

## **Slavery, Forced Displacement, and Climate Change in Western Mali**

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Since October 2018, more than 3,000 people have been displaced in Western Mali to escape violence and community conflicts linked to internal slavery and its legacies. These forced displacements are far less mediatized than the tragic internal displacements experienced by more than 240,000 people from Northern and Central Mali since 2012. Yet, the recent displacements in Western Mali are only the tip of the iceberg and the slightly more visible part of a far longer-term exodus affecting the region since the beginning of the twentieth century. The conflict between population with ascribed slave status and the descendants of the ruling class and the resulting forced migration have until recently been largely ignored and unrecognized, especially in its complex relations with longstanding forms of ecological crises which are increasingly seen as linked to climate change.

In this paper we argue that such historical and contemporary conflicts leading to forced displacement are not linearly connected to ecological degradation and related land pressure. While not denying that ecological crisis may pose challenges to these communities and their mobilities, focusing just on this aspect risks de-historicising and de-politicising a long history of conflict and violence which is not the result of a single event but of cumulative inter-generational forms of violence linked to slavery. The latter may have sometimes been exacerbated by ecological crises but were not triggered nor caused by them.

Despite the lack of longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data on slavery-related conflicts, rural displacements and ecological crises in the Sahel region of West Africa, the latest 'slavery crisis' in Western Mali invites us to (re)think past and present forms of forced displacements outside the 'usual suspect' boxes of climate change related 'internally displaced populations'.

We question the climate change-conflict causality link in the case of slavery and forced displacement in Western Mali over the past century. Climate has always been varying greatly over defined and circumscribed spaces in West Africa and thus it had very different and localized impacts in the Sahel drylands (van Dijk et al., 2022; Bonnecase and Brachet, 2021; Benjaminsen et al., 2012). These significant local climate variations make it difficult to draw on broader quantitative regional data that would allow for connecting movements with ecological crises.

Our quantitative and qualitative data collected between 2020-2022, among forcibly displaced victims of descent-based slavery and their host communities from the village of Mambiri in Western Mali, pointed to social causes, as main reasons for their displacement, rather than any specific ecological crisis. These social causes include total exclusion from vital resources (water wells, medical care, shops, land) in home villages, as direct consequences of ongoing discriminations linked to descent-based slavery. When going further back in time and looking at previous exodus by populations with ascribed slave-status like in the case of the 1906 Banamba exodus (Roberts and Klein, 1980), but also subsequent "slave rebellions" in Western Mali (Rodet 2015; 2018; 2020) and other forms of fugitive displacements (Pelckmans, 2021) it becomes clear that these exoduses were not actually linked to environmental crisis, but rather to legal and political changes related to descent-based slavery and resource access, including land tenure.

We propose to examine how the continuous exodus of people with ascribed “slave status” over time has been primarily linked to longstanding and accumulated layers of social violence, which are systemic, rather than episodically linked to ecological crises. We will do so by analysing the history of cumulative waves of both individual and collective displacements of people with ascribed slave status in Western Mali in the twentieth century based on our own work (Rodet, 2009; 2010; 2015; 2018; Pelckmans, 2011; 2021), complemented by studies of other scholars for the period of 1960 to 1990 in the region (Daum, 2017; Pollet and Winter, 1972; Bonnacasse, 2011; Crombé and Jezequel, 2007; Mann, 2015). This historical overview will then be combined with a contemporary case study focusing on the village of Mambiri, where we conducted extensive quantitative and qualitative research in the past two years. Our analysis will demonstrate that past and present displacements in Western Mali must be understood through the lens of endemic forms of violence, rather than simply as ad hoc responses to changes in the climate or ecology.

In the continuity of Benjaminsen and Hvarstad’s critical assessment of the climate change-conflict nexus in the Sahel (2021) we thus argue that using the narrative of climate change to understand slavery-related conflicts and displacements in the Sahel contributes to de-politicising such conflicts and displacements and to upholding the hegemonic discourse of (descent-based) slavery negationists. The use of the climate change discourse risks further contributing to the invisibility of structural power imbalances linked to descent-based slavery, and thereby undermine other profound structural political causes of marginalisation leading to displacement. We further argue that many forms of conflicts and displacements in Western Mali, both past and present, are not linked primarily to land pressure due to ecological degradation as such, but rather to the political economy of resource control in the region which continues to be permeated by a long history of hierarchical power relations inherited from slavery and its aftermaths.

In a first section of our paper, we will critically assess the causality link often made between ecological crises and social conflicts related to slavery looking at past “slave rebellions”, land conflict as debated in court cases and ecological crises in Western Mali in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the second section we will analyse data from those currently displaced and their host communities, giving an in-depth overview of how the political economy of resource control continues to drive conflicts between the historical ruling class and populations with ascribed “slave status” in the region. In a third section we will assess the consequences of depoliticising existing social inequalities through the lens and discourses of climate change. In our conclusions, we will underline how power relations mediating land control and its lack of legal regulation, rather than the actual infertility and or lack of available land as such, are generating longstanding insecurities and are more fundamental and immediate threats to livelihoods compared to environmental crisis or climate change as such.

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