



BACK HOME, WITH A SENSE OF POSSIBILITY: A RESEARCH ON THE “AFTERLIFE” OF WEST AFRICAN SLAVERY
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August 2012, Turin: back home, I look at the bookshelves around my desk. Not even a year ago I was sorting out the materials that I thought I needed in Berlin. After having been in Germany in 2004 for a Humboldt Research Fellowship at the University of Bayreuth, I now looked forward to spending a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I thought,

and so it was, that this memorable human and intellectual adventure would enrich my life in unpredictable ways. I arrived in Berlin with the idea of closing a cycle started in the early 1990s with my first period of fieldwork along the River Gambia, the area of West Africa that has been long at the core of my research. After years devoted to the study of West African slavery and its demise, and of stimulating research collaboration with Sandra Greene of Cornell University and Martin Klein of the University of Toronto, I mulled the idea of changing my topic and field of research. I even made this statement during my first meeting with Joachim Nettelbeck, the Secretary of the Institute. Today, I can say that if I have got a fresh starting, it is not in the direction I anticipated. One year after my initial declaration of change, I am rooted more than before in the field of slavery studies.

At Wiko, I have rediscovered the pleasure of discussing the reasons that in the 1990s turned me into a historical anthropologist, and I recollected episodes of my African fieldwork that I had long stopped thinking about. Thanks to Ioana Macrea-Toma, I have reconsidered the critical contribution of anthropology to a broader understanding of colonial archives, a theme that I had temporarily put aside though it was a landmark of my research. Thomas and Clara Christensen have reawakened my love for classical music, while from Jim Hunt I have learned that wasps have a labor organization that strongly resembles slave-master relationships and that these insects practice the most controversial of human institutions: infanticide. Mark Viney has taught me to look at parasitism as the most widespread feature of life, while Alessandro Stanziani's focus on the Russian Empire and the Indian Ocean has fuelled my interest in historical and cultural contexts other than Africa.

Like the majority of socio-cultural anthropologists, I love ethnographic and historical details, semantic nuances, and dense knots of social relationships. My manuscript on the River Gambia is built from the perspective of grasping local notions of slavery and their significance in the 20th-century history of Gambian society long after the legal abolition of slavery and the slave trade. I have looked at the ways the elderly men and women, whom I met over 20 years of research, described the past world of enslavement and life in slavery; I have compared their memories with the traces contained in travel accounts and colonial archives and questioned how these elderly men and women – the majority of whom were born after abolition – had acquired such a rich knowledge of slavery and its place in society. Delving into that past has brought me to interrogate processes of cultural transmission that occur in the interstices of daily life. Yet, the task of the anthropologist does not end with the recognition and documentation of the concreteness and terrific

variety of human experience. Since its beginning, social and cultural anthropology has fostered a comparative spirit that travels across social, cultural, and theoretical boundaries. So I learned while training at the University of Turin, and so I have rediscovered in the interdisciplinary environment of Wiko.

In the last year, I cultivated my passion for historically and ethnographically grounded analysis and appreciated the never-ending potentiality of following networks of sameness and difference across intellectual domains, historical periods, and cultural contexts. Slavery is a thriving object of study in this respect, one of those millennial human institutions whose understanding broadens our awareness of the challenges faced by contemporary governments, activists, scholars, and citizens who deal with human trafficking and bonded labor. In addition, Berlin is the perfect setting to rethink local problems in terms of global history and establish comparisons between contexts not historically interrelated. I spent part of my sabbatical developing a research agenda that could bridge the study of historical slavery and abolition with that of contemporary forms of oppression and exploitation. By talking about an “afterlife” of slavery, I have started to explore the ensemble of the conceptual and social transformations that have occurred in African labor organization and social relations since legal abolition. Slavery died slowly in colonial Africa, as colonials feared the disruptive effects of mass abolition, which they had already witnessed in other parts of the world. In many areas, the vestiges of old slave-master relationships are still visible today and have continued to evolve in response to changing economic, political, and social circumstances. Meanwhile, in the course of the 20th century, slavery itself has turned into a rallying symbol for struggles against political and social oppression. It started at the time of World War II, when some African intellectuals used the metaphor of slavery to contest colonial oppression and the controversial institution of forced labor.

That history still needs to be documented, while a new abolitionist wave has been investing Africa and the rest of the world since the beginning of this new century. Is there a linkage between the Mauritanian, Sudanese, and Nigerian vestiges of “old” slave-master relationships and the contemporary exploitation of vulnerable subjects such as children, women, and migrants? Activists and anti-slavery organizations meet the victims of contemporary slavers among the disbanded militias of the 1990s African civil wars, the migrants stuck in Saharan oases and North African cities, the domestic laborers of Ghana, Benin, Gabon, and South Africa, the African children recruited for mines and cocoa plantations, and the sex workers of African and European cities. Whether we are facing the “dark side” of late 20th-century policies of wild economic liberalization or witnessing

the late transmogrification of a millennial history of violence and exploitation is a dramatic question that deserves our historical and ethnographic attention. I cannot close this short report without special thanks to Andreas Eckert and the re:work program of the Humboldt University (International Research Center, IGK), where I discussed my research in a stimulating and friendly atmosphere, as much as to the Zentrum Moderner Orient, where I presented part of my results.

Eva von Kügelgen has been a fabulous German teacher and partner of innumerable discussions on the diversity of European lifestyles, while there are no words to commend the moral and intellectual support of Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus to Fellows and their projects. Last but not least, Wiko would not be such an intellectually dynamic community without the multiple talents of the spouses and children of Fellows. My gratitude goes to the legion of “invisible hands” that provided for our families unique opportunities of integration into German culture and society.