
‘Slavery is Allowed in My Religion’: Legal Pluralism and Sexual Slavery in Northern Uganda and Northern Nigeria, 1890-2014

Benedetta Rossi*¹

¹University of Birmingham (UK) (UoB) – University of Birmingham Department of African Studies
Arts Building Birmingham B15 2TT United Kingdom, Royaume-Uni

Résumé

This article serves as an introduction to four papers (including this one) on legal pluralism in African slavery and emancipation. Its first section addresses the issues raised in the introductory statement above; discusses theoretical debates on the concept of legal pluralism (mainly from the discipline of legal anthropology); and considers the implications of adopting a legal pluralist perspective for historical research in African slavery and emancipation. The second section analyses two regional case studies illustrating how legal pluralism functioned in the field of conjugal and sexual slavery in Northern Nigeria and Northern Uganda. In both contexts British abolitionism was mediated at an early stage by the action of Frederick John Dealtry Lugard (Lord Lugard), who was Military Administrator of Uganda in the early 1890s and High Commissioner of the Protectorate, and then Governor, of Northern Nigeria in the first two decades of the twentieth century. While there were commonalities in the British abolitionist impulse in these two colonies, differences were also important: for example, missionary intervention differed in Uganda and Northern Nigeria due to the prevalence of Islam in the latter region. Distinct religious, political, and legal systems in these two regions resulted in unequal evolutions of slavery and emancipation and idiosyncratic forms of legal pluralism and syncretism. The case studies focus narrowly on conjugal and sexual slavery. They cover the colonial and post-colonial periods all the way to the contemporary period, ending with a comparative analysis of the Aboke girls abduction by the Lord Resistance Army in Northern Uganda in 1996 and the Chibok girls abduction by Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria in 2014. This section considers the religious arguments mobilised by the abducting parties, the responses of international anti-slavery activism, and testimonies of survivors and their relatives. Building on the first two sections, the article’s final section assesses the consequences of a legal pluralist approach for the periodization of African emancipation.

*Intervenant