Josef Köstlbauer

Subjugation by Labelling

Analysing the Semantics of Subservience in a Fugitive Slave Case from Eighteenth-Century Germany[*]

Abstract: This contribution uses a set of documents dealing with the case of a fugitive slave named Samuel Johannes in Upper Lusatia in 1754 to demonstrate the merits of a historical semantics–inspired approach. Not only does the studied case present evidence of the extension of colonial slaveries into the Holy Roman Empire, it also provides a snapshot of the language of subservience spoken in mid-eighteenth-century Germany. By revealing a striking indifference towards defining and explaining categorisations of dependency, the sources analysed here defy simple juxtapositions like 'enslaved' versus 'free'. Labels like 'slave', 'serf', or 'Moor' were employed to enforce and legitimise authority and proprietorial claims over Samuel Johannes. But these labels had to be constantly translated into actual practices and filled with meaning, as they did not readily convert into established, closely circumscribed positions or categories of status.

Keywords: Moravian Church, slavery, German history, global history, eighteenth century

An extraordinary source on slavery in early modern Germany has been preserved in the Unity Archives of the Moravian Church *(Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine)* in Herrn-

hut (Upper Lusatia). It is a slim file, and the spidery letters on its yellowing cover aptly describe its contents: "Acta, concerning the escape of Johannes Samuel Felix [sic], a black Malabar, the search for him, and his retrieval from Barby as well as further consequences thereof. Ao 1754."[1]

Samuel Johannes (sometimes Samuel Johannes Felix, c. 1730–1763), the eponymous "black Malabar", had been brought to Germany as an enslaved child in 1742 by Christian Dober, a former ship surgeon in the employ of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) who intended to join the Moravian Church.[2] Dober allegedly gave the boy as a present to Countess Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf (1700–1756), wife of Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, founder of the Moravian Church or Renewed Unitas Fratrum. Raised in the institutions of the Moravian Church, Samuel Johannes decided to leave as a young man and departed secretly from the Moravian settlement of Herrnhut in Upper Lusatia. The consequences of this action are detailed in the file in the Unity Archives.

So far, the case of Samuel Johannes has received attention from only two scholars despite being remarkable in several regards.[3] First of all, it presents obvious evidence of the existence and persistence of slavery in the Holy Roman Empire during the mid-eighteenth century.[4] Enslaved individuals brought into principalities of the Holy Roman Empire in the eighteenth century could be, and were, claimed as slaves by contemporary Germans. More specifically, it shows that even members of the Moravian Church in Germany did not hesitate to invoke slavery to assert authority over individuals. In addition, Samuel Johannes' story is one of the very few runaway slave cases in early modern Germany that we know of, and it is also by far the best documented of them.

The question of the legal and social status of enslaved people brought into German territories between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries has long vexed historians. They were not visible as slaves, as there was no specific social place or eco-

---

1   Unity Archives (UA), R.6.a.A.74.4. All translations from the original German versions are by the author. The archives were established in Zeist in 1764 and moved to Herrnhut in 1820.
2   Dutch National Archives, 1.04.02 Dutch East India Company (VOC), 6035, fol. 31, Christiaan Tober.
3   Paul Peucker, Aus allen Nationen. Nichteuropäer in den deutschen Brüdergemeinden des 18. Jahrhunderts, in: Unitas Fratrum 59/60 (2007), 1–35, 21–23; Heike Raphael-Hernandez, The Right to Freedom. Eighteenth-Century Slave Resistance and Early Moravian Missions in the Danish West Indies and Dutch Suriname, in: Atlantic Studies 14/4 (2017): German Entanglements in Transatlantic Slavery, 457–475, 463. For a biographical sketch, see Peucker, Aus allen Nationen, 2007, 33f.
4   I have already used this case as evidence of slavery practices in the Holy Roman Empire in Josef Köstlbauer, "I Have No Shortage of Moors". Mission, Representation, and the Elusive Semantics of Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Moravian Sources, in: Rebekka von Mallinckrodt/Josef Köstlbauer/Sarah Lentz (eds.), Beyond Exceptionalism. Traces of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Germany, 1650–1850, Berlin/Boston 2021; Jon Sensbach, Rebecca's Revival. Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World, Cambridge, MA 2006.

nomic role for slaves. Also, the laws and ordinances of German principalities contained no explicit references to slaves brought from overseas colonies or West Africa. In pioneering studies concerning Africans in early modern Germany, this sometimes led to the misunderstanding that there were no slaves in the empire or that enslavement was meaningless. Nevertheless, the ambiguities characterising the lives of many so-called "Moors" – whether enslaved or not – have generally been recognised.[5] Vera Lind has succinctly characterised the simultaneously prominent and liminal position of Africans in early modern Germany as "a paradox of privileged dependency".[6] Furthermore, recent scholarship has not only established the many ties binding early modern German territories to the slave trading networks of the Atlantic World and beyond;[7] it has also become evident that enslaved persons could be encountered within German principalities, and that their enslavement was accepted in everyday practice as well as in legal thought.[8]

---

5   Peter Martin recognised the persistence of slavery in the empire and spoke of a legal "no man's land between free and unfree": Peter Martin, Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren. Afrikaner in Geschichte und Bewußtsein der Deutschen, Hamburg 1993. Uta Sadji declared black servants to have been legally free but living like slaves (though in many cases it might be more accurate to put it the other way around). See Uta Sadji, Mohrendiener im deutschen Drama des 18. Jahrhunderts, in: Gotthardt Frühsorge/Rainer Gruenter/Beatrix Wolff Metternich (eds.), Gesinde im 18. Jahrhundert, Hamburg 1995, 357–367. Monika Firla has described the lives of several so-called "Court Moors" in great detail, but she concluded from the lack of legal provisions for slavery that it ultimately did not exist in the Holy Roman Empire (with some exceptions). See for example Monika Firla, AfrikanerInnen und ihre Nachkommen im deutschsprachigen Raum vor der Zeit der Kongokonferenz und ihre Folgen. Bemerkungen zur Forschungsproblematik, in: Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst/Reinhard Klein-Arendt/Stefanie Michels (eds.), AfrikanerInnen in Deutschland und schwarze Deutsche – Geschichte und Gegenwart, Münster 2004, 9–24, 13. For assessments of the liminal situation of the so-called "Moors", see Vera Lind, Privileged Dependency on the Edge of the Atlantic World. Africans and Germans in the Eighteenth Century, in: Byron R. Wells/Philip Stewart (eds.), Interpreting Colonialism, Oxford 2004, 369–391; Mark Häberlein, "Mohren", ständische Gesellschaft und atlantische Welt: Minderheiten und Kulturkontakte in der Frühen Neuzeit, in: Claudia Schnurmann/Hartmut Lehmann (eds.), Atlantic Understandings. Essays on European and American History in Honor of Hermann Wellenreuther, Münster 2006, 77–102; Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov, Schwarze Europäer im Alten Reich: Handel, Migration, Hof, Göttingen 2013.
6   Lind, Privileged Dependency, 2004, 382.
7   See for example Klaus Weber, Deutschland, der atlantische Sklavenhandel und die Plantagenwirtschaft der Neuen Welt (15. bis 19. Jahrhundert), in: Journal of Modern European History 7/1 (2009), 37–67; Felix Brahm/Eve Rosenhaft (eds.), Slavery Hinterland. Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850, Woodbridge 2016; Michael Zeuske, Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei. Eine Globalgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, vol. 2, 2nd rev. ed., Berlin/Boston 2019, 850–870; Jutta Wimmler/Klaus Weber (eds.), Globalized Peripheries. Central Europe and the Atlantic World, 1680–1860, Woodbridge 2020.
8   See the chapters in von Mallinckrodt/Köstlbauer/Lentz (eds.), Beyond Exceptionalism, 2021; Rebekka von Mallinckrodt has published extensively on the legal perceptions of slavery in the Holy Roman Empire. Most recently: Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Die lichtabgewandte Seite der Freiheit. Sklaverei im frühneuzeitlichen Sachsen, in: Nicole J. Saam/Heiner Bielefeldt (eds.), Die Idee der Freiheit und ihre Semantiken. Zum Spannungsverhältnis von Freiheit und Sicherheit, Bielefeld 2023, 109–131.

But there is more to be gleaned from the sources pertaining to Samuel Johannes' escape: Not only can we chart the progression of a limited and interconnected set of events in a reasonably comprehensive fashion, but these old pages also provide a snapshot of the language of dependency and subservience spoken at this specific place and moment in time where early modern estate-based society and colonial slavery unexpectedly intersected in Upper Lusatia. Labels like 'slave', 'serf', and 'Moor' were employed to enforce and legitimise authority and proprietorial claims over an individual. We thus witness the convergence of colonial categories with local and regional terminologies of social difference and authority, all employed to describe situations of strong asymmetrical dependency.[9] The number of labels employed reveals a striking indifference towards assigning firm legal categories to individuals. Rather, to enforce and legitimise authority and proprietorial claims, labels like 'slave', 'serf', or 'Moor' were used ad hoc and in conjunction with explanations of how interpersonal relations of dependency had been established. 'Slave' therefore appears as a label whose significance and consequence were defined by the immediate context and circumstances. It had to be translated into actual practices and filled with meaning. By providing unique insights into how eighteenth-century Germans understood slavery and its meaning and consequences, this semantic analysis can thus hopefully contribute to overcoming the simple juxtaposition of 'enslaved' versus 'free'.

The historical semantics approach pursued in this article can be characterised as "micro-semantic":[10] The terminology of authority, subservience, and coercion in a limited source corpus is deconstructed and subsequently re-contextualised. The compact nature of the corpus is offset by the fortuitous circumstance that it contains the terminologies and rhetorical strategies of those claiming authority and rights of possession over a human being in condensed form. As such, the corpus very much conforms to the requirements for semantic studies formulated by Ludolf Kuchenbuch, who called for the analysis of source documents representing "verbose crime scenes" or "language nests" densely packed with semantic "egg clutches".[11] My own approach is also inspired by microhistory. Closely circumscribed historical situations offer rich opportunities to flush out the inconsistencies, the minute lacunae,

---

9   The concept of strong asymmetrical dependencies was proposed at the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies. See Julia Winnebeck/Ove Sutter/Adrian Hermann/Christop Antweiler/Stephan Conermann, The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency, in: Journal of Global Slavery 8/1 (2023), 1–59.
10   See Ludolf Kuchenbuch's vignette "Serfdom in Aichstetten (late 10th c.). A micro-semantic analysis of emic labelling practices" in the introductory vade mecum of this OeZG issue, 25–32.
11   Ludolf Kuchenbuch, Dienen als Werken. Eine arbeitssemantische Untersuchung der Regel Benedikts, in: Willibald Steinmetz (ed.), Semantiken von Arbeit. Diachrone und vergleichende Perspektiven, Göttingen 2016, 63–91, 63.

Table 1: Documents in "Acta, concerning the escape of Johannes Samuel Felix […]". Unity Archives (UA), R.6.a.A.74.4. Numbered according to the order in which the documents are bound together in the original source file.

Document no.	Description	Place of origin	Date
1	Printed passport form, issued for Jacob Haußmann and Martin Brodersen. Signed by Paul Schneider, *Actuarius,* i.e. scribe, of the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court	Berthelsdorf	26 March 1754
2	Letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund at Unwürde. Unsigned copy with *pro nota* by Paul Schneider	Herrnhut	27 March 1754
3	Letter of Requisition, signed by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf. Copy with pro nota by Paul Schneider	Herrnhut	
4	Report by Johann Daniel Jacobi, court administrator at Unwürde	Unwürde	
5	Letter by Karl Gotthelf von Hund to Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf	Unwürde	
6	Report by Paul Schneider about search for Samuel Johannes	Herrnhut	29 March 1754
7	Letter by Paul Schneider to Johann Friedrich Köber, financial director at Herrnhut	Herrnhut	30 March 1754
8	Letter by Johann Leonhard Weinel, Moravian secretary at Barby, to Gottfried Clemens in Herrnhut	Barby	28 April 1754
9	Letter by Daniel Michln to Samuel Johannes in Gebelzig	Unwürde	28 March 1754
10	Ordinance by Siegmund August von Gersdorf to Johann Leonhard Weinel in Barby. Copy with a *pro nota* by Paul Schneider	Herrnhut	4 May 1754
11	Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to the Royal Superintendent and the Bailiff of Barby. Concept with a *pro nota* by Paul Schneider	Herrnhut	11 May 1754
12	Passport for Judge Neumann and Samuel Johannes issued by Christian Gottfried Weßel, Bailiff at Barby	Barby	18 May 1754
13	Memorandum by Paul Schneider about the transportation of Samuel Johannes to Herrnhut	Herrnhut	25 May 1754
14	Copy of Document 9	Herrnhut	
15	Copy of passport issued to Samuel Johannes in Gebelzig on March 29, 1754. With confirmation of his passage through Berlin on April 17, 1754, and a *pro nota* by Paul Schneider	Herrnhut	

Source: author's own work

the dissonances. In a way, the story of Samuel Johannes fits the notion of the "exceptional normal" developed by Edoardo Grendi and later by Giovanni Levi: It provides

starting points for questioning established generalisations, or at least for establishing new perspectives onto them – in this case, regarding the forms, perceptions, and meanings of slavery in eighteenth-century Germany.[12]

To facilitate the analysis, so-called emic labels were identified (see figure 1 and table 2) and used to construe Samuel Johannes' position from the points of view of Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf and the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court, of Chamberlain Karl Gotthelf von Hund and his officials, and of the escaped young man himself. Essentially, these labels all invoked (or rejected) contemporary categories of dependency or subservience in one way or another, providing anchor points for a narrative of authority rooted in the rightful possession of human beings.

1. Case summary

Like every story, that of Samuel Johannes has many beginnings – some on faraway shores like Tuticorin (today: Thoothukudi) on the Gulf of Mannar or Galle in Ceylon, others in the Holy Roman Empire. But let us follow the events as they unfold in the file from the Unity archives and begin in Herrnhut on the morning of Tuesday, 26 March 1754, a young man in his mid-20s quietly slipped out of town and struck out north on the road to the town of Löbau. Known by the name of Samuel Johannes, he had arrived in Herrnhut only two weeks earlier from the Moravian seminary in Barby on the River Elbe.

Herrnhut was the first settlement of the Moravian Church. Its first houses had been built in 1722 by persecuted Protestant exiles from Moravia on Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf's estate of Berthelsdorf in Upper Lusatia. The peculiar community that developed there blended the ideals of German pietism with a radical Philadelphian understanding of Christianity which envisioned the Moravians as a unity of members of different existing denominations.[13] The initially minuscule group grew rapidly, sprouting congregational settlements all over Protestant Europe – and its fervent missionary zeal soon turned the Moravian Church into a global community. By 1770, settlements and missionary outposts had been established throughout the Caribbean, in North America, Greenland, South Africa, Southern India, and in the lower Volga region. Incidentally, this missionary work – which began in the Danish

---

12 Edoardo Grendi, Micro-analisi e storia sociale, in: Quaderni storici 35 (1977), 506–520; Giovanni Levi, On Microhistory, in: Peter Burke (ed.), New Perspectives on Historical Writing, University Park, PA 1992, 93–113. For a historiographical assessment of both, see Francesca Trivellato, Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory, in: French Politics, Culture & Society 33/1 (2015), 122–134.
13 Paul Peucker, Herrnhut. The Formation of a Moravian Community 1722–1732, University Park, PA 2022.

colony of St. Thomas in the West Indies – brought the Moravians into intimate contact with colonial slavery. Starting out as missionaries amongst the enslaved plantation workers on St. Thomas, the Moravians soon became slave owners themselves. This resulted in an unusual situation in which missionary congregations were made up of enslaved individuals, some of them the legal property of their European-born brothers and sisters.[14] In the 1740s, a number of enslaved and formerly enslaved persons, mostly from the West-Indies, also lived in Moravian settlements in Germany – especially in Marienborn and Herrnhaag, where Samuel Johannes grew up.[15]

On orders of Countess Zinzendorf, Samuel Johannes had been placed as a valet in the house of Baron Johann Friedrich von Schell, a prominent member of the Moravian Church.[16] Unhappy with his situation there, Samuel Johannes decided to seek his fortune elsewhere. As soon as his departure had been noticed, parties were sent out to search for him. Two messengers caught up with him at the Unwürde estate belonging to Chamberlain Karl Gotthelf von Hund (1722–1776), the scion of a local noble family as well as a Catholic convert and prominent Freemason.[17] Samuel Johannes rejected their request that he return, and Hund refused to have him detained. Upon receiving this news, the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court immediately resolved to organise the apprehension of Samuel Johannes. But why did the patrimonial court respond rather than the Moravians in Herrnhut, where Samuel Johannes had lived? In Upper Lusatia, matters of lower jurisdiction were a seigneurial prerogative exercised through patrimonial courts staffed by trained jurists. Since the township of Herrnhut was situated on the estate of Berthelsdorf owned by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf, the Berthelsdorf court was responsible for handling the administrative and legal side of retrieving the escapee Samuel Johannes.[18]

---

14 On the global Moravian community, see Gisela Mettele, Weltbürgertum oder Gottesreich. Die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine als globale Gemeinschaft 1727–1857, Göttingen 2009. On Moravians and slavery, see Sensbach, Rebecca's Revival, 2006; Jan Hüsgen, Mission und Sklaverei. Die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine und die Sklavenemanzipation in Britisch- und Dänisch-Westindien, Stuttgart 2016; Köstlbauer, "I Have No Shortage of Moors", 2021.

15 For more details on these individuals, see Peucker, Aus allen Nationen, 2007; Köstlbauer, "I Have No Shortage of Moors", 2021. 19 probably enslaved persons have been identified so far.

16 Johann Friedrich von Schell (1694–1767) had built a lasting friendship with Zinzendorf while they were students in Halle. A jurist, he served for many years in a senior administrative position in Hesse-Homburg before settling in the congregation town of Herrnhaag and later in Herrnhut. His proximity to Zinzendorf, his status as a noble, and his functions as community judge *(Gemeinrichter)* and head of the Unity's Guardian Collegium *(Vormünder Collegium)* evidently placed him within the top tier of the Herrnhut society. This explains why his household included a valet. There was no obvious previous connection between the two men, though Schell may have known Samuel Johannes from his stay in Herrnhaag in 1744/45. UA, R.22.1.c.1, Johann Friedrich Schell, 7 March 1767.

17 For a short biography, see Friedrich Bülau, Geheime Geschichten und räthselhafte Menschen. Sammlung verborgener oder vergessener Merkwürdigkeiten, Leipzig 1850, 356–365.

18 When Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf was ordered into temporary exile by the Saxon government in 1733, his wife took over his estates including Berthelsdorf. Cf. Dietrich Meyer, Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine 1700–2000, Göttingen 2000, 37f.

On the very next day, the Berthelsdorf judge Johann Gottlob Neumann rode to Unwürde to present a writ of requisition and a letter by the countess, which set out her claim in great detail and kindly requested Hund's assistance (Document 2). This is a key document for our study, as it established the legal reasoning of the countess' party pertaining to the proceedings that would follow and defined Samuel Johannes as a slave, ward, and generally indebted dependent. But when Neumann arrived, Samuel Johannes had already been safely hidden in nearby Gebelzig, another of Hund's estates. As search parties returned to Herrnhut empty-handed, suspicion among the Moravians grew that they had been misled (Document 6). The Berthelsdorf court scribe Schneider resignedly concluded that the only measure left to be taken would be to place a search notice in the newspapers (Document 7).[19]

Whether or not Karl Gotthelf von Hund recognised the legitimacy of Countess Zinzendorf's claim to Samuel Johannes as her slave is impossible to ascertain. But the protection he afforded Samuel Johannes shows that he not only had a negative perception of the young man's enslavement but was in fact willing to actively aid him: Besides hiding the refugee, he openly lied in his official reply to Countess Zinzendorf by stating that Samuel Johannes had left for Dresden via Leipzig to seek employment at the elector's court (Document 5). The sources provide no explanation concerning Hund's motivations, but his Masonic background may have played a role. While contemporary Freemasonry was hardly abolitionist by default, its preoccupation with virtue, merit, and the equality of men could lead to such views. As an avowed Catholic, Hund may also have been acting out of anti-Moravian sentiment.

This also relates to the question why Samuel Johannes turned up at Unwürde in the first place. Having lived the past thirteen years in the Moravian Church, he had no outside network that could have supported him. It therefore made sense to look for someone who might offer a modicum of help and protection. Hund and his Masonic leanings were well known in Herrnhut, and as Baron von Schell's valet, Samuel Johannes was perfectly placed to hear gossip about neighbouring nobles. It is also possible that Hund had visited Herrnhut, as many inquisitive aristocrats did, and that Samuel Johannes had become acquainted with him on such an occasion.

In Gebelzig, Samuel Johannes received a letter (Document 9) from Unwürde by a certain Daniel Michln relating Hund's suggestion to go to Berlin and find a lawyer. Thanks to a copy of a passport issued to Samuel Johannes in Gebelzig (Document 15), we know that he heeded this advice and travelled to Berlin. However, a private correspondence between the secretary of the Barby seminary, Johann Leonhard Weinel, and Gottfried Clemens in Herrnhut tells us that Samuel Johannes unex-

---

19   No such notice has been identified in any of the regional papers thus far.

pectedly turned up in Barby at the end of April to surrender himself and was subsequently placed under house arrest (Document 8). We can only speculate about what motivated him to do so. Perhaps he simply decided to seek refuge at his erstwhile home after finding no way to support himself in Berlin without funds and friends. He was eventually transported back to Herrnhut by Judge Neumann, where he arrived on 25 May 1754.

2. Quantitative distribution of emic labels

The majority of documents in the file (except Documents 7, 8, 9, and 14) are of an official nature, produced by estate holders, officials of patrimonial courts, and administrators. These are also the most extensive documents and contain the most instances of emic labelling (table 2). All of the emic labels describe and categorise Samuel Johannes, with some appearing as substantives, others as attributes, and some in both forms. The most detailed and significant document is Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf's letter to Chamberlain Karl Gotthelf von Hund (Document 2). Written a day after Samuel Johannes' departure, most of the labels were used in it for the first time (see table 2) and the entire legal reasoning and argumentative strategy for the subsequent proceedings was established.

When ranking emic labels by frequency of use throughout the documents, the phenotypical classification "black" *(schwarz)* respectively "the Black" clearly heads the list, with the ethnic label "Malabar" coming ex aequo with "serf" *(Leibeigener)* (see figure 1). But when the labels "serf" *(Leibeigener)*, "runaway" *(entwichener)*, "subject" *(Untertan)*, "not sui iuris", "slave" *(Sclave)*, "servant" *(Knecht)*, "ward" *(Pflegebefohlener)* and "employed in service" *(in Diensten stehend)* are added up, there is a very pronounced majority of labels denoting subservience. Not only are there eight different such labels vs. only three denoting Samuel's foreignness ("Black", "Malabar", and "Moor"), but they are also used more often, in twenty-eight versus nineteen total instances. This can of course be explained in part by the type of communication: Labels of subservience were employed in official correspondence produced by the countess' party, where there was a need to substantiate an argument for her authority over Samuel Johannes (Documents 2, 3, 10, and 11; see table 2). On the other hand, Moravians communicating among each other referred to Samuel Johannes simply by his name (Documents 7 and 8).
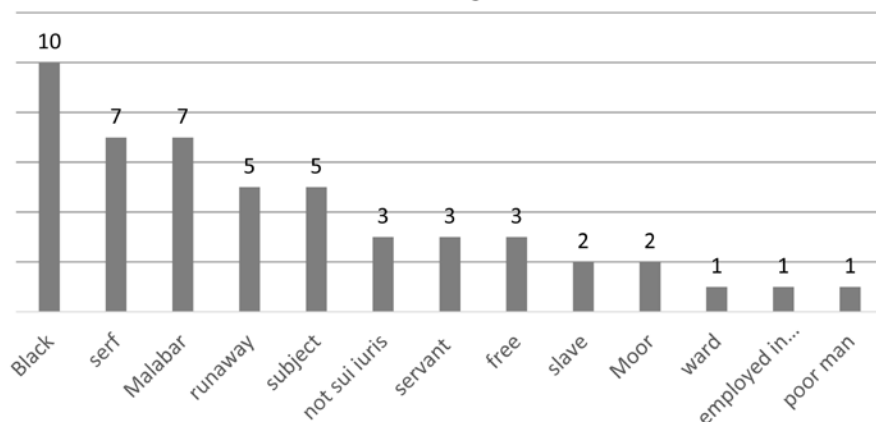
Emic labels describing Samuel Johannes

10

Black serf Malabar runaway subject not sui iuris servant free slave Moor ward employed in… poor man

(Bar chart values: Black 10, serf 7, Malabar 7, runaway 5, subject 5, not sui iuris 3, servant 3, free 3, slave 2, Moor 2, ward 1, employed in… 1, poor man 1)

Figure 1: Frequency of emic labels applied to Samuel Johannes in Documents 2 to 13. Source: author's own work

Table 2: Emic labels per document. Document 14 is a copy of Document 9 and therefore not taken into consideration.

	Black	serf	Mala-bar	run-away	sub-ject	not sui iuris	serv-ant	free	slave	Moor	ward	empl. in ser-vice	poor man
Doc. 1	1		1										
Doc. 2	1	2	1	1	1	1			2		1		1
Doc. 3	1		1	1	1							1	
Doc. 4	2							1		1			
Doc. 5	1		1		1			2					
Doc. 6	2			1									
Doc. 7													
Doc. 8													
Doc. 9													
Doc. 10	1	2			1	1	1						
Doc. 11		3	2		1	1	1						
Doc. 12				1			2						
Doc. 13	1		1										
Doc. 14													
Doc. 15										1			
Total	10	7	7	5	5	3	3	3	2	2	1	1	1

Source: author's own work

3. Slave and serf: the challenges of polysemy

Only twice is Samuel Johannes labelled a "slave" *(Sclave)*, and both instances are to be found in the letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund (Document 2). In both cases, the term is used in connection with Samuel Johannes' origins. The letter begins by explaining in great detail how he came into the "possession" of the countess, thus establishing the root of her claim of proprietorial rights:

> "[I] see myself compelled to hereby announce how a young black Malabar and born slave named Samuel Johannes, who anno 1740 [actually 1742] by a former naval surgeon named Christian Dober, whose relatives are inhabitants of this place [Herrnhut], was brought to Germany from his fatherland; right after his transport was gifted to me and before his [Dober's] death most urgently commended to me to take care of him and [be] at my free disposal."[20]

There is quite a bit of subtext in this opening paragraph: The countess alleged that she was "compelled" to report on how the "black Malabar" came into her possession. This referred to the Unwürde court's refusal to detain Samuel Johannes without proof of wrongdoing. In the very first sentence, Samuel Johannes is described as a "born slave" who had been "gifted" to the countess. And as if this was not enough, the letter goes on to tell how Dober had once more entrusted Samuel Johannes to the countess's care and "free disposal" prior to his death – the child had thus essentially been put under her authority twice. This account is partly corroborated by other sources. Among the documents left behind by Christian Dober after his death, which are preserved in the Unity Archives in Herrnhut, is a notary document from the port of Tuticorin on India's Coromandel Coast confirming his acquisition of a male child named Maden from Laurentina Dominicus, who incidentally was the widow of a fellow VOC ship surgeon.[21] This Maden was the same as the "little Malabar Felix" whom David Nitschmann, a Moravian missionary, encountered in Dober's service in Galle on Ceylon in 1740. Before Nitschmann left Galle, Dober promised him the boy "as a present", and Nitschman would proceed to bring Felix along when he returned to Europe.[22] Arriving in the Netherlands on 20 July 1742, he turned

---

20 UA, R.6.a.A.74.4, Acta concerning the escape of Johannes Samuel Felix. Letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund at Unwürde (copy), Herrnhut, 27 March 1754.

21 UA, R.21.A.28.47, notary document, Tuticorin, 1 June 1739; I am grateful to Julia Holzmann for her help in translating this document. See also Iris Bruijn, Ship's Surgeons of the Dutch East India Company. Commerce and the Progress of Medicine in the Eighteenth Century, Leiden 2009, 225.

22 UA, R.15.S.2, diary of David Nitschmann's (the Syndikus) and August Christian Friedrich Eller's journey to Ceylon, vol. 2, 17 August 1740 to 24 November 1741. What is puzzling here is that Dober allegedly said he would try to buy the child for a "fair price", and in a later letter claimed that he

the child over to the Moravians, who sent him to their children's home in Marienborn. There, Samuel Johannes eventually received baptism and was accepted into the congregation as a full-fledged member. In October 1750 he was sent to the newly established seminary in Barby, from where he was ordered to Herrnhut in March 1754. Meanwhile, Dober had settled in Herrnhut and later in Marienborn, where he passed away in November 1743.[23] No documentary evidence exists of Christian Dober "gifting" Samuel Johannes to Countess Zinzendorf; but this is not necessarily surprising, however, as informal transfers of proprietorial rights were often not documented. Significantly, Dober kept the notary deed from Tuticorin affirming his purchase of the child.

The countess' claim thus rested on the fact that Samuel Johannes had been brought to Germany as a slave and turned over to her as such. It is important to note that this was not an outlandish notion: Even though contemporary Germans did not regard slavery as a homegrown institution, they readily accepted it – even within German principalities. As pointed out above, a number of enslaved persons were brought into German congregations from Moravian mission areas. There are numerous other examples from early modern Germany between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries as well.[24] Entering the Holy Roman Empire certainly did not terminate the status of enslavement: Early modern German principalities knew no free-soil principle as it was presumed to exist in France, the Netherlands, and England.[25]

---

owed 600 guilders to the VOC for expenses incurred for the child. This appears strange if Dober had already bought the child in Tuticorin. See UA, R.21.A.28.4, Christian Dober to David Nitschmann, 28 November 1742. The identity of Maden/Felix is asserted in a marginal note by David Nitschmann in the German translation of the Dutch notary document. See Peucker, Aus allen Nationen, 2007, 34.

23 UA, R.8.33.b.3, diary of the Wetterau congregation, 1742; UA, R.21.A.28.49, relation by Br. Reling on Dober's death; UA, R.22.1.a.71, Christian Dober, 2 November 1743.

24 For a recent overview of the topic, see Josef Köstlbauer, Slavery in the Holy Roman Empire, in: Damian A. Pargas/Juliane Schiel (eds.), The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery throughout History, London 2023, 259–277.

25 Earlier scholarship has sometimes assumed the opposite to be true. See for example Andreas Becker, Preußens schwarze Untertanen. Afrikanerinnen und Afrikaner zwischen Kleve und Königsberg vom 17. bis ins frühe 19. Jahrhundert, in: Forschungen zur Brandenburgischen und Preußischen Geschichte 22/1 (2012), 1–32, 13–15. The various iterations of the free-soil principle were less straightforward that sometimes assumed. Sue Peabody has shown that the laws in France became ever more restrictive and protective of the rights of enslavers over the course of the eighteenth century. At the same time, the government increasingly restricted the number of slaves brought to France. Only in 1791 was a free-soil principle legislated. In the Netherlands, there was no 'slave law' until 1776, and the legal situation of enslaved individuals brought into Dutch territory remained ambiguous. In a detailed study, Julia Holzmann has shown that various options existed to keep them enslaved. The law (Plakaat) of 1776 regulated the transport of enslaved individuals to the Netherlands but gave slave owners considerable leeway in keeping their enslaved. The situation in Britain was similarly characterised by ambiguity. Sources like the runaway notices and newspaper advertisements from England and Scotland testify to the existence of slavery and slave trade within Bri-

The legal scholarship of the time supported this as well: In a widely-read Roman law commentary of the period, for instance, jurist Ludwig Julius Friedrich Höpfner explained that "true slaves" like "Negro slaves" or "captured Turks" should be "treated [as servi] according to Roman law". Gustav Hugo, another well-known legal scholar, even argued for a straightforward acknowledgment of the possession of slaves based on colonial laws.[26] Conversion and baptism likewise provided no ready exit from enslavement: The Moravians owned numerous slaves in the West Indies and North America, many of them baptised and members of the mission congregations. From the beginning, Moravians were quite clear regarding their firm belief that baptism did not necessitate manumission.[27] This was a prevalent opinion: Even eighteenth-century German jurists like Höpfner or Christian Thomasius explicitly denied any link between the baptism of slaves and their manumission.[28] Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf was therefore no exception in assuming that enslavement persisted when a slave was brought to Germany from a colonial slaving society.

The second instance of the term "slave" in the countess' letter to Hund is linked to a moral and financial argument put forth to reinforce her claims of authority:

> "Now, I have properly accepted that wild slave in his 8th or 9th year, had him educated and instructed in the Christian religion, also had him trained as a tailor by seigniorial servants, furthermore, helped him to holy baptism and generally, throughout 13 years here and at other places, did everything and had everything provided that can be expected from lords, parents, and guardians for a serf and ward."[29]

---

tain. For England, the famous Somerset Case and the decision by Lord Mansfield certainly had far-reaching consequences and generated considerable international attention. Nevertheless, its practical consequences were limited, and it hardly ended slavery in England. See Sue Peabody, There Are No Slaves in France. The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime, New York 1996; Julia Holzmann, Geschichte der Sklaverei in der niederländischen Republik. Recht, Rassismus und die Handlungsmacht Schwarzer Menschen und People of Color 1680–1863, Bielefeld 2022; Simon P. Newman, Freedom-Seeking Slaves in England and Scotland, 1700–1780, in: The English Historical Review 134/570 (2019), 1136–1168; Trevor Burnard, Jamaica in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia 2020, 151–156.

26 On Höpfner and Hugo, see Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Slavery and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Germany, in: von Mallinckrodt/Köstlbauer/Lentz (eds.), Beyond Exceptionalism, 2021, 139–148. Further examples can be found in von Mallinckrodt, Die lichtabgewandte Seite, 2023, 241–244.

27 Katharine Gerbner, Christian Slavery. Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World, Philadelphia 2018, 159f.

28 Christian Thomasius/Henning Adolph Koch, De Ratione Status Dissertationem XV. & XVI. De votorum pluralitate de Arbitrio imperatoris […] cum adjuncta Quaestione AnMancipia Turcica per Baptismum manumittantur, Halle 1693, § III.

29 UA, R.6.a.A.74.4, Acta concerning the escape of Johannes Samuel Felix. Letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund at Unwürde (copy), Herrnhut, 27 March 1754.

By labelling Samuel Johannes as her "ward," another level of authority and dependency was introduced to the countess' narrative: She made sure to emphasise how diligently she had fulfilled her obligations as a Christian guardian to ensure Samuel Johannes received a proper religious education and was baptised. As a ward, the young man owed the obedience and gratitude of a minor to the head of the *familia*. The term "ward" *(Pflegebefohlener)* is used only this one time, but the argument itself is repeated as a justification in the ordinance issued by Sigmund August von Gersdorf (Document 10) and in the letter from Countess Zinzendorf to the authorities in Barby (Document 11). Describing Samuel Johannes as a "wild" slave *(wilden Sclaven)* underscored what contemporaries considered 'heathen' or 'barbarian' origins – and hence the gratitude owed to the countess for facilitating his conversion.

As if this was not enough, Samuel Johannes was also cast as owing a pecuniary debt: "Upkeep and food for this poor human being has cost me far more than 1000 rth [Reichsthaler], and the services he gave in return account for nothing."[30] One thousand *Reichsthaler* was a substantial sum and likely a significant exaggeration, even though funds from the countess' estates may have been used for the young man's upkeep. The morality of debt was thus brought into play twice, placing Samuel Johannes not only in the position of a dependent minor owing a debt of gratitude but also in that of a defaulting financial debtor.

These descriptions culminated in an unambiguous declaration of proprietorial authority. "Without doubt", Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf claimed, "I am the only one besides God who can claim possession and make use of this human being, also in the entire world there is nobody to be found who has any reasonable claim to him but me." The letter goes on to describe Samuel Johannes as someone who had no authority over himself:

> "He himself is not sui iuris and cannot decide to do as he likes since he is a trueborn serf, and as such came to me[,] also he owes me the expenses for his education and maintenance and therefore must remain in subjection to me until he has been set free and given a valid passport and letter of manumission by me as his sole lordship, also [until] that which he cost me has been remitted."[31]

Considering the centrality of Samuel Johannes' slave status in this narrative, it may seem surprising that the label "slave" was employed only twice. Even more astonishing may be the presence of the term "serf" *(Leibeigener)* in the above passage. In fact, it was used seven times throughout the entire corpus – considerably more often

---

30   Ibid.
31   Ibid.

than "slave". The polysemic nature of this term presents a challenge: It is commonly understood to refer to a range of strongly asymmetric feudal or tenurial labour relations characterised by a peasant population bound to the land. But in the complex societal and legal realities of early modern Germany, serfdom encompassed institutions and practices that differed significantly and were known by diverse, quite specific names.[32] For example, in Upper Lusatia (and parts of the electorate of Saxony), peasants bound to the land were so-called *Erbuntertanen*, which roughly translates as "hereditary subjects".[33] Such *Erbuntertanen* also toiled on the Berthelsdorf estate. They owed labour services to the lord of the manor in exchange for the land they received to support themselves, and their mobility was restricted. But they were not considered to be legal property, they could inherit, bequeath, and testify at court. During the eighteenth-century, labour service obligations in Upper Lusatia could entail up to six days per week. But there were variations in practices, with Berthelsdorf being a case in point; there, the obligations were limited by accords from 1661 and 1663, and some labour duties had been turned into money rents.[34] Accordingly, the various ordinances and directives issued for the margraviate of Upper Lusatia (and other legal texts) consistently used the technical term *Erbuntertanen*.[35] Indeed, the juridical literature of the day clearly distinguished between serfs like the *Erbuntertanen* and slaves, and the territorial ordinance of Upper Lusatia from 1652 pointed out that the *Erbuntertanen* were not slaves.[36] But to complicate matters, contemporary Germans colloquially used 'serf' *(Leibeigener)* synonymously with 'slave', making it an umbrella term with a range of meaning far exceeding the sphere of feudal labour organisation. As such,

---

32 Peter Blickle, Von der Leibeigenschaft zu den Menschenrechten. Eine Geschichte der Freiheit in Deutschland, München 2003; Markus Cerman, Villagers and Lords in Eastern Europe, 1300–1800, Houndmills/Basingstoke/Hampshire 2012. The many variations of serfdom were also recognized by contemporaries. See for example the entry "Leibeigene, Halseigene, Eigenbehörige", in: Johann Heinrich Zedler's grosses vollständiges Universal Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste, vol. 16, Halle/Leipzig 1737, col. 1506–1510.

33 *Erbuntertänigkeit* in Upper Lusatia was governed by a series of ordinances *(Untertanenordnungen)* enacted in 1651, 1726, 1764, 1767, 1775, and 1779. It was abolished in the Prussian parts of Upper Lusatia in 1819, and in the parts under Saxon rule in 1832. Hermann Knothe, Die Stellung der Gutsunterthanen in der Oberlausitz zu ihren Gutsherrschaften von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Ablösung der Zinsen und Dienste, in: Neues lausitzisches Magazin 61 (1885), 159–308. See also József Leszczyński, Der Klassenkampf der Oberlausitzer Bauern in den Jahren 1635–1720, Bautzen 1964.

34 Gottlieb Korscheit, Geschichte von Berthelsdorf, Berthelsdorf 1852, 77.

35 See Collection derer den Statum des Marggrafthums Ober-Lausitz in Justiz- Polizey- Lehns- und […] andern die Landes-Verfassung betreffenden Sachen […], 2 vols., Budissin, 1770–1771.

36 Johann Christian Lünig, Codex Augusteus oder neuvermehrtes Corpus juris Saxonici: worinnen die in dem Churfürstenthum Sachsen und darzu gehörigen Landen, auch denen Marggrafthümern Ober- und Nieder-Lausitz, Publicirte und ergangene Constitutiones, Decisiones, Mandata und Verordnungen enthalten, nebst einem Elencho, dienlichen Summarien und vollkommenen Registern, vol. 3., Leipzig 1724, col. 451. A Confirmation regarding Upper Lusatian *Erbuntertanen* issued the same year said they were not like Roman *servi*: ibid., col. 211–212. For more examples, see von Mallinckrodt, Die lichtabgewandte Seite, 2023, 239f.

it could be used to designate all sorts of situations of strong asymmetrical dependency (the literal meaning of the German term *leibeigen* is "belonging to somebody else") that implied extensive, proprietorial control over individuals' bodies, labour, and mobility – including forms of feudal tenancy as well as slavery. For example, the eighteenth-century encyclopaedia published by Johann Heinrich Zedler contains an entry on "Leibeigene, Halshörige, Eigenbehörige" as well as an entry on "Sclave, Leibeigener, Knecht".[37] The former discusses the various forms of serfdom in Germany. The latter uses the terms "Sclave" and "Leibeigener" synonymously and mostly deals with Christians enslaved by North African corsairs.

Therefore, the intended meaning could only be inferred from the context in which the term was used. This polysemy presented no problem for contemporaries, who were well inured to the existence of diverse and highly localised forms of dependency and therefore habituated to handling the term's context sensitivity. When Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf spoke of the "Leibeigenschaft" at Berthelsdorf he referred to the obligations that bound the subjects living there. When he betokened slaves on St. Thomas as "serfs" he was clearly aware that their life was governed by a different set of dependencies. Likewise, Moravian missionaries in the West Indies who occasionally labelled slaves as serfs were well acquainted with the conditions of serfdom at Berthelsdorf or elsewhere in Germany and would hardly confuse them with slavery in the West Indies. [38]

The documents pertaining to Samuel Johannes' escape can only be interpreted correctly when "serf" is read as "slave". In the countess' letter, the young man is called not only a serf but a "true born serf" *(würklich leibeigen gebohrener)*. Since he had certainly not been born to Berthelsdorf subjects, this could only refer to his slave status. Indeed, the expression appears as a parallel phrasing to "born slave" *(gebohrener sclave)* in the same document. Similarly, in Documents 10 and 11, Samuel Johannes is characterised as a serf *(Leibeigener)* who had been bought in East India *(in Ostindien erkauffet)* by his erstwhile master. Considering this synonymity of "slave" and "serf" when surveying the documents, we end up with nine instances of Samuel Johannes being referred to as being enslaved.

Document 11 provides an especially pertinent example, as it touches upon the problem of translating the countess' proprietorial authority into legal action. With

---

37 Zedler, Universal Lexicon, vol. 16, Halle/Leipzig 1737, col. 1506–1510, and vol. 36, Leipzig/Halle 1743, col. 643–645; Plantation slavery in the West Indies is only treated in an entry on "Nigritien", ibid., vol. 24, Halle/Leipzig 1740, col. 887–891.

38 See for example UA, R.15.B.a.3.64, Zinzendorf's farewell speech, 15 February 1739; UA, R.15.B.a.11.232, certificate by Friedrich Martin that Maria is free und unmarried, 10 November 1742; UA, R.15.B.a.3.31, comments regarding the Brethren's economy and household in St. Thomas and St. Croix, 1755.

this letter, Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf asked the royal Saxon superintendent and the bailiff of Barby for their cooperation in transporting Samuel Johannes back to Herrnhut. A *pro nota* relates how these local authorities considered the proprietorial claims of the countess problematic, since they were of the opinion that "there are no serfs in Germany" *(weilen keine Leibeigene in Deutschland vorhanden)*. Had the two officials had rural serfs in mind, this statement would have been nonsense, as these certainly existed in Saxony as well as in the margraviate of Upper Lusatia. They, too, apparently meant "slave" when using the term "serf". The issue they identified had nothing to do with repudiating the countess' authority; rather, they saw a problem of proper procedure: Because neither imperial law nor Saxon ordinances contained instructions for how to deal with slaves, they were reluctant to sign off an extradition based on a claim of slavery – at least not without calling on the elector's court for a decision *(ohne Vorbewußt des Hofes)*. Instead, they proposed that Samuel Johannes be defined as a "runaway servant" *(entwichener Knecht)*, since the laws governing servants included ample provisions for the arrest and handing over of absconders.[39] The matter was eventually concluded in this fashion, and Judge Neumann came to fetch Samuel Johannes and received the requisite passport from the bailiff (Document 12).

Concluding this analysis, I propose that serfdom *(Leibeigenschaft)* may best be understood as a hypernym, a general term denoting various forms of strongly asymmetrical hierarchy like slavery and the *Erbuntertänigkeit* of Upper Lusatia. They all shared a strong element of possession – of people having at least some of the qualities of property and being treated as such.

4. The use of antonyms, or meanings of subservience

The understanding of slavery exhibited in the correspondences is best described as essentialist. Labelling Samuel Johannes a "born slave", a "true born serf" and a "wild slave" emphasised how much subservience was considered part of him. Slavery was not something that had happened to him because of an unfortunate fate, like that of Christian mariners enslaved by Muslim corsairs. On the contrary, he was born into this status; it was part of his origin and defined his place in the social order.

---

39   On ordinances regarding runaway servants in Saxony and the Margraviate of Upper Lusatia, see Codex Augusteus oder neuvermehrtes Corpus juris Saxonici: worinnen die in dem Churfürstenthum Sachsen und darzu gehörigen Landen, auch denen Marggrafthümern Ober- und Nieder-Lausitz, publicirte und ergangene Constitutiones, Decisiones, Mandata und Verordnungen bis zum Jahr 1772 enthalten, vol. 1, Leipzig 1772, 633–634 (1735); Collection derer den Statum des Marggrafthums Ober-Lausitz in Justiz- Polizey- Lehns- und […] andern die Landes-Verfassung betreffenden Sachen […], vol. 1, 1770, 611–614 (1649), 643–650 (1689), 665–670 (1715), 685–687 (1750).

To obtain further insight into how the consequences of Samuel Johannes' enslavement were perceived, we may look at the antonyms to the labels denoting subservience. Of particular interest are the labels "(not) sui iuris" and "in dominica potestatis". Unsurprisingly, these appear exclusively in documents arguing Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf's case (see table 2; Documents 2, 10, and 11). The Roman law expression *sui iuris* meant not being in someone else's power *(alieni iuris)*, with the latter concept characterising the legal status of those in the dominion of the Roman paterfamilias, like children or slaves. In the documents, the term was used in conjunction with the label "true born serf": "he is not sui iuris […] since he is a true born serf" (Document 2). Samuel Johannes not being *sui iuris* but rather in "dominica potestatis" was presented as a consequence of his having been born into slavery.

There are also three instances of Samuel Johannes being labelled as "free", specifically as a "free person" *(freye Person)*. The report by Johann Daniel Jacobi (Document 4), court administrator at Unwürde, relates how the two messengers from Herrnhut unsuccessfully tried to persuade Samuel Johannes to return to Herrnhut. The same course of events and line of argumentation was reiterated in the formal reply by Karl Gotthelf von Hund to Countess Zinzendorf's request for assistance (Document 5). The use of the label "free" in these instances is of importance as it reveals how the term was employed and understood by contemporaries. It is likewise noteworthy that these two documents also preserve statements made by Samuel Johannes himself and thus offer a glimpse of his own perception of the situation. Despite being mediated through another's writing, this places them among the rare sources allowing the voice of an enslaved person to be heard.

Jacobi recorded how on the afternoon of 26 March, "two persons – one a trimmings-maker, the other a cobbler [Jacob Haußmann und Martin Brodersen] – arrived from Herrnhut and wanted to persuade the Moor […] to return with them". Allegedly, Haußmann and Brodersen assured Samuel Johannes "that there had been no need for him to depart secretly, him being a free person" and that he would be supplied with a passport if he returned with them. A passport was indeed important, since without it Samuel Johannes was at risk of being arrested as a vagrant. Nevertheless, Jacobi's dry reporting barely conceals the sarcasm of Samuel Johannes' answer: "Thereupon the Black declared he was not going with them in good faith. But if they wanted to prove their love and send him a passport, he would wait for them until tomorrow morning 11 o'clock, but after that he would continue on his way."[40]

After Samuel Johannes had refused to return to Herrnhut voluntarily, Haußman and Brodersen asked the local authorities to detain him – "to keep him until he

---

40   UA, R.6.a.A.74.4, Acta concerning the escape of Johannes Samuel Felix. Report by Johann Daniel Jacobi, court administrator at Unwürde, 27 March 1754.

would be picked up". The Unwürde court asked for reasons that would justify such measures, but the two envoys could only point out that Samuel Johannes had left Baron von Schell's service, thus describing him as a servant who had ignored proper protocol. Without a formal writ of requisition being presented, the Unwürde court could easily dismiss their request.

Samuel Johannes himself acknowledged that he had worked for Schell, though he denied having actually been a servant: "He had never been in the latter's service, he had only waited on him for a bit more than 21 days, and he had done nothing for which he could be detained. But because it was not right for him to stay longer in Herrnhut he left this morning."[41] This was a tactically sound declaration: By styling his service as an almost voluntary stand-in, he distanced himself from the restrictions of servants' law, which generally forbade leaving without permission before the end of a contract. This clearly ran counter to the countess' narrative framing Samuel Johannes as a subject whose labour she could dispose of at will, including lending him to another noble. The passage also shows Samuel Johannes as unwilling to reconcile himself to being a servant. His refusal to accept the status of servant – and by extension, of being the countess' subject – indicates that he had a different vision for his life. The somewhat enigmatic assertion that it was "not right" for him to stay in Herrnhut suggests that he intended to leave the Moravian Church for good.[42] His offer to wait for the messengers to bring him a passport was pure mockery: He was making it clear that he saw through their impromptu ruse – after all, had they truly considered him a "free person", they would hardly have asked the Unwürde court to detain him until someone could return with a proper writ of requisition.

What characterises a "free" person in all these instances was primarily control over one's own mobility, an agency that servants, serfs, and slaves did not enjoy: Their mobility depended on their masters' consent. Freedom was therefore something specific – a right to do something rather than an innate quality. Daniel Michln's letter to Samuel Johannes (Document 9) also contains a reference to "freedom": Michln related Karl Gotthelf von Hund's advice to find a lawyer in Berlin who might be able to clarify whether someone might have "pretensions to him" *(ob jemand praetension an Ihn haben könnte)* and whether something could be done with regard to "his freedom" *(wegen seiner Freiheit)*. The use of a noun instead of an attribute could perhaps be read as an indication of a more abstract, comprehensive notion of freedom, whereas the unspecified "pretensions" once again suggest a more discriminate understanding of freedom as control over one's own mobility and economic strategies.

---

41 Ibid.
42 Paul Peucker has pointed to sources indicating that his estrangement had already begun in Barby, see Peucker, Aus allen Nationen, 2007, 21.

5. Labelling the alien: a "Moor" and "black Malabar"

The label "Moor" *(Mohr)* appears twice in the documents. It was a common (though somewhat ill-defined) term in the early modern German language. By the mid-eighteenth century, it was certainly used mostly to designate persons of African descent, although it could still be applied to any foreign individual considered dark-skinned – Samuel Johannes being a case in point.[43] It also continued to carry associations with the Muslim world: North Africans of various ethnic backgrounds, as well as inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, were sometimes referred to as 'Moors' regardless of the colour of their skin.[44] Moravians used the term frequently as well, but the sources in the archives in Herrnhut and Bethlehem suggest that it was rarely applied to Samuel Johannes within the Moravian community.[45] In the texts analysed here, the term appears only twice, and both instances occur in documents generated at Unwürde: the report by Johann Daniel Jacobi (Document 4) and the passport issued to Samuel Johannes (Document 15). Considering the small size of the textual sample, this may be a coincidence. It was in keeping with the German language usage of the time, however, for Jacobi and Karl Gotthelf von Hund to label someone they considered dark-skinned a "Moor".

Six times Samuel Johannes is labelled a "black Malabar". Once, in the report by the Unwürde court administrator Jacobi, he is referred to as the "black Samuel Johannes". Three times he is simply called "the Black". Therefore, in a total of ten instances he is described in terms of what German contemporaries perceived to be the color of his skin. Only once is he labelled simply "my Malabar". This phrasing appears in the letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to the Barby authorities (Document 11) and only after Samuel Johannes had been called "my black Malabar" in the same document. This is remarkable because in Moravian sources produced before the events of 1754, he was usually referred to by name or by the ethnic designation "Malabar" – without the attribute "black".[46] The only agent in Erd-

---

43 For the history of the German term 'Mohr' (Moor) and its connection to skin colour, see Martin, Schwarze Teufel, 1993, 84f.; Kuhlmann-Smirnov, Schwarze Europäer, 2013, 84–94. A very critical appraisal is Malte Hinrichsen/Wulf D. Hund, Metamorphosen des 'Mohren'. Rassistische Sprache und historischer Wandel, in: Gudrun Hentges/Mechtild M. Jansen/Jamila Adamou (eds.), Sprache, Macht, Rassismus, Berlin 2014, 69–96.

44 Stephan Theilig, Türken, Mohren und Tataren. Muslimische (Lebens-)Welten in Brandenburg-Preussen im 18. Jahrhundert, Berlin 2013.

45 The only instance of Samuel Johannes being called a 'Moor' in Moravian sources predating 1754 can be found in UA, R.8.33.b.2.b, Herrnhaag congregational diary, 3 August 1742. On the other hand, children from the West Indies and North America who lived in the German congregational settlements were routinely referred to as 'Moors'. Köstlbauer, "I Have No Shortage of Moors", 2021, 125–129.

46 Cf. UA, R.8.33.b.3, Wetterau congregational diary, 2 August 1742; UA, R.8.33.b.2.c, Herrnhaag congregational diary, 9 December 1742.

muthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf's party to use the substantive form "the Black" for Samuel Johannes was the Berthelsdorf *Actuarius* Paul Schneider, who very likely did not know Samuel Johannes personally (Document 6, *pro nota* to Document 10). Once again, because of the limited scope of the source sample we can only speculate on the significance of this deviation. The label "Black" was certainly used as a bodily, indelible identifier. At the same time, the sources provide no indication whether their various originators had clearly established notions of what this 'Blackness' meant or entailed. Neither 'Black' nor 'Moor' or 'Malabar' were synonymous with 'slave' in early modern Germany, although without a doubt many of the people designated in this way were in fact enslaved. Obviously, all three labels invariably pointed to foreign origins, however vague. At the same time, we have seen that when the countess' party felt the need to emphasise Samuel Johannes' foreign background and his differentness, they used labels like "wild slave" that highlighted his non-Christian, colonial origins rather than his ethnicity.

6. Beyond 1754: across the ocean and into the woods

The events recorded in the file in the Unity Archives end with Samuel Johannes arriving in Herrnhut guarded by Judge Neumann and his subsequent imprisonment there as reported by the Berthelsdorf *Actuarius* Paul Schneider (Document 13). These measures in themselves did not indicate slavery; arrest, bodily punishment, banishment, public shaming, and exclusion from rituals were all part of the legal and social instruments at the disposal of the religious and secular authorities in Herrnhut and Berthelsdorf.[47]

As if to ensure that the countess' authority was not challenged any further, within a few months after returning to Herrnhut, Samuel Johannes was sent across the Atlantic Ocean to the Moravian town of Bethlehem, deep in Pennsylvania's frontier region, where he arrived on November 24, 1754.

By crossing the Atlantic, he entered a colonial slaving zone where slavery was widespread and obvious – even if it was less conspicuous in Pennsylvania than in neighbouring Maryland and Virginia. Several enslaved Africans lived and worked in Bethlehem during Samuel Johannes' time there.[48] They were usually referred to as 'Negroes', a term clearly implying enslavement in colonial parlance. As far as I have

---

47   Christina Petterson, The Moravian Brethren in a Time of Transition. A Socio-Economic Analysis of a Religious Community in Eighteenth-Century Saxony, Leiden 2021, 107–113.

48   Katherine Faull, Self-Encounters. Two Eighteenth-Century African Memoirs from Moravian Bethlehem, in: David McBride/Leroy Hopkins/C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay (eds.), Crosscurrents. African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World, Columbia, SC 1998.

been able to ascertain, however, Samuel Johannes himself is labelled a "Negro" only once in the Bethlehem records – directly upon his arrival in a catalogue of all the single brothers who had come to Bethlehem from England on 24 November 1754.[49] Perhaps the person assembling this list had no prior knowledge about him and thus resorted to the term. Subsequently, Samuel Johannes was repeatedly referred to as a "Malabar" or Ceylonese in Bethlehem – if he was labelled at all. In the eyes of the European-born church members, his East Indian origin as well as his childhood and education in Marienborn and Barby may have placed him in a different category from the local enslaved population. This assumption is reinforced by his marriage to Magdalena Mingo in 1757:[50] She was a freeborn woman of African Creole and Danish ancestry who had lived in Herrnhaag for several years at the same time as Samuel Johannes. Marriages among Moravians were mostly arranged, and the two 'Moors' from Germany were perhaps considered an obvious match (although the term is not applied to them in the Bethlehem congregational records).

An obituary published after Samuel Johannes' death on 24 May 1763 in the Bethlehem diary does not mention the events of 1754. It merely refers to a "persisting confusion of his mind" that was eventually resolved.[51] All things considered, Samuel Johannes' return into the Moravian community can be interpreted as a (re-)entry into an adapted relationship of dependency: A once hopeful member of the Church living in the aristocratic surroundings of Marienborn and Barby, he had briefly become a wayward Moravian brother who eventually returned submissively, was disciplined and readmitted, and subsequently lived the remainder of his life as a humble brother in the colonial backcountry of Pennsylvania.

7. Conclusion: sifting through the semantic field of authority and possession

The story of Samuel Johannes shows that while enslavement existed in the early modern Holy Roman Empire, it confounds an understanding of slavery as something exceptional and drastic, something that stands out and can be easily identified by the enquiring historian. Had the term 'slave' not been spelled out in Countess

---

49 Moravian Archives Bethlehem (MAB), diary of the Bethlehem congregation, vol. 13, 24 November 1754, 824.
50 MAB, diary of the Bethlehem congregation, vol. 17, 20 April 1757, 99–101. Incidentally, Magdalena Mingo was also labelled a "Negro" in a catalogue upon her arrival in Bethlehem in May 1749. MAB, diary of the Bethlehem congregation, vol. 8, 314.c. In her case, too, this seems to have remained a singular occurrence.
51 MAB, diary of the Bethlehem congregation, vol. 26, 24 May 1764.

Zinzendorf's letter to Chamberlain von Hund, Samuel Johannes's status might have remained hidden forever – him being just another escaping servant and/or wayward Moravian brother.

Moving on beyond this proof of the persistence of slavery, the micro-semantic analysis of the documents helps us to look "behind" concepts like slavery, as it were. What emerges is an understanding of authority and far-reaching proprietorial control exercised over individuals that was shared by the nobles and officials active in this case. To Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf and the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court, everything in Samuel Johannes' biography indicated that she held rights of possession over him. But the language of the documents exhibits a marked indifference towards defining and explaining categorisations of dependency. Instead, they were building a case and creating a narrative in a semantic field that did not provide clear-cut categories and associated legal procedures. The strongly asymmetrical relationship between countess and runaway was construed at the levels of mistress and slave/serf, of guardian and ward, of debtor and creditor. Essentially, an array of mutually reinforcing labels signalling dependence and subservience was assembled, as if they hoped that one of them would stick. Ironically, none of the labels put forward did – instead, it was the age-old ordinances of servants' law that ultimately provided the legal basis for Samuel Johannes' forced return from Barby to Herrnhut.

The bailiff and royal superintendent in Barby balking at extraditing Samuel Johannes as a slave serves to illustrate that there was no well-established legal procedure applicable to enslaved people brought from colonial slaving zones into German principalities. But this did not translate into a refutation of proprietorial rights imparted by the acquisition of a slave. It is quite obvious that the authorities in this case had no intention of engaging in scholarly legal disputes or establishing legal precedent. Their sole motivation was to quickly identify the administrative prerequisites for the apprehension and extradition of Samuel Johannes. It might have been a very different matter if the entire affair had been brought to trial at a higher court and lawyers had actually debated the slave status of Samuel Johannes and its legal repercussions. But this never happened, and the affair remained a matter of negotiation at the lowest (local) levels of administration.

Samuel Johannes' alien, 'heathen' origins served to reinforce the theme of dependency; his labelling as a (formerly) "wild slave" underscores this understanding. Using the term 'slave' *(Sclave)* instead of 'serf' *(Leibeigener)* may also have served to accentuate the foreign origin of his subservience. In this way, slavery appears more as a source or proof of subservience that had to be constantly translated into actual practices and filled with meaning (or ignored). Furthermore, his 'heathen' origins outside the bounds of Christendom increased his perceived debt and gratitude as someone who had received the blessing of baptism.

A reason for the legal invisibility of slave status, respectively its intermittent irrelevance, or at least invisibility, in the face of other forms of dependence and subservience, also lies in numbers. The Holy Roman Empire was never a central nexus of the slave trade. Enslaved people arrived in the territories of the empire singly or in small groups of twos or threes. Their total number can only be guessed at, but it was certainly small compared to the demographics of enslaved persons in other European countries with intra-imperial connections to colonial slaving zones or well-established slaving traditions and significant slave populations since the Medieval period.[52] Since proprietorial claims were very rarely questioned, let alone brought before courts, there was little impetus in German principalities to regulate the status of slaves until late in the eighteenth century. Existing laws and ordnances provided ample options for dealing with these isolated instances, and both Roman law and natural law could be used as ancillary sources to argue for the recognition of property rights over individuals.[53] Only relatively late, in the wake of the emerging abolition debate in the Atlantic world, did the perception of a need to regulate the status of enslaved individuals in German territories arise. The *Allgemeine Landrecht* (General State Law) of Prussia introduced in 1794 proclaimed that slavery was not to be condoned there. But the rights of slave owners bringing enslaved individuals into Prussian territory for a limited time were still explicitly protected. In the Austrian Empire, it was only the *Allgemeine Bürgerliche Gesetzbuch* (General Civil Code) of 1811 that explicitly outlawed slavery.[54]

Where does this case study leave us in regard to the history of enslaved people in the Holy Roman Empire, or the history of 'slavery' as such? In a way, it is an exercise in what has been called "globalizing early modern German history" some years ago:[55] It shows how enslaved people moved through the networks linking German territories to places as far away as Ceylon or Pennsylvania, as did the lan-

52 For a discussion of numbers, see Köstlbauer, Slavery in the Holy Roman Empire, 2023. See also Giulia Bonazza, Slavery in the Mediterranean, in: Pargas/Schiel (eds.), Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery, 227–242.

53 von Mallinckrodt, Slavery and the Law, 2021. For the application of the Roman Corpus Iuris Civilis in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Germany, also see Thomas Ahnert, Another *querelle*. The *Usus Modernus Pandectarum* and the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire around 1700, in: Ines Peper/Thomas Wallnig (eds.), Central European Pasts. Old and New in the Intellectual Culture of Habsburg Europe 1700–1750, Berlin/Boston 2022, 293–310.

54 Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, There Are No Slaves in Prussia?, in: Brahm/Rosenhaft (eds.), Slavery Hinterland, 2016, 109–131, 129f.; Walter Sauer, From Slave Purchases to Child Redemption. A Comparison of Aristocratic and Middle-Class Recruiting Practices for "Exotic" Staff in Habsburg Austria, in: von Mallinckrodt/Köstlbauer/Lentz (eds.), Beyond Exceptionalism, 2021, 162–188, 176.

55 Globalizing Early Modern German History, in: German History 31/3 (2013), 366–382; see also Renate Dürr, Inventing a Lutheran Ritual. Baptisms of Muslims and Africans in Early Modern Germany, in: Ulinka Rublack (ed.), Protestant Empires. Globalizing the Reformations, Cambridge 2020, 196–227.

guages and terminologies of slavery. In the transition between slaving societies and societies with slaves, their meanings changed and mutated – and so did the consequences of being enslaved. The case of Samuel Johannes and the micro-perspective it affords provide evidence of the convergence of colonial categories (i.e. 'slave', 'negro') with local German terminologies and practices, but it clearly did not create a place of slavery in German society: It was far less important than a present-day reader might instinctively assume. Even in the life of Samuel Johannes himself, it appears as an oddly transitory circumstance. The need to label Samuel Johannes as a slave had arisen only because he had fled from Herrnhut, the place assigned to him. The countess and her party subsequently acted and communicated solely with the intent of coercing Samuel Johannes into returning to Herrnhut and into the Moravian *Gemeine*. Neither in earlier nor in later Moravian sources is he claimed as a slave. In the absence of clear markers of enslavement and a social position reserved for the enslaved, the actual roles and jobs occupied by such individuals were far more important than their enslavement: To contemporaries, they defined the social status and specific dependencies of such foreigners in much more readily recognisable ways.

Therefore, I propose that rather than asking about slavery as a status or an institution (and having to contend with the powerful images of Caribbean or antebellum plantation slavery), we should ask about individuals and the situations and forms of dependency shaping their lives at specific places and times.[56] This in turn implies looking at the language and terminologies brought into play in those individual cases.

---

56 This also conforms to a programme repeatedly formulated by Michael Zeuske. See Zeuske, Handbuch der Geschichte der Sklaverei, 2019, vol. 1, x–xi, xiv–xix. See also Joseph C. Miller's definition of "slavery as a historical strategy" in: Joseph C. Miller, The Problem of Slavery as History. A Global Approach, New Haven 2012, 18–24.