

BOOK REVIEW

Bernard Moitt. *Child Slavery and Guardianship in Colonial Senegal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. vii + 223 pp. \$110. Hardback. ISBN: 9781009296472.

While so much has been written about the transatlantic slave trade, little has been said about children's experiences within this traumatic experience, especially in Senegal. In his book, Bernard Moitt strongly urges scholars to study this history and acknowledge Senegal's importance as a site to which researchers should pay more attention, particularly regarding the status of children in the history of slavery in Africa. Responding to his call, Moitt has written a condensed yet thorough study of child slavery in colonial Senegal in a captivating way through succinct chapters that have convincing arguments and clear time-frames. His book is a great example of how to do strong scholarly work based on colonial archives and extant research.

Focusing on the period between France's abolition of the slavery trade in 1848 and 1910, Moitt uncovers a tragic history in which this empire's greed ended up marring the liberator status that it aimed to have by emancipating slaves. This paradox is evident in France's successful attempt after its 1848 emancipation decree to compensate for its anticipated loss of labor that would result from the proclaimed end of the slave trade with a new and covert bondage system. The empire aimed to create a legal mechanism through which the supposedly liberated blacks in Senegal could be kept in a customary and dissimulated form of captivity. This history unfolded between the 1840s and the early twentieth century in Senegal when inhabitants of the four communes (Saint-Louis, Dakar, Gorée, and Rufisque) could aspire to French citizenship. By contrast, other Senegalese (composed of child and adult populations) were ushered into a system that re-enslaved them. The solution was "*tutelle*," a mechanism that made it possible for children and adults who were categorized as slaves before 1848 to have a new status that was akin to the one they previously had. Former slaves and their children were now put under the legal category in which French, black, or other inhabitants of the four communes with privilege were supposed to house, feed, and care for them in exchange for labor. Focusing on Saint-Louis, Moitt writes:

Paradoxically, many of the children ended up in households in which they were once enslaved, particularly households headed by *signares*—mixed-race African women. The council entrusted many others, mostly males, to artisans in whose households the children worked as apprentices. In all instances, the guardians of liberated children exploited their labor and the

guardianship system was characterized by abuse to which the youths responded by flight and other means that testify to their agency. (202)

Tutelle was a flawed substitution for the adoption system the French colonial administration had proposed to *signares* and other inhabitants of Senegal before these groups temporarily rejected this option. For instance, as Moitt argues, “*signares* viewed efforts to recruit them as guardians of freed-slaves formerly in their charge as an insult to and degradation of their social standing” (64). According to Moitt, *tutelle* was finally instituted in the communes of Saint-Louis, Gorée, Rufisque, and Dakar, as well as in the Lebu villages. The system resulted from a “correlation between liberation and child labor” which “worked to the advantage of the colonial administration in that it fostered social and economic stability, the displacement and subjugation of minors notwithstanding” (24). Therefore, *tutelle* needs to be approached as a restrictive institution that did not prevent a few members of the reenslaved population from escaping bondage through resistive means such as flight, skill acquisition, socio-economic mobility, and, very rarely, a successful petition for a colonial administrator’s support.

Furthermore, as Moitt clearly shows, all the formerly enslaved children who were forced into *tutelle* did not completely lose their agency and ability to survive against all odds. First, several institutions, especially Catholic missions, “sought to reform and prepare minors for the future, whatever their shortcomings” (101). Furthermore, Moitt states: “By 1905, the data show that far too many minors disappeared from view after too brief a glimpse. Not all of them led miserable lives, although the case histories of these young people reveal considerable delinquency and misery, which sometimes led to incarceration in the *Pénitenciaire de Thiès*—a state penitentiary institution” (102). Therefore, despite its horrible nature, *tutelle* did not prevent many previous child slaves from ultimately gaining some freedom, especially when they became adults. Moitt’s arguments help us understand the complicated nature of social hierarchies that prevailed in colonial Senegal. After reading the book, one begins to fathom the effects that racial, social, and economic stratifications had in the distinctive history of French slavery and colonization in Senegal between 1848 and the early twentieth century. These topics remain highly understudied despite their major importance.

Babacar M’Baye 

Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA

bmbaye@kent.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2024.168