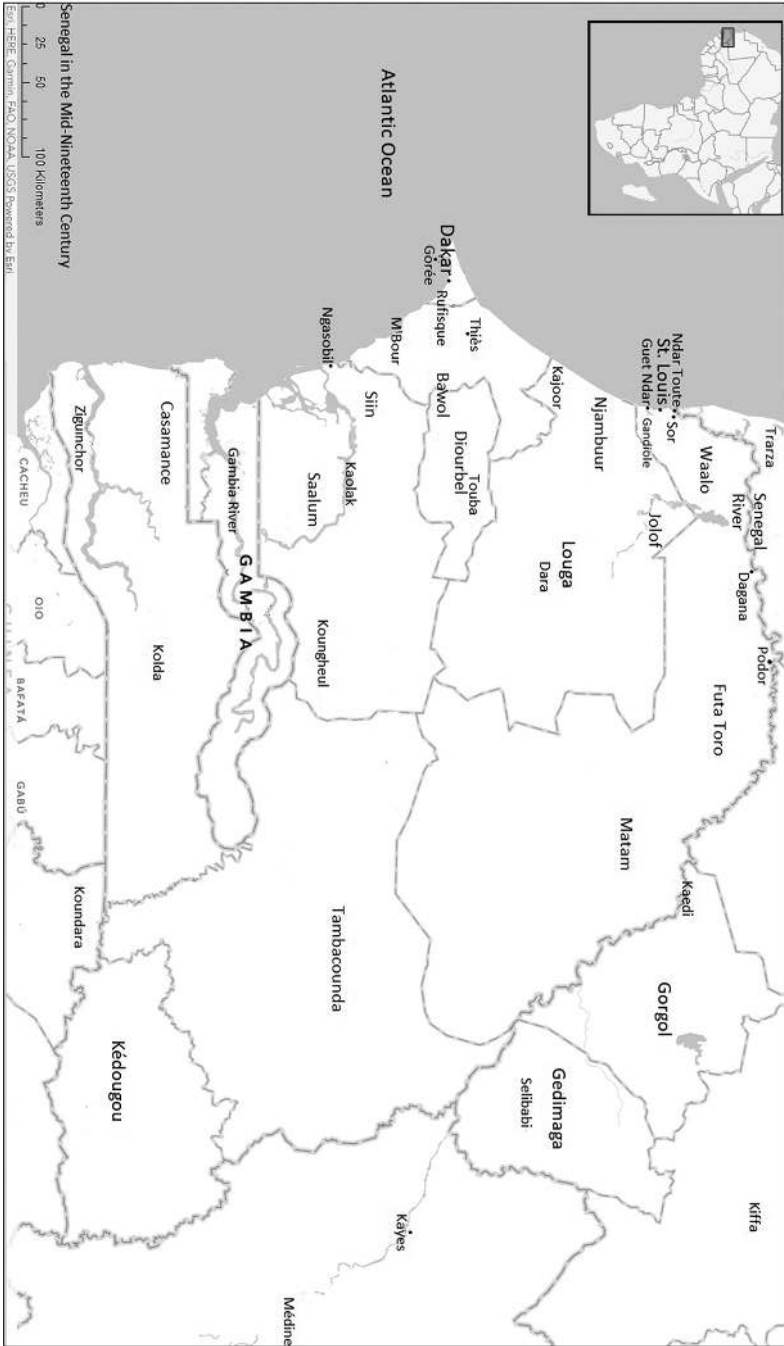
*To Tia Moitt and to the memory of my mother,  
Pearl Augusta Moitt, 1910–1967*

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*Map of Senegal*

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## *Preface*

My interest in *tutelle* or guardianship of minors in post emancipation Senegal dates back to the 1980s when I was a graduate student at the University of Toronto engaged in PhD research on peanut production and social change during the nineteenth and twentieth century in the Wolof Kingdoms of Kajoor and Bawol in Senegal. While conducting this research in the National Archives of Senegal, I perused dossiers that contained gems of information about *tutelle* that raised my consciousness about gaps in the historiography of slavery in Africa that required attention. Scholars seemed to have ignored *tutelle* – an institution that was clearly a subterfuge for slavery. In pursuing research on this subject, I felt the need to contribute to scholarship that dealt with the aftermath of slavery. In this respect, *The End of Slavery in Africa*, which appeared in 1988, was significant and timely.<sup>1</sup>

A worthy scholarly pursuit, guardianship in post emancipation Senegal has not been the object of sustained or substantial intellectual inquiry. Indeed, with few exceptions, the historiography on servitude in French West Africa focused heavily on the period before 1848 and ignored child slavery for the most part. Moreover, little, if any, attention was given to child labor in the urban areas, the most significant of which were Saint-Louis and Gorée in the case of Senegal. I came across scattered archival references to child servitude after 1848 that I found astonishing and revealing. I read specific cases of liberated minors – children under eighteen years of age – who had been freed by the French Abolition Act of April 27, 1848 only to become wards of the colonial state, and whose labor was coerced in ways that I had not imagined. The abuse they endured, including sexual exploitation and

<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (eds.), *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

trafficking, and the agency that they employed to fight back in all instances took me by surprise. I decided that addressing this lacuna in the historiography would be my next major research project after the completion of my PhD, fully aware, all along, that *tutelle* could well be the pursuit of other scholars faster on the draw. But the state of the data was daunting and may explain why there has not yet been a book-length treatment of the subject. Indeed, the data are highly fragmented and spotty, compounded by large gaps in the chronology, making the reconstruction of case histories of liberated minors – a major focus of this book – all the more challenging. Some of the *Libérations* registers used in this study are in poor shape and falling apart, the brittle paper a sad reminder of how histories can be lost if not preserved in ideal conditions. In some cases, the archival sources are hard to read and decipher, especially the M3 files. These files are incredibly rich. However, teasing out information from them is fraught with difficulty and often requires enormous concentration, extended periods of time, and the use of a magnifying glass in order to get at the specificity of the language and expressions that various French administrators and officials used in their reports and correspondence. In probing the data in this fashion, I hope that I have justifiably represented the experience of and done justice to the multitude of liberated minors – females and males – whose lives were shaped, upended, and no doubt destroyed, by *tutelle*.

The challenges posed by the absence of and gaps in the data notwithstanding, I pressed on. In 1988, I delivered a paper on *tutelle* at a graduate history workshop organized by the Canadian Association of African Studies held at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. On subsequent trips to the National Archives in Senegal, I continued to pursue my goal of bringing liberated minors out of anonymity. In 1993, *Slavery & Abolition* published my article, "Slavery, Flight and Redemption in Senegal, 1819–1905," which dealt with the transition from slavery to freedom. I argued that, although the transition was marked by few disruptions, the process was not at all smooth for a significant number of enslaved people. For too many, redemption fell short of expectations as they lacked complete personal autonomy, their labor remained coerced, and their relations with former slave owners were not a radical break from the past. *Tutelle* fell into this category in my estimation. I concluded that the need to continue probing the process of emancipation was important to get at

the resilience of coercive labor systems and the aspirations on the enslaved to acquire liberty.<sup>2</sup>

With a full-length study still in mind, many years would go by as my career took multiple turns – often in ways that I had not anticipated. My relocation to the United States from Canada in 1994, the need to maintain my expertise and scholarship in the African Diaspora – my second research and teaching field – and the preparation to acquire promotion and tenure further delayed the completion of my manuscript. To acquire tenure, the Department of History at Virginia Commonwealth University, which hired me in August, 1995 after an academic year on tenure-track at Utica College of Syracuse University, required a monograph published by a reputable press. To meet this requirement, I turned my attention to the Caribbean and researched and wrote from scratch *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848*.<sup>3</sup> Little did I know, the gaps, lack of data, and methodological hurdles that I encountered in researching and writing this book would be strikingly similar to *tutelle*, and good preparation for what turned out to be a most difficult and time-consuming book project. I was not deterred. In 2011, I published my first full-length article on *tutelle*, entitled “Slavery and Guardianship in Postemancipation Senegal: Colonial Legislation and Minors in Tutelle, 1848–1905,” in a volume on child slavery edited by Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Miller.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I argued that *tutelle* in Senegal was an institutionalized form of servitude, and highlighted the duplicitous role of the colonial state as the legal protector of children – aspects of the institution that I have amplified in this book.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Moitt, “Slavery, Flight and Redemption in Senegal, 1819–1905,” *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 14, no. 2 (August, 1993), pp. 70–86.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Moitt, “Slavery and Guardianship in Postemancipation Senegal: Colonial Legislation and Minors in Tutelle, 1848–1910,” in Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (eds.), *Child Slaves in the Modern World* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 140–156.

## *Acknowledgments*

Given the time it took me to bring this study to fruition, it is reasonable to assume that I would accumulate many debts along the way, and I did, even though researching and writing this book was a lonely journey from start to finish. In Senegal, Momar Diop, my good friend and former director of the National Archives of Senegal, drew upon his extensive knowledge of the holdings to guide me to valuable archival sources. His assistance was invaluable and served to enhance the quality of my research. He and his wife, Fatou, accommodated my wife and I at their home in close proximity to the archives, and this facilitated my work appreciably. Momar remained enthusiastic, encouraging, and supportive throughout. I am deeply indebted to him for his support, his fidelity, and his confidence in me that I would reach the finish line in due course. Along the way, Mohamed Mbodj, Ibrahima Thioub, and Mamadou Diouf were all helpful in identifying sources and clarifying specific historical issues related to *tutelle* and Senegalese history that enabled me to sharpen my focus. So were Charles Becker and Hilary Jones. In the late stages of my project, I reached out to Richard Roberts, whom I have known since our graduate student days at the University of Toronto studying with Professor Martin Klein. Richard took an interest in my project, pointed me to recent publications on *tutelle* and work on liberated slaves, including the work that he and his team at Stanford University were in the process of producing on the *Libérations* registers of Senegal. A sharp and inciteful critic, Richard's input and guidance on the manuscript submission process at Cambridge University Press were invaluable. Due to our engagement, he recused himself from the evaluation process, and expressed his delight at the outcome.

In Toronto, my good friend, Egya Sangmuah, gave me valuable insights into legislative matters relating to *tutelle*, while his son, Benjamin Sangmuah, conducted bibliographical searches at the University of Toronto that yielded valuable results, especially during the period when COVID-19 caused disruptions in library acquisitions.

From Martinique, my good friend, José Robelot, answered my call for help at every instance, from researching arcane French words and expressions, to checking my French translations. Like Momar Diop, he too has been in it for the long haul. I thank him sincerely for his demonstrative interest in me and my work, for his rapid responses, and for never wavering.

I am greatly indebted to my PhD dissertation supervisor, Martin Klein, whose work on slavery in French West Africa put him in a unique position as a critic. This was all the more so since his work and mine on *tutelle* are complementary in many ways. Martin's help served to enrich my study in countless ways. He willingly read drafts of the manuscript and provided detailed comments on my chapters that enabled me to make corrections, provide clarification, think about chronology, and improve my structure. He pointed me to additional sources that assisted me in enriching my chapters. Overall, I benefited substantially from his comments and criticisms. However, neither he nor others mentioned here bear any responsibility for the contents of my study or its shortcomings, for which I am entirely responsible.

Thanks are also due to members of the VCU Department of History: to John Powers, chair, and administrative assistants, Kathleen Murphy and Andrea Wight, for their multidimensional assistance, especially in the technical realm. And to Ramont Reed for the technical services he provided no matter my location in the world. For his help in constructing a map of Senegal, which was tedious and time-consuming, Dylan Stephens, a VCU student, also has my thanks.

Most of all, the help that I received from my wife, Tia Moitt, who has lived with *tutelle* through my ups and downs over decades, while also shouldering much of the responsibility of nurturing our two children, and holding down a permanent, full-time position as a professor of nursing at the Waterfront Campus of George Brown College in Toronto as I advanced my own career, was nothing short of magnanimity. She accompanied me on one of my research trips to Senegal and teamed up with me in the archives so that I could accelerate the pace of bringing my study to fruition, never ceasing to marvel at my ability to decipher almost illegible manuscripts. Fortunately, the international life we have lived has been a tremendous source of joy. To be sure, it has enabled us to develop solid and enduring friendships globally. To Tia, I offer my sincere thanks, my gratitude, and my love.