Cahiers Africains de Rhétorique

ISSN 2790-6108 | E-ISSN 2790-6116

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CAHIERS AFRICAINS DE RHÉTORIQUE

Cahiers Africains de Rhétorique(fr), African Rhetoric Notebooks(An) **Vol. 2, N°02, pp.126-136, décembre 2023**
ISSN : 2790 -6108, EISSN : 2790-6116

Religion and slavery in America through Claude Fohlen's *Histoire de l'esclavage aux Etats-Unis*[1]

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https://doi.org/10.55595/DKAWS2023

Date de réception : 25/10/2023 **Date d'acceptation :** 20/12/2023 **Date de publication :** 30/12/2023

Abstract
The history of America at large and that of slavery in particular cannot be told without sound reference to religion. Indeed, the practice of Christianity imposed by the masters was a key tool for to get the slaves busy when they were not at work, on Sundays mainly, and white pastors resorted to interpretation of the bible aiming at getting the black slaves to accept and adapt to their condition. Yet, from adaptation to the white man's religion, the black slaves found motives for fight and resistance. Claude Fohlen's *L'Histoire de l'Esclavage en Amérique* has explored the functioning of slavery in America, along with the importance of religion in the process. The present paper seeks to highlight the meaning of religion to both the slave master and the slaves themselves, and how it served both the white master's control over slaves, and the slaves' fight for emancipation. The study has been conducted under the New Criticism theory, an approach that focuses primarily on the text itself, avoiding outside influences such as historical and biographical information that might drive the reader from the essential meaning of the text.
Keywords: America, Slavery, Religion, Domination, Emancipation

Religion et esclavage en Amérique à travers l'Histoire de l'esclavage aux Etats-Unis de Claude Fohlen

Résumé
L'histoire de l'Amérique en général et celle de l'esclavage sont inéluctablement liées à la religion. En effet, l'introduction du Christianisme dans la vie des esclaves était une stratégie pour le maître esclavagiste de mieux contrôler ses esclaves, non seulement en occupant leur temps libre mais aussi en les maintenant de toute idée de révolte ou de fuite. Mais l'adaptation à la religion du maître avec la touche qu'ils y apportaient ont permis aux esclaves de trouver le moyen de résister et de lutter pour l'émancipation. Le Livre, *Histoire de l'Esclavage aux Etats Unis* de Claude Fohlen a explore la pratique de l'esclavage en Amérique et la

[1] Comment citer cet article : KOMBIENI D., AHOUANGANSI R.S., SIME A.W. (2023). Religion and slavery in America through Claude foemen's histories de l'esclavage aux Etats-Unis . *Revue Cahiers Africains* de *Rhétori*que, 2 (4), pp.126-136.

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contribution de la religion. Le présent article vise à mettre en exergue le sens et l'importance de la religion à la fois pour les maitres esclavagistes dans la pratique de l'esclavage, et pour les esclaves dans la survie, la résistance et la lutte pour l'émancipation. Cette étude est conduite sur la base de la théorie littéraire Néo Critique, une approche qui repose en premier lieu sur le texte de base, tout en évitant les influences historique et bibliographiques externes qui pourraient amener le lecteur à se détourner du message substantiel dans l'œuvre, support de l'étude.
Mots clés : Amérique, Esclavage, Religion, Domination, Émancipation

Introduction

History is more than the path left by the past; it influences the present and can shape the future. All civilizations, at a given moment of their historical process, have experienced slavery or any other similar practices based on human exploitation. Slavery is a condition in which a human being is owned by another human being as a private property, not for material wealth, but for physical exploitation, which leads to moral and psychological exploitation. In the American context, a slave was considered by the law as property or chattel and was deprived of most of the rights ordinarily held by free persons. An explanation by Oscar Handlin reveals that the term "Slave" was a gradual creation of the XVII century. For, the term slave was used to describe or design any human being of low condition, no matter where they come from or their skin color. For him, slavery has not then existed from the very beginning as particularity characteristics of black people. It rather got started by the adaptation by some Europeans to Blacks' conditions from a given moment. (C. Fohlen, 1998, p45) The first condition of most early Blacks in America was Indentured servants, that is, workers under contract. Slavery latter came as a response to the necessity to exploit the soil and the underground in the absence of the availability of sufficient or accurate local labor force. It was then capital to use black people energy as they seemed to be more resistant to the sun and could work harder than the other races then under indentured service.

For all human species undergoing à certain condition of servitude, not benefiting for their freedom as human and whose life and death dwells on someone else's will at a given moment, the emergency to find a way out becomes a necessity. As Martin Luther King Jr put it "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed" (M. L. King Jr, 1963, p4). In this perspective, all means ready to help are considered. One of those ways is the religious conception by black people, although this was set at their disposal by their master for a totally different, and even opposite, purpose the following articles describes how religion contributed to awake black slaves' consciousness on their unacceptable condition, and their right to emancipation.

2. Theoretical framework of the study

2.1. A brief overview of the history of slavery in America

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Before the advent of slavery in the United States of America, it was first of all about making people work by force under many forms of conviction, common right and indentured servants working under contracts. Considered as low clans' people, black people were first called to offer their labor services, by signing a contract in which they engaged to work for an agreed number of year (around four or five years in general for adults, seven for children, who could not afford the transportation fees from their home continent to the New World), in order to gain back their transportation fees and in the counterpart, get their freedom back. The problem with black people after their arrival in the New World, was their skin color. They had early been enslaved because they were different from the other workers, so exposed to more subjective discrimination that had immediately been used to reduce them to the unlimited servitude states. In the context of that time the destiny of black people was to become slave. According to James Madison, the successor of Jefferson as President of the USA, slaves are basically considered as goods. They were not full persons for as they matter only for the three-fifths compromise, that was proposed by James Wilson and Roger Sherman and added to the constitution. It was a compromise agreement between delegates from the Northern and the Southern states at the United States Constitutional Convention (1787) that three-fifths of the slave population would be counted for determining direct taxation and representation in the House of Representatives. The abolition of slavery was gradually carried out. At Pennsylvania, any slave born would be free at 28 years old and would be treated as an apprentice, initiated to a manufacturing job. The Connecticut and Rhode Island decided to abolish the institution in 1784. New York and New Jersey were the States with the largest number of slaves in the north particularly employed in the agricultural exploitation.

In 1799, New York then voted a law releasing the black boys to be born when they reach 28 years and girls when they reach 25. Four years later, it was the turn of New Jersey (25 years for men and 21 for women). (C. Fohlen, 1998, p118)

2.2. Family life in slavery

According to Cambridge International Dictionary of English, Family can be defined as a social group of people consisting of a parent, or parents and their children, or your husband/wife and children, or your parents, brothers and sisters and sometimes grandparents, uncles, aunts etc… From the above definition, one can see how criminal family life was represented in the rank of black slaves. History shows how blacks were treated in an inhuman way as for them, their family's destiny has to be decided by their master who, basically consider them as non-human. Masters who see them not like normal human beings but rather like working machines to increase and insure high productions in plantations. The larger the family is, and the richer the master is, as he can use them either for sale or for more workforces in their plantations. The notion of family has long been considered for slaves, but not in accordance with the institution. As matter of fact, Family has long been considered by historians as practically inexistent for slaves,

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because judged incompatible with their trade, which represented an obstacle to the stability of familial institution. (C. Fohlen, 1998, p158). Some historians as well as sociologists have been influenced by the realities of black people marital conditions, whether set in a united family or in a non-united and mostly mono parental family, different from the rest of the American society. Indeed, black people found themselves in a nation they do not originally belong to, a nation that does not consider them in the country law, but yet want them in, for exploitation and slavery's sake. Tocqueville noticed that the culture of tobacco, cotton and sugar cane demanded, contrary to cereals, a diversified and permanent workforce, including women and children. In another term, family constitute for him, a foundation of the prosperity of the south, what abolitionists contradicted by portraying the image of slaves as victims of economical and sexual exploitation leading black family to be unsteady, non-efficient, disturbed and fundamentally different from white families. Black slaves had no family life for over a century. Their family life was to be equated with the one of animals, as only the immediate family formed by the slave woman is considered: the father truly had little consideration, since children belonged to the master of the slave woman. Black slaves had nuclear families but not like the ones of white Americans. Slaves' families were on permanent decomposition and re-composition, as the father, the mother or a child could be sold to another proprietor at any time, for any single reason. Slaves then adopted nuclear family system; grand-parents were most the time referred to in tales or stories. The notion of family was then clearly understood under many circumstances. Imagine living in such a family where the familial hierarchy is disturbed, where your father may not be 'your father' but you master. Where an external force could be the decider of the future of your family. But globally, slave owners encouraged marriage within slaves to protect their investment in their slaves.

Paradoxically, despite the likelihood of breaking up families, family formation actually helped owners to keep slavery in place. Owners debated among themselves the benefits of enslaved people forming families. Many of them reasoned that having families made it much less likely that a man or woman would run away, thus depriving the owner of valuable property. Many owners encouraged marriage, devised the practice of "jumping the broom" as a ritual that enslaved people could engage in, and sometimes gave small gifts for the wedding. Some owners honored the choices enslaved people made about whom their partners would be; other owners assigned partners, forcing people into relationships they would not have chosen for themselves. Indeed, during slavery in the United States and as black slaves could not legally wed like white people, brooms were readily available to the enslaved and could be used in wedding ceremonies. Enslaved people would jump over the broom to marry. Other people argue that slave owners would force them to get married in that manner. During that moment, "both the bride and the groom exchange vows and say 'I do', the officiant will either provide a prayer, a poem, or a brief explanation of the meaning of jumping the broom", explains Harris (A. LaBarrie, 2022, p24) The broom is then placed on the ground and the newlyweds jump

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over it. Since children of slaves are automatically slaves, the real authority for children education is the slave owner, although this authority is directly exercised by the mother. The following paragraph is from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by Harriet Jacobs, a former slave, in 1861.

> My father, by his nature, as well as by the habit of transacting business as a skillful mechanic, had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves. My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress had happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, "You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first." "You are my child," replied our father, "and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water. "Poor Willie! He was now to learn his first lesson of obedience to a master". (H. Jacobs,1861, Chapter 2)

2.3.The place of slaves in the economic growth of the United States of America.

Capitalism, through its economic and development processes, is inextricably in close link with the brutal practice of slavery. Economist Mark Stelzner from the Connecticut College, and Sven Beckert, historian from the University of Harvard, in a new working paper, entitled *The Contribution of Enslaved Workers to Output and Growth in the Antebellum United States, explain that* this system of violence was central, as it forced labor was to the country's economic growth in the years leading up to the Civil War, which continues to shape racial inequities for Black Americans today (M. Stelzner and S. Beckert, 2004, p4). Indeed, the workforce and the labor of slaves is one of the key elements that contributed to the United States economic growth essentially by the culture of cotton, sugar cane, tobacco etc. That new working paper has provided the very first clear estimates of slaves in the plantations and their contributions to the economic improvement on the regional and national grounds from 1839 to 1859. In another hand, it was shown by Stelzner and Beckert, the important driver of growth that the work of American slaves represented for the country's economy, in the South and even on national scale, comparably to the economic growth in per capita output of manufacturing workers in New England. These data also display the increased disparity between White households and American slaves in the South and those with no destabilizing social and political factor in the Southern antebellum.

These two authors, trough their findings, have demonstrated that "slavery was an important institution for economic development in the United States, and that the unrequited labor of enslaved women, men and children helped produce in significant ways the nation's economic expansion in the two decades before the Civil War" (M. Stelzner and S. Beckert, 2004, p2). This research is important to understand the role of

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slavery in the American economic history, and by further quantifying the exploitation of enslaved people, can contribute to discussions of reparations and the legacy of slavery today. Steven Mintz in his article entitled *Historical Context: Was Slavery the Engine of American Economic Growth?* argue that few works of history have exerted as powerful an influence as a book published in 1944 called *Capitalism and Slavery* (S. Mintz, 2009, p1). Its author, Eric Williams, later the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, charges that black slavery was the engine that propelled Europe's rise to global economic dominance. He maintains that Europeans' conquest and settlement of the New World depended on the enslavement of millions of black slaves, who helped amass the capital that financed the industrial revolution (S. Mintz, 2009, p1). "Europe's economic progress, he insisted, came at the expense of black slaves whose labor built the foundations of modern capitalism". Indeed, slavery was indispensable and very important to European development of the New World that was a term often used for the majority of Earth's Western Hemisphere, specifically the Americas and also describing the North Central and South America especially in the past. European colonists could not have settled and developed North and South America and the Caribbean without slave labor. Moreover, slave labor was basically the only actor of production of the major consumer goods that were the basis of world trade during the 18th and early 19th centuries: coffee, cotton, rum, sugar, and tobacco.

In the pre-Civil War United States, a stronger case can be made that slavery played a critical role in the economic development. One crop, slave-grown cotton, provided over half of all US export earnings. By 1840, the South grew 60 percent of the world's cotton and provided some 70 percent of the cotton consumed by the British textile industry (S. Mintz, 2009, p2). Thus, slavery paid for a substantial share of the capital, iron, and manufactured goods that laid the basis for American economic growth. In addition, precisely because the South specialized in cotton production, the North developed a variety of businesses that provided services for the slave in the South, including textile factories, a meat processing industry, insurance companies, shippers, and cotton brokers.

There's then no doubt that slaves highly contributed to the economic building of the United States of America of today. To go further, one could come to the assessment that black slaves by their strength and hard work in plantation and in many other forms of servitude they were submitted to build the United States of America. They were living under difficult life conditions and accommodation. In an article on the De Bow's Review a monthly southern that is precious source for the history of slavery, a doctor wrote that "a Black's house should never be so full. A cabin of 16 out of 18 feet is not big enough for one man, his wife and their three or four children. This is here about an optimum. Moreover, the ceiling was low in size, reducing the air cubage inside the room". (C. Fohlen, 1998, p164). Slaves were assigned different kinds of tasks in the plantations. Those tasks were subdivided into two: the task system and the gang system. The first consisted in assigning to each slave, a given task that could be carried out according to their own rhythm. It was a variant of work in pieces, in usage of the industry applied to

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agriculture in order to get a better yield. Once the assigned task achieved, the slave could do other things, take care of his kitchen garden or his barnyard. The gang system the most extended holding more about line work, was more constraining. Slaves were organized in teams or gangs who accomplished together a given task with a specific function for each participant under the guidance of a driver. (C. Fohlen, 1998, p168). The wealth of the South America was greatly influenced by slavery and the workforce offered by black people against their will. As such, they have been part and parcel contributor of what American stand to be today, a standing economic super power in the world. The descents of the American slaves then deserve to be treated as full American citizens.

3. The relations between slaves and their masters

3.1.The Slaves' domination and exploitation

During the declaration of independence in the Philadelphia Congress Hall on July 4, 1776, it was clearly decided on the motto that: "… all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Declaration of Independence,1776). Unfortunately, this strong motive for rejecting the British domination was not to be universal; at least, it was not to be applied when considering the then Americans and the Blacks. Indeed, the existing relationship between Slaves and their masters was determined by a full authority of masters over their slaves. Slaves were considered as merchandise or properties and not human beings. Slaves were considered as non-disciplined and moral people. They were to be educated on morals, discipline and religion respecting the conceptions the masters wanted them to understand. Yet, this instruction referencing God's prescriptions was not based on what was recommended by Holly The Bible in all its lines. Slave women were exposed to sexual abuse of any kind from some of their masters, no matter their marital condition. As a matter of fact, this of course resulted not only in disputes between the slave husband of abused women, leading to fight, but also real rage and jealousy between the white mistress whose husband is abusing the slave and the slave herself. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston portrays how Nanny is forced to leave her master's house at midnight to escape her mistress's anger after she gave birth to Leafy, a mulato baby from her master.

The life of a slave was always subservient to the master. Slaves had to obey or be punished. Even if the master was less abusive and demanding, the slave still held resentment, for his life was not his own. For slave owners, the main object was to keep financially valuable slaves alive and working; that is all that mattered. They were items, property and a commodity to be owned or sold for profit. Slave owners supplied only the minimum needs for the slaves' survival; little food was given and often that was not fit to eat. Living conditions were poor such as no beds or bedding. The work was grueling and the hours were long for the slave. They often got very little sleep and they were watched during the day to make sure they were not idle and at night to be sure they didn't escape. They were dominated by the people that owned them. It is then clear that the

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master-slave relationship was generally one of fear, tension and dominion. The slave had no rights but only duties, and was expected to be subjected to the master will and needs.

3.2. Slaves' strategies against masters

In the history of slavery in America, escaping, rebellion have marked the masters and slave relations. The first slave rebellion started in the XVIII century. Herbert Aptheker identified around two hundred cases, numbers that were questioned by some historians. In a deposition made in 1841, a fugitive slave, Madison Jefferson declared: "Insurrections sometimes break out, although they are less frequent than one might imagine, because the enclaves, being disarmed and very discouraged by the treatment they receive and having no opportunity to organize a common effort, are invariably dominated". Slaves' protests were performed under two strategies such as marooning and opened rebellion. (C. Fohlen, 1998, p.183). By "maroons" it is meant, those slaves who fled away from their masters and formed new freedmen communities. There are different kinds of maroon. A typical maroon community in the early stage usually consists of three types of people. Most of them were enslaved people who ran away directly after they got off the ships after the long journey from Africa as captives; they refused to surrender their freedom and often tried to find the impossible ways back to Africa. The second group were enslaved people who had been working on plantations for a while. Those enslaved people were usually somewhat adjusted to the slave system but had been abused by the plantation owners, often with excessive brutality. Others ran away when they were being sold suddenly to a new owner. The last group of maroons were usually skilled enslaved people with particularly strong opposition to the slave system.

Maroonage also consisted in escaping from plantations and surviving in places practically inaccessible, a kind of going back to nature. It was a very common practice in the Caribbeans were hills and islands facilitated the fugitive's living conditions, contrarily to the United States where conditions were less comfortable unless they take refuge in the forest camps or with the Indians.

Maroon communities represented one of the greatest threats for planters, they did not submit to the Master's authority and encourage other slaves to join them for their freedom's sake. This changes some slaves mind and awaked many mindsets. Maroons sometimes attacked plantations to steal weapons and livestock to ensure their survival. They also attacked isolated individuals (whites and their families) and spread fear around them. Cases of clashes have been reported here and there, in Virginia, in 1825, in north California in 1856 were clashes ended up with the death of white people. These series of clashes opened doors to the increase of the maroons' communities in fringes where the authority of the American government was not well carried out. This is how they started mingling with some Indian tributes like the Choctaws, the Chickasaws or the Seminols who were also slave owners and owned black slaves as well. In Florida where the Seminols were established, they became a refuge for the maroon slaves who regularly used to organize retaliation against the plantation owners of Georgia. Maroon slaves were

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intimately joined in the Seminols struggle against the American government, in 1818, and mostly during the second world War (1835-1842), where a certain Abraham, a Florida plantation fugitive exercised a great ascendancy, as an interpreter between Americans and Indians.

4. Impact of religious beliefs on slaves

4.1. Slaves and their beliefs

Away from their ancestry and cultural practices, African slaves in America were all forced to adopt new types of religious practices, depending basically on the part of the American land they were sold to; Africa was a continent in which typical local religions, such as the vodoun, existed, together with exported European and Asian religions such as Christianity and Muslim. According to historians Besheer Mohamed, Kiana Cox, Jeff Diamond and Claire Gecewicz in their article entitled *Faith among black American*: *A brief overview of Black religious history in the US* "when they were first captured and taken to America, some enslaved black people were Christian. More were Muslim" (B. Mohamed & al ,2021, p23). But the largest number, by far, were followers of traditional religions common in West Africa at the time. Many of these African beliefs system included a supreme, distant God who created the world and a pantheon of lower gods and ancestor spirits who were active in daily life. This said, African people before landing in America as slaves, all knew about what religion was. This religious heritage also included the use of herbal medicine and charms, applied by specialists known as conjurers, who were believed to be able to heal diseases, to harm an enemy or to make someone fall in love. Historians say that access to a conjurer gave enslaved people a sense of empowerment and control over their lives, while allowing for a worldview that distinguished them from slaveholders and connected them to Africa. Talking about black people's beliefs and religions in America, historian Carter Woodson, an anthropologist, Melvin Herskovits and a sociologist, and Franklin Frazier decided to focus some studies in the religious universe of Black people, but they were divided in their interpretations starting from the thesis of the continuation between black people's former religions and its extension in the servitude in America, to the notion of adaptation in a new area which relegated to the background, the African traditions (C. Fohlen, 1998,p175).

4.2. Masters' apprehension on Slaves' religious practices

Africans deported to America as slaves became unrooted from many grounds, including their home tradition, culture and religion. Most masters prevented their slaves from practicing their ancestral religion, imposing on them Christianity, Protestantism in main; but from the beginning, slaves tried to print their own touches to their masters' religious practices. Indeed, for slave masters, religion was considered as a tool to restore discipline and prevent revolt and strikes; they resorted to the Bible, which they interpreted to their own benefit, just to get slaves to accept and adapt to their condition as path to salvation. As for slaves, adopting the imposed Christianity was a way to express their

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emotions and to link up with their past through songs, spirituals and sermons, dances and other manifestations which, although strange to the protestants masters was accepted since it let the slaves be busy out of plantation; as such thinking of revolt and escape would be lessened. A French movie from Fabrice Eboué and Thomas Ngijol, which described a little bit how Christianity was taught to black people in its sequence entitled: *L'égalité selon la Bible*, expresses how the white masters resorted to their own religion to tame the so-called savage black slaves. In this sequence of the movie, a priest preaches the bible to the slaves in these words: "Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot get it; you (black slaves) living in the darkness, with your dark skin color, be good servants, hardworking and submissive, and then, maybe, would you be like us, anointed with light, say Amen!" (Eboue and Ngijol, Case départ, séquence *L'égalité selon la Bible*)

White people then resorted to religion to encourage black slave to accept their condition as slaves, which is said to be God's prescription, so that they would be more submissive. But some black predicators who primarily were assisting their white colleagues, gained their autonomy and got easily accepted by the Baptists and the Methodists. With the help of some white abolitionists, they knew how to put some vibrations in their audience by revealing them a moral and a theology better adapted to black community. Sins were less mentioned in this context because what black slaves were looking for in Christianity was Hope, more than fear, Happiness more than retribution, to make it short, Heaven instead of hell. What they decided to consider about Christianity, was what could help them overcome their life conditions. These black pastors strived to open the African descents' consciousness and allow them to dream for a better future out of slavery.

Conclusion

Claude Fohlen's *L'Histoire de l'Esclavage aux Etats-Unis* has exposed and depicted the whole institution of slavery from the colonies to the American states; the book the issue of religious implication in the education of slaves aiming at controlling slaves' movements, and preventing escape and revolt. Yet, the Catholicism imposed on the slaves has not prevented the Africans descents from introducing aspects of their home cultural, traditional and religious practices, which as a reverse of the medal, reinforced their consciousness about the unacceptability of slavery, and its rejection through escaping, revolt and claim of emancipation with the assistance of some white abolitionists. The present research work, based on critical reading, analysis and documentary investigation has mainly explored the implication of Christianity in the consolidation of the practice of slavery, and how religion as practiced by the slaves has been a tool for rejecting slavery.

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Cahiers Africains de Rhétorique(fr), African Rhetoric Notebooks(An) **Vol. 2, N°02, pp.126-136, décembre 2023**
ISSN : 2790 -6108, EISSN : 2790-6116

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