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978-1-107-11905-5 - From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800–2000

Benedetta Rossi

Excerpt

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I

At the Desert's Edge

'Before we used to work for the Abzinawa [elites], who sat and did nothing; then the White [colonialists] controlled our labour; now project agents tell us what to do. Someone is always sitting and watching us work for nothing.'

Houssa Aboubakar, farmer of slave descent, northern Ader, 2005

This book is concerned with the relationship between ecology, politics, and labour. The constant influence of the desert on human arrangements accounts for continuities in Ader's history: the Sahelian environment has been partly responsible for the resilience of the exploitative relations that continue to haunt Houssa Aboubakar. With its arid land and its threat of thirst, the desert influenced the productivity of labour, the need for mobility, and the options of workers seeking to resist those 'sitting and watching' over them. But if the desert was an impartial tyrant, successive political regimes limited the options of some to the advantage of others. Not everyone in Ader's society was equally exposed to the recurrent risk of famine. Politics determined who had priority access to scarce resources, who could move freely, and whose movements would be controlled and constrained. Different standards applied to the work of persons of free and slave descent, Africans and Europeans, men and women. Access to resources, returns to labour, and the right to move freely were regulated politically.

Politics often appeared progressive. In the first half of the twentieth century, colonial abolitionism hindered extreme forms of labour coercion in African societies. Yet it applied different standards to traditional practices (which it blamed for the persistence of slavery) and colonial labour

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recruitment (which introduced new forms of labour coercion). Since the 1940s the ideology of development may have aimed to increase economic productivity and improve the poor's living conditions, yet its introduction enabled the continuing underpayment of Ader's workers. Successive political discourses justified power by reference to the highest moral ideals – Islamic slavery exalted conversion; colonialism invoked the *mission civilisatrice*; 'aid' is branded as human development. But their existence depended on the moralising exploitation of slaves, natives, 'the poor'. The costs of intervention at the desert's edge were high compared to the economic and political benefits that could be gained. Productive outputs in Ader were limited to narrow margins by ecological conditions. Few people voted – and votes mattered little to development bureaucrats who were not politically accountable to the 'beneficiaries'. Political will could have introduced welfare measures. It did not. The cost of justice was never politically expedient or economically viable.

The productivity of resources on thin semi-desert soils is low compared to richer savannah and forest lands. From a comparative perspective, Ader exemplifies the agricultural environment least likely to allow the development of commercial farming on a large scale. Gareth Austin highlighted the relation between the growth of export agriculture and the accelerated ending of slavery in regions of West Africa where the spread of cash crops made it possible for masters to become employers.¹ This transformation took place, mostly after the colonial abolition of slavery, in areas that supported commercial farming in what today are Ghana,² Senegal,³ Gambia,⁴ and Nigeria.⁵ In contrast with the contexts described by Austin, in Ader the limitations of local production conditioned the peculiar endurance of slavery and unfree labour. Ader's predicament, then, urges us to revisit the old question of the relationship between ecological and political factors. This amounts to asking whether ecology, like destiny, predetermines social relations, and what options people have to shape their history.

This study shows that Ader's workers took their destiny into their own hands. Place may determine the productivity of labour in particular areas and at different seasons. But because people can move, place is not destiny. Looking at where people went reveals their aspirations. The choices people made with their feet, when they could choose where to go, expose at once

¹ Austin, 'Cash crops and freedom'. ² Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital*.

³ Searing, 'God alone'. ⁴ Swindell and Jeng, *Migrants, Credit and Climate*.

⁵ Lovejoy and Hogendorn, *Slow Death*; Agiri, 'Development of wage labour'.

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their strategies and the obstacles they faced: under which conditions do people leave or stay? Who can and who cannot move autonomously? How does politics alter opportunities *in loco*, and the capability of different groups and individuals to control their labour and movements? Looking backwards at Ader's history, if the Sahel's ecology facilitated the reproduction of exploitative labour relations, people's relative and conditional freedom depended ultimately on their capacity to move to places where new options were accessible to them and where they could renegotiate their identities.

In Ader the last two centuries saw a succession of political regimes that developed different ways of coping with the challenges posed by the desert. These regimes did not only attempt to regulate the relations between people and the land. They also created inequalities in the ability of different groups to control natural resources, labour, and movement. Ader's pre-colonial hierarchies, the French administration, and developmentalist bureaucracies in the colonial and independent era classified places and people. Their interpretations produced distinct horizons of opportunity for freemen and slaves, administrators and subjects, developers and beneficiaries, men and women. Comparing successive forms of government against the same ecological settings exposes the consequences of politics for different groups and individuals. What made a difference to poverty? There is no absolute answer to this question. Not everyone could pursue the same strategies and hope to succeed. Those who could not avert the threats of a hostile environment through migration embraced the bitter benefits of subservience. A paradoxical finding of this study is that steep social hierarchies often provided means to evade extreme destitution for those who occupied their bottom ranks. Another possibly unexpected finding is that 'aid' has not truly helped: whatever else it did, it never prioritised the interests of those most vulnerable.

ECOLOGY AND POLITICS

Place matters in Ader. The question is how, when, to whom, and with what consequences. Discussing the effects of environmental constraints on the poorer regions of the world, Landes notes that 'the world has never been a level playing field'.⁶ It has not. Ader's geography influenced

⁶ Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*, p. 6.

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production, trade, and politics. It protected it from invasions and exposed it to famines. But place is never only place. It is always also, but not exclusively, what people make of it: how they interpret it, and consequently act upon it.⁷ And people are never just people. Some groups and individuals have more power than others to decide how to represent and shape the world. The world has never been a level playing field, but there have always been multiple ways of interacting with any particular environment. In Ader political regimes alternating throughout the twentieth century interacted with the environment in different ways. This should suffice to lay to rest the ghost of simplistic environmental determinism that still haunts African studies. Ader's history cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of climatic and geographical factors. Yet, the environment, more than other factors, shaped its *longue durée*.⁸

A long tradition in African research looks at ecological conditions as determinants of economic and political arrangements. James Webb and George Brooks considered how climate change made possible major political realignments throughout West African history.⁹ Focusing on the central Sahel, Paul Lovejoy and Stephen Baier examined the relationship between the ecology and dominant ideologies of trade, government, and slavery.¹⁰ Tuareg ethnographers and historians – amongst them Edmond and Suzanne Bernus, Johannes and Ida Nicolaisen, Pierre Boilley, and André Bourgeot – showed that Tuareg social and political organisation responded to ecological requirements.¹¹ More generally, numerous studies argued that Africa's ecology put a check on population growth and that high land–labour ratios interfered with economic and political processes.¹² These

⁷ Smith, *Uneven Development*; Lefebvre, *Production de l'espace*.

⁸ Cf. Braudel, 'History and the social sciences'.

⁹ Webb, *Desert Frontier*; Brooks, *Western Africa*; Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*; Brooks et al., 'Environment-society nexus'. For a review of the debates, see McCann, 'Climate and causation'.

¹⁰ Baier and Lovejoy, 'Desert side'; Baier and Lovejoy, 'Tuareg'; Lovejoy, *Ecology and Ethnography*; Baier, *Economic History*; Baier, 'Ecologically based trade'.

¹¹ See, for example, Bernus, *Touaregs nigériens*; Bernus, 'Dates, dromedaries, and drought'; Nicolaisen, *Ecology and Culture*; Bourgeot, *Les sociétés Touaregs*; Boilley, *Touaregs entre contraintes*. Further works are mentioned in Chapter 2. Along similar lines, but focusing on southern Mali, see the work of de Bruijn et al., *Sahelian Pathways*.

¹² An influential set of writings in economic history includes the work of A. G. Hopkins (see *Economic History*) and Gareth Austin (especially 'Factor markets'). Other relevant studies are more politically focused and include, for example, Iliffe's introduction to *Africans*, Goody's analysis of technology and political organisation in *Technology*, Kopytoff's emphasis on the frontier (*African Frontier*), and Herbst's study of the African state (*States and Power*).

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studies have shown that the power of centralised states is hindered by ecological conditions that impose low population densities. The corollary of this argument, examined in the following section, is that where population density is too low, political centralisation is unviable and alternative political rationales must inform the government of people.

A strand in the historiography of slavery seeks to explain the occurrence of slavery and serfdom as a function of the land–labour ratios of particular regions. In 1900, Herman J. Nieboer published his voluminous study *Slavery as an Industrial System: Ethnological Researches*.¹³ He argued that slavery is the main form of labour found in societies where productive resources are openly accessible, because in these conditions coercion is necessary to constrain people to work for others rather than for themselves. Where land is abundant and labour and capital are scarce, long-term hiring of free labour is non-existent because, in Austin's clear reformulation of this argument, there is 'no wage rate which it would be mutually profitable for an employer to offer and for a worker to accept'.¹⁴

It is tempting to apply Nieboer's argument to Ader's scarcely populated landscape, where slavery died so slowly that it is yet to become fully extinct. But Nieboer's theory calls for provisos.¹⁵ As noted by economic historian Evsey Domar, Nieboer 'ignored the role of government'.¹⁶ Politics, more than population density, determined the presence or absence of slavery and analogous forms of coerced labour.¹⁷ Given the enormous influence of the Sahel's environment on labour relations, this cannot simply be stated, but must be demonstrated.

First, neither agricultural production nor population density are independent of social and political factors: specific land–labour ratios do not shape labour arrangements any more than they, too, are shaped by

¹³ Nieboer, *Slavery*, p. 418. Nieboer's emphasis on the relative availability of productive resources is also present in Watson's study of the prevalence of slavery in relation to systems where resources are openly accessible in his study of slavery in Asia and Africa, cf. Watson, *Asian and African*. Igor Kopytoff's discussion of the African frontier is based on similar premises: Kopytoff, *African Frontier*.

¹⁴ Austin, 'Factor markets', p. 42.

¹⁵ Patterson, 'Structural origins'; Pryor, 'Comparative study'; Domar, 'Causes'; and Austin, 'Factor markets'.

¹⁶ Domar, 'Causes', p. 32.

¹⁷ Engerman, 'Economic change', p. 148. See also Bolland and Green's debate over the primacy of demographic or political factors: Bolland, 'Systems'; Green, 'Perils'; and Bolland, 'Reply'.

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social relations.¹⁸ High population densities are sometimes found in correlation to more – not less – hostile environments, if hostile environments provide safe havens from military threats. The preferred location of some villages in nineteenth-century northern Ader was not the bottom of fertile valleys, but the arid rocky top of plateaux, from where enemies could be sighted in advance. While scarcity of sources makes reconstructions of pre-twentieth-century demographic dynamics speculative, limited extant sources suggest that during the Sokoto wars Ader received waves of immigrants engaged in what Muslims saw as pagan practices.¹⁹ Free Asna farming communities settled in Ader in the nineteenth century could have cultivated more productive lands in what today is northern Nigeria. But the closer to Sokoto, the higher the risk of enslavement.

The northward movement of these farming immigrants attests to the high value they placed upon retaining free status. Their choice, informed by political circumstances, influenced the land–labour ratios of both the places they left behind and those to which they relocated. In both sites, access to and control over productive resources was determined by socially and politically ascribed status. If place shapes politics, the reverse is also true: Asna farmers moved from more densely populated regions where their religious identity entailed a higher risk of being enslaved to less populated areas where – as free-born immigrants – they were able to clear and appropriate new lands. On the other hand, Ader's enslaved groups were excluded from ownership rights over land and other valuable resources. These two groups were not compartmentalised: a free farmer could be kidnapped and forced into the unenviable position of a slave. Awareness of the risks present in any particular location influenced the development of protective strategies amongst the free and of resistance strategies amongst the unfree. Exposure to enslavement was not determined by population density alone, and population density does not explain why, in any particular place, risk was higher for certain groups than for others.

Moreover, 'labour scarcity' is not an absolute condition, but depends on the quantity and quality of productive resources in any given region at different times of the year.²⁰ In the nineteenth century, Ader's land–labour

¹⁸ Cooper, 'Africa in the world economy', p. 26. Goody, 'Population', pp. 535–45; cf. Austin, 'Resources', pp. 591 ff.

¹⁹ Echard, *Expérience*, pp. 154–6.

²⁰ These considerations, to which Nieboer paid insufficient attention, were nevertheless known to earlier writers concerned with the consequences of the abolition of slavery in the Americas. Herman Merivale, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, considered not only land–labour ratios, but also the relative fertility of different types of soil in British

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ratio was surely high.²¹ But Ader's characteristic crevasses accounted for substantial variety in the quality of lands available. Valleys, glacis, slopes, and plateaux lent themselves to different uses. Yearly climatic variations and the farming techniques of traditional staples (millet and sorghum) placed heavy demands on labour at particular points in the rainy season, but there was, and is, no labour scarcity outside this period.²²

Both Ader's population density and the productivity of its resources changed over the period examined in this book. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ulrich Seetzen's description of southern Ader emphasised abundance of wild game and farming products – such as wheat and cotton – that require more humid conditions than the ones found in Ader today. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Keita Lake was a permanent lake and not, as today, a seasonal pond that evaporates completely in the winter (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). While Ader's environment progressively dried up over the last two centuries, its population grew substantially.²³

slave colonies. See Merivale, *Lectures*; Engerman, 'Economic change'; and Austin, 'Resources', pp. 597 ff., 615 ff.

²¹ There are no demographic data for the nineteenth century. That Ader was sparsely populated can be inferred from the fact that European travellers to the central Sudan, such as Barth and Clapperton, did not record the presence of any large villages in the Ader region, and the first maps of Ader drawn by French military officers in the first decade of the twentieth century contain only few, relatively small villages. In 1901 the 'group of Tamaske', which corresponded roughly to today's District of Keita, was estimated to count approximately 18,000 inhabitants; see Capt. Brescon, *Monographie du Cercle de Tahoua*, section entitled 'Poste de Tamaske: Monographie du Secteur', p. 16, ANN 17.1.3. This 1901 census was doubtlessly unreliable, for at the time few French military officers had even started to explore these recently occupied areas. Even allowing for major miscalculations, comparison with the 2011 census figure of 303,469 inhabitants in the District of Keita suggests massive population growth. In the 1940s demographic data collection became more precise. A 1946 census of the administrative region (cercle) of Tahoua (which includes the District of Keita) gives an average population density of 1.60/km², that is, a total population of 176,303 people for area of about 110,000 km². This figure should be broken down into the northern desert region and the southern savannah region of the district: the northern 'nomadic subdivision' (*subdivision nomade*) covered an area of 80,000 km² inhabited by about 50,000 people (density 0.62); and the southern 'sedentary subdivision' (*subdivision sédentaire*) covered 30,000 km² with 118,413 inhabitants (density 3.9); see *Rapport d'Ensemble du Premier Semestre 1946*, ANN1E33. In the national census of 2011 the region of Tahoua (roughly corresponding to the homonymous colonial cercle) has a population of 2,741,922 people over a total area of 106,677 km², and an average density of 26 inhabitants per km².

²² On agricultural techniques and seasonal labour requirements in Ader, see Raulin, *Techniques et bases*; Echard, *Etude socio-économique*.

²³ 'At the beginning of the 1860s, Shaba Valley was an expanse of wooded country, fertile and well-watered, as yet unclear [sic] for cultivation', Brock, *The Tamejirt*, p. 150. Shaba Valley, studied by Brock, is located in north-eastern Ader, just south-west of Tamaske.

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Population growth and the progressive drying-up of the land shifted the balance in factor endowment ratios away from Nieboer's 'open access' conditions and towards conditions in which, according to both Nieboer and Domar, a wage economy should develop. But as the use of coercion in labour recruitment became politically impracticable, relative labour abundance resulted in migration rather than the hiring of wage labour. The consequences of these changes were not the same for everyone. 'Labour' is not one group, but many, with unequal capabilities to negotiate their options. Nieboer's theory does not constitute a sufficient explanation for the prevalence of slavery in the nineteenth century, or for its slow demise in the twentieth century. Most importantly, it says nothing about the interests, agency, and strategies of slaves and masters, men and women, herders and farmers: their history is simply silenced by the assumption that land-labour ratios are all that matters.

THE IMPERATIVE OF MOBILITY

At the desert's edge, nothing is more important than being able to control one's movements, either to access resources in times of heightened scarcity, or to trade across long distances, or to avoid the constant threat of raids and enslavement. Mobility is a political and economic imperative that gives rise to a distinctive social organisation. These conditions have been described as forms of connectivity, a logic that governs the life of people who need to move safely along established social and commercial networks operating across deserts or seas.

Recent studies of Saharan societies emphasised connectivity as a precondition for survival and sociality.²⁴ Inspired by Peregrine Hordell and Nicholas Purcell's study of Mediterranean micro-ecologies, this literature draws a parallel between societies specialised in crossing the Mediterranean and those specialised in crossing the Sahara.²⁵ But if the similarities between the 'disputed desert' and the 'corrupting sea' are surely suggestive, they are also merely formal.²⁶ Studies of

²⁴ Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints*, pp. 7–18 and chapter 4; McDougall and Scheele, *Saharan Frontiers*; McDougall, 'Frontiers, borderlands', pp. 81–7; Grémont, *Touaregs Iwellem-medan*, pp. 13–22.

²⁵ Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*.

²⁶ James McDougall discusses differences between (allegedly introverted) Mediterranean and (comparatively extraverted) Saharan ecologies, but mainly to emphasise common connectivity. See his 'Frontiers, borderlands', pp. 82–4.

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Saharan connectivity emphasise reliance on institutions that enable the establishment of durable connections and collaboration across vast spaces that cannot host large settled populations. But they pay limited attention to particular rationales of government responsive to the extreme aridity of the desert and the scattered and ephemeral nature of its productive resources.

The societies living at the desert's edge did not face the same environmental conditions as those living on the coast of the Mediterranean and did not rely on similar systems of production. Even though complex trade networks crossed both the Sahara and the Mediterranean and developed moral economies of connectivity, the edge of the Sahara and the Mediterranean coast are different kinds of place, where distinct forms of government developed. The travellers who crossed the 'corrupting sea' were mostly issued from societies – be they Greek, Roman, Ottoman, or North African – whose centralisation permeated social and political relations. Circum-Mediterranean societies were internally diverse, and remained so even when they became integrated into overarching empires. But they were supported by relatively stable natural resources whose year-long productivity encouraged intensive methods of production and substantial investments in lands that yielded valuable crops. Fernand Braudel showed that differences in productive conditions defined cultural and political distinctions within Mediterranean societies.²⁷ And he highlighted the 'immensity and emptiness' of the Sahara that lay beyond the Mediterranean world and imposed constant movement:

Seen from the inside, through field studies [...] desert societies, so simple at first glance, reveal their complicated organisations, hierarchies, customs, and astonishing legal structures. But from the outside they seem a handful of human dust blowing in the wind. By comparison, societies which in the Mediterranean seemed so unsettled, mountain society in particular, suddenly appear weighty and established.²⁸

To be sure, the essentialising opposition of nomadic and settled societies must be avoided.²⁹ Political, cultural, and ecological boundaries have

²⁷ 'The Mediterranean means more than landscapes of vines and olive trees and urbanised villages; these are merely the fringe. Close by, looming above them, are the dense highlands, the mountain world with its fastness, its isolated houses and hamlets, its "vertical norths". Here we are far from the Mediterranean where orange trees blossom', Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, pp. 26–7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²⁹ Boesen, Marfaing, and de Bruijn, 'Nomadism and Mobility in the Sahara-Sahel', p. 2.

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always been permeable, and desert dwellers changed their lifestyles when they moved to urban centres. But the low productive potential and carrying capacity of (semi-) desert regions yielded distinct political institutions. These ideas are not new. The authors of medieval Arabic sources emphasised the distinction between desert-based societies and societies living in centralised polities in regions that could sustain higher population densities, and noticed the differences in their forms of government. Arabic sources on the history of North and West Africa emphasise opposition between centralised ‘states’ (kingdoms, empires, caliphates) supporting settled lifestyles where natural resources allow higher population densities; and nomadic societies structured into segmentary lineage units, practising transhumant pastoralism, and stratified into hierarchies. Ibn Khaldoun placed the tension between desert life and city life at the centre of his philosophy of history: ‘Civilization may be either desert (Bedouin) civilization as found in outlying regions and mountains, in hamlets (near suitable) pastures in waste regions, and on the fringes of sandy deserts. Or it may be sedentary civilization as found in cities, villages, towns, and small communities that serve the purpose of protection and fortification by means of walls.’³⁰

The desert eludes state rule. The tension between centralised state rule and desert governmentalities exposes divergence in the principles structuring social relations.³¹ For societies living on the fringes of the desert diversification is an economic imperative: because natural resources are limited and exposed to the recurrent threat of localised drought, pest attacks, or enemy raids, it is necessary to diversify one’s economic activities broadly in space, rather than concentrate one’s efforts and resources in any one or few bounded farms or pastures.³² Diversification strategies apply beyond one person’s investments: networks of binding relations, often of a hierarchical nature, enable individuals to make claims on the resources of others scattered across large distances and involved in a variety of economic endeavours. Patterns of skewed reciprocities function as safety nets when things go wrong in one or more activities.

³⁰ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, pp. 84–85. For a review of how this theme is developed in other medieval Arabic sources, see Rossi, ‘Kinetocracy’.

³¹ On this tension see, for example, Lefebvre, *Production de l’espace*, pp. 322–3; Elden, *Terror and Territory*; Bovill, *Golden Trade*, p. 12; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 377.

³² See Retaille and Walther, ‘Spaces of Uncertainty’; Retaille, ‘De l’espace nomade à l’espace mobile’, pp. 17, 24.