

“The Quest for Inclusion: Revision of Slave Histories by Leaders of Social Movements in West Africa”

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When slavery is addressed in West African national public spheres, the focus is often on the Atlantic Slave Trade (AST) rather than on domestic African slavery practices. This reinforced the image of internal slavery as more benign or at least less problematic and memorable than the AST. This bias has been recognized by academics on the sub-continent, who recently started to address the (history of) African domestic slavery. Not only academics, also people of slave origin themselves started addressing their slave past in order to get (political) recognition in the present.

Lack of a legitimate common history is the reason why many groups of slave descent continue to be stigmatized. The idea that “slaves have no history” appears to have been internalized by people of slave descent themselves and is reinforced by a lack of national recognition in educational curricula, commemoration sites and museums, most of which are biased towards the transatlantic trade. It has, therefore, been particularly difficult for people of slave origin in West Africa to take pride in their history. For a long time the majority of marginalized slave descendants maintained this “a-historical” status quo and opted for social promotion by keeping silent on and/or even obscuring their past. Increasingly however, several individuals with slave origins themselves started to conduct research on their own history.

The paper addresses revisions of the past as an ‘active’ form of contesting the existing stigma of slave status. Being able to claim their own role and dignity in the past is crucial for people of slave descent who want to take on roles of authority and manifest themselves against stigmatization of slave ancestry. The focus is on how social movements like Timidria in Niger and Temedt in Mali, who are fighting for the emancipation of groups of slave origin, contest existing versions of the past as a social policy to reduce the stigma of slave descent. The personal life histories and activities of the leaders of these social movements demonstrate how revision of existing versions of the past as it has been represented by colonial officers, researchers and freeborn members of their respective societies, are considered a priority in their quest for inclusion in the post-colonial nation state.