

Claiming a Runaway Slave in the Holy Roman Empire: The Case of Samuel Johannes (1754)

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In the early morning hours of March 26, 1754, a lone man secretly left the Moravian communal settlement Herrnhut in the margraviate of Upper Lusatia. His name was **Samuel Johannes** (sometimes Samuel Johannes Felix), he was a Moravian, and he originally hailed from Southern India. Samuel Johannes had been living in Herrnhut for a mere two weeks, employed as a servant in the house of Baron von Schell, an aristocratic member of the Moravian Church. Apparently dissatisfied with the conditions and his prospects there, Samuel Johannes decided to pack up and leave.

This is the story of an attempt to **exit** a coercive labor relation and about the **eventual reentry** into such a relation. But this is not simply the story of a servant leaving his post without permission before his time of service was up: It is one of the few known cases of a runaway slave in premodern Germany and one of a very small number in which Moravians explicitly claimed authority over a person as a slave within a German principality (outside of Europe, in the West Indies and North America, the Moravian Church owned numerous slaves; see, for example, Hüsgen 2016 or Koestlbauer 2021).

The following data-story is essentially an experiment, asking what a semantic analysis of sources relating to this case may reveal about forms of coercion at the intersections of Central European German estate-based society, Indian Ocean slavery, and Moravian missionary endeavors—intersections that produced liquid and overlapping forms of coercion and dependency, and therefore present quite daunting challenges to historical analysis.

The dataset used in this analysis consists of fifteen documents written during the escape and eventual return of Samuel Johannes, between March and May 1754 (for transcriptions and translations see [dataset](#)). They were probably collated soon after in a single bound file in the Unity Archives in Herrnhut (R.6.a.A.74.4). Several of the documents are copies or drafts of letters sent, two are passports. To some documents, comments (*pro nota*) were added.

This file provides such a rich material for investigation because several moments come together in it: the progression of a limited and interconnected set of events can be reconstructed in a reasonably comprehensive way; the different perspectives on the events and the strategies to legitimize coercion or the evasion of coercion provide a rich vocabulary; this vocabulary can be situated in specific social contexts.

Documents in the file (original sequence):

1. Printed passport form, issued for Jacob Haußmann and Martin Brodersen, filled in and signed by Paul Schneider, *Actuarius* (scribe) of the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court, Berthelsdorf, March 26, 1754 (not included in dataset)
2. Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund at Unwürde, Herrnhut, March 27, 1754 (unsigned copy)
3. Letter of Requisition, signed by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf, March 27, 1754
4. Report by Johann Daniel Jacobi, court administrator at Unwürde, March 27, 1754 (probably originally attached to document 5)
5. Letter by Karl Gotthelf von Hund to Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf, March 27, 1754
6. Report by Paul Schneider about search for Samuel Johannes, Herrnhut, March 29, 1754
7. Letter by Paul Schneider to Johann Friedrich Köber (financial director at Herrnhut), Herrnhut, March 30, 1754

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8. Johann Leonhard Weinel (secretary at Barby) to Gottfried Clemens in Herrnhut, Barby, April 28, 1754
9. Letter by Daniel Michln to Samuel Johannes in Gebelzig, Unwürde, March 28, 1754
10. Ordinance by Siegmund August von Gersdorf to Johann Leonhard Weinel in Barby, Herrnhut, May 4, 1754
11. Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to the Royal Superintendent and the Bailiff of Barby, May 11, 1754 (Concept of letter)
12. Passport issued by Christian Gottfried Weßel, Bailiff of Barby, May 18, 1754
13. Memorandum by Paul Schneider, scribe (*Actuarius*) of the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court, about the transportation of Samuel Johannes to Herrnhut, Herrnhut May 25, 1754
14. Copy of letter by Daniel Michln to Samuel Johannes in Gebelzig, Unwürde, March 28, 1754 (Copy of document 9, not included in dataset)
15. Copy of passport issued to Samuel Johannes on March 29, 1754, in Gebelzig

Background: A Global Biography – From Ceylon to the Holy Roman Empire

In 1739, in the southern Indian port of Tuticoryn (today Thoothukudi), the ship surgeon of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), Christian Dober, bought a twelve-year-old slave boy named Maden from Laurentina Dominicus, the widow Quickelenburg. A notary document witnessing this transaction has survived in the Unity Archives. Dober renamed the child Felix and employed him as a personal servant. In 1742 he took Felix along when he returned to Europe to seek admission into the Moravian Church. According to David Nitschmann, a Moravian missionary who had met Dober in Ceylon in 1740, at the time Dober had promised him (or the Church) the boy “as a present.” And indeed, after arriving in the Netherlands on July 20, 1742, Dober handed Felix over to the Moravian community in ‘s-Heerendiek. From there, the boy was sent to the children’s home ran by the Church in Marienborn, in the Wetterau region, near Frankfurt am Main. Dober moved on to settle in Herrnhut and later in Marienborn, and passed away in November 1743—likely without having had further contact with Samuel Johannes.

The Countess Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf, wife of Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, later reported that Dober had gifted Felix to her immediately after his arrival. While no written records of this transaction can be identified (and may have never existed), such a present seems a viable strategy for Dober to facilitate his own admission into the Moravian community and increase his reputation with church leaders. Countess Zinzendorf probably became the recipient of this peculiar present because in the years 1741 to 1743 her husband was travelling in British North America, furthering the Moravian cause there.

The *Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine* or Moravian Church was a radical religious community founded in 1727 by Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf and adherents of the fifteenth century church of Bohemian Brethren Church who had found refuge from religious persecution on Zinzendorf’s estates in Upper Lusatia. It was in many ways extraordinary, combining a German Lutheran pietist thought with the pre-Lutheran reformation of Bohemia and a Philadelphian and universalist mindset. Extraordinary, too, were the missionary impetus of the Moravian Church, its rapid global expansion, and the subsequent entanglement with Atlantic and East Asian slaveries.

Felix was brought up in the children’s home in Marienborn and later Lindheim, and on January 10, 1746, he was baptized Samuel Johannes by Count Zinzendorf himself. Later that year, he was admitted to communion which also signified his acceptance as a full-fledged member of the Church. In addition to schooling, Samuel Johannes received training as a tailor, and in 1749 he was sent to the Moravians’ newly established theological seminary in Barby (on the river Elbe in western Saxony). This indicates that the Church at the time harbored great expectations for his future.

With each step during the journey from India to Europe the enslaved child’s name changed, signifying new relations of dependency and new roles assigned to him. For Europeans serving with the VOC in

India, like Christian Dober, it was common to acquire child slaves. Maden probably was his original name. Names associated with antiquity like Felix were popular slave names in the East Indian colonies, same as in the Atlantic colonies. It was also not unusual for returning Europeans to bring such enslaved servants along to Europe.

Dober not only exploited Felix's labor but also expressed his own status through employing a child slave. In eighteenth-century society, service and representation were inseparable. This is especially true for individuals of African or Asian extraction, who in early modern courtly society were employed as so called "court moors" or "chamber moors." But to the Moravians, individuals like Samuel Johannes were not merely prestigious servants. They were living symbols of the Savior blessing their missions and of Zinzendorf's eschatological vision (see Peucker 2007, Koestlbauer 2021). Therefore, the Moravians, and most notably Zinzendorf himself, exhibited a lively interest in building a presence of actual or converted "heathens" in their German settlements. During the time of Samuel Johannes's stay in Marienborn (1742–1749), twenty individuals of West-African, Arawak, Inuit, and Asian descent lived in the Moravian settlements of Marienborn and nearby Herrnhag. This entanglement of representation, mission, and eschatological expectation provided the background for Samuel Johannes's upbringing in the Moravian children's home, his admission into the religious community, and his education in the seminary at Barby.

After the events related below, Samuel Johannes was sent to the Moravian settlement of Bethlehem in Pennsylvania. He died on May 24, 1763, having crossed two oceans and lived on three continents in his lifetime (for more biographical detail, see Koestlbauer 2021; Peucker 2007).

Case Summary:

In March 1754, Samuel Johannes, then about twenty-seven years old, was suddenly ordered to leave the seminary in Barby and go to Herrnhut. While there are no sources detailing the reasons for this summons, there is evidence of growing dissatisfaction with the young man's progress (Peucker 2007). In Herrnhut, Samuel Johannes was placed in the service of Baron von Schell, from where he fled after a mere three weeks, on March 26, 1754. Messengers were sent out, who caught up with him at nearby Unwürde, the estate of Chamberlain Karl Gotthelf von Hund. Samuel Johannes rejected their entreaties to return with them, and the Unwürde patrimonial court (manorial courts in Germany) refused to detain him as no proof of wrongdoing could be presented (documents 2, 4, 5).

Receiving news of this, the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court immediately moved to organize the apprehension of Samuel Johannes. Herrnhut was situated on the estate of Berthelsdorf, which belonged to Erdmuth Dorothea von Zinzendorf. In Upper Lusatia all matters of lower jurisdiction were in the hands of the lords of the manors (*Gutsherren*), who usually employed trained jurists to run their patrimonial courts. Therefore, the Berthelsdorf court was the institution responsible for handling the administrative and legal side of the matter. It was the judge himself, Johann Gottlob Neumann, who rode to Unwürde accompanied by a jurist to present a letter (document 2) by the Countess to Karl Gotthelf von Hund and a writ of requisition (document 3). In the letter, the Countess Zinzendorf openly labelled Samuel Johannes as a slave and runaway.

But upon arrival, judge Neumann was informed that Samuel Johannes had already moved on. Von Hund wrote a reply to Countess Zinzendorf's request for help (based on a report by his court actuary Johann Daniel Jacobi (documents 4, 5). He explained that he saw no reason to detain Samuel Johannes as the messengers from Berthelsdorf declared him "a free person" and not guilty of any crime. But he went even further and openly lied to the Countess, claiming that Samuel Johannes had left for Dresden via Leipzig to find employment at the elector's court, while in fact he had safely sent Samuel Johannes to another of his properties in nearby Gebelzig, where the refugee lived in hiding for several days. Judge Neumann, spending a day riding to and fro, eventually returned to Herrnhut emptyhanded. At this time, he already suspected that he had been lied to and that Samuel Johannes in fact had found help at Unwürde. After subsequent search parties from Berthelsdorf were unable to find Samuel Johannes in the region's villages and towns, court scribe Schneider concluded that the only measure

left would be to place an ad in the newspapers. As of yet, I could not identify any such ad in any of the regional papers (documents 6, 7, 8, 9).

In Gebelzig, Samuel Johannes received a letter (document 9) from Unwürde by one Daniel Michl(n) (a servant of von Hund?), which contains irrefutable evidence that von Hund actively protected and hid Samuel Johannes. It related news about the search for Samuel Johannes and advice from Karl Gotthelf von Hund: Samuel Johannes should go to Berlin and there he should seek employment and a lawyer's advice on his situation. While von Hund assured Samuel Johannes of his continuing support, the document may also be interpreted as a subtle hint that it was time to move on. Thanks to a copy of a passport issued to Samuel Johannes by the court in Gebelzig and later taken from him, we know that Samuel Johannes heeded this advice and arrived in Berlin (document 15). But by the end of April, he turned up in Barby and surrendered himself to the Moravians there. Possibly, after finding no way to support himself in Berlin and without funds and friends, he decided to go to Barby, which had been his home for four years.

In Barby, Samuel Johannes was put under house arrest. On May 29, 1754, based on stipulations in servants' law, he was transferred into the custody of judge Neumann Neumann of the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court, who brought him back to Herrnhut (documents 8, 10, 11, 12, 13).

Semantic analysis

The following analysis focuses on documents 2 and 4, which I identified as the most pertinent to this endeavor. Document 2 is a letter written by Countess Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to request that Samuel Johannes be detained and handed over to her emissaries. It is the key source in this collection, as it established the Countess's claim and the line of argumentation that was followed by the Countess's party throughout the affair. Some passages were copied word by word in documents 3, 10, and 11. Document 4 is a report drawn up by Johann Daniel Jacobi, the administrator of the patrimonial court at Unwürde, where Samuel Johannes had found refuge after his departure from Herrnhut. It reports on the first attempts by two messengers from Herrnhut to persuade or force Samuel Johannes to return to Herrnhut and provided the basis for a reply by Karl Gotthelf von Hund to Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf (document 5). It is of importance as it provides a glimpse of how Samuel Johannes himself portrayed the situation. As such, it is a rare text for the history of slavery in the Holy Roman Empire, which seldom provides room for the voice of the enslaved. In addition to these two documents, I am going to draw on data derived from the remaining thirteen documents.

To facilitate the analysis, I have been utilizing the cross-corpora annotation model developed with the members of the working group "Grammars of Coercion," which has been implemented in CATMA, a computer assisted text annotation and mining tool. Throughout the dataset, so called "action phrases" [infobox: "a coherent continuous grammatical compound describing an "action", whatever the grammatical structure of the language of the text."] relating to situations of dependency and coercion have been identified, [[LINK to Working Paper WG 1: Grammars of Coercion: Towards a Cross-Corpora Annotation Model](#)] as well as "emic labels" used to identify Samuel Johannes. In a next step I have selected action phases from the most pertinent to the subject (coercion), and listed them together with the respective actors.

The principal actors emerging are Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf and Samuel Johannes. Further action phrases can be identified related to Christian Dober, Karl Gotthelf von Hund, or the two messengers from Herrnhut. But as the events were driven by the actions of Samuel Johannes and the Countess Zinzendorf, I am focusing on these two.

A more extensive analysis than the one conducted here could also involve the Berthelsdorf judge Johann Gottlob Neumann and scribe Paul Schneider. As legal experts on the Countess's team, they surely influenced events and very probably were responsible for a large part of the phrasing of the

letters written in the Countess's name. (This does not imply that the Countess herself did not take an active interest. She was deeply involved in the economy of the Herrnhut community and the estates.)

Actors and action phrases:

Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf:

1. sehe mich bemüßigt, hierdurch anzuzeigen (I see myself compelled to hereby announce) (document 2)
2. habe sothanen wilden Slaven [...] ordentlich angenommen (have properly taken in that wild slave) (document 2)
3. ich habe [...] in der Christlichen Religion erziehen und unterweisen (...) lassen (had him educated and instructed in the Christian religion) (document 2)
4. das Schneider-Handwerk erlernen lassen (had him trained as a tailor) (document 2)
5. zur heil. Tauffe befördert (helped him to holy baptism) (document 2)
6. an ihm gethan und erweisen lassen, was man nur irgend von Herrschaften, Eltern und Vormündern bey einem Leibeigenen und Pflēgbefohlenen erwarten kann (did everything and had everything provided, which can be expected from lords, parents, and guardians for a serf and ward) (document 2)
7. Unterhalt und die Verpflegung dieses armen Menschen kommet mir in diesen 13 Jahren weit über 1000 rth.[Reichsthaler] zu stehen (upkeep and food for this poor human being has cost me far more than 1000 rth) (document 2)
8. daß ich nebst Gott ohnstrig das alleinige Recht zu dem Besitz und Gebrauch dieses Menschen habe (without doubt, I alone have the right to possess and make use of this human being) (document 2)
9. aus der Bedienung des Herrn Barons von Schell, welchen ich denselben auf einige Zeit überlaßen (from the household of Baron von Schell, to whom I have borrowed the same [Samuel Johannes] for a time) (document 2)
10. als meinen rechtmäßigen Unterthanen reclamirt (I hereby claim my rightful subject) (document 2)

Samuel Johannes:

1. Er selbst ist auch nicht sui juris und kan sich nicht ermächtigen vorzunehmen was ihm beliebt, maßen er ein würcklich leibeigen gebohrener, und in dieser Qualitat an mich gekommen (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) (document 2)
2. mir seine gantze Erzieh- und Unterhalts-Kosten schuldig ist und daher so lange in meiner Unterthänigkeit verbleiben muss (he owes me the expenses for his education and maintenance and therefore must remain in subjection to me) (document 2)
3. seine Schuldigkeit so weit außer Augen gesezet (has neglected his obligations so much) (document 2)
4. verleiten lassen von hier zu gehen (has let himself be enticed to leave this place) (document 2)
5. früh aus der Bedienung des Herrn Barons von Schell [...] würcklich entlauffen ist (yesterday morning truly ran away from the household of Baron von Schell) (document 2)
6. biß er von mir als seiner alleinigen Herrschaft loßgegeben und mit einem gültigen Freyschein und Loßbriefe versehen auch ihm dasjenige was er mich kostet, erlassen worden ist (until he has been set free and given a valid passport and letter of manumission by me as his sole lordship, also that which he cost me has been remitted) (document 2)
7. sich bey Ihro Gnaden (...) meldenden (had presented himself to his Grace, the Chamberlain von Hund) (document 2)
8. als Schneider Dienste suchenden (asked for work as a tailor) (document 4)
9. heute (...) weg gegangen (today he went away from there) (document 4)

10. erwiderte hierauf, es habe niemals bey selbigen in würkl. Diensten gestanden, sondern ihm nur seit etwas über 21 tagen aufgewartet (answered, that he had never been in the latter's service, he only had waited on him for a bit more than 21 days (document 4)
11. habe auch nichts begangen, weswegen er angehalten werden könne (had done nothing for which he could be detained) (document 4)
12. weil es aber ihn länger in Herrnhuth zu bleiben nicht mehr anständig wäre (...) er fort gegangen (because it was not right for him to stay longer in Herrnhut he left) (document 4)
13. erklärte sich hierauf, er kehrte nicht in guten wiederum mit ihnen um (declared he was not going with them in good faith) (document 4)

Overall, document 2 contains twenty-one action phrases, as compared to six in document 4. This is due to the fact that the letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf is the longest document by far in the file, and contains the most extensive narrative of the events. Even more importantly, it established the Countess's claim and the line of argumentation which then got repeated in subsequent documents.

The Countess's letter emphasizes through specific phrasing the differences in position and actions between Samuel Johannes and Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf. In four of ten action phrases, the Countess Zinzendorf appears in a position removed from the actual action, making things happen through directives. Thus, her position of authority within the relationship with Samuel Johannes is subtly accentuated: She "had" Samuel Johannes "educated," "instructed," "trained," "had everything provided," and his upkeep "has cost her." Also, the rhetoric of the introductory remark ("I see myself compelled to hereby announce") aids in conveying the aloof status of the Countess. It is the insubordinate act of Samuel Johannes that forces her hand. Obviously, this was a conventional rhetorical phrase and typical for eighteenth century letter writing. But all too easily the conventional is equated with the unconscious and therefore the insignificant. In discourse, every utterance, every choice matters, and conventional, stereotypical phrases are significant as they carry normative power and generate additional layers of meaning according to context and circumstance. Therefore, I would argue that the impact of the letter's rhetoric and the styling of the Countess's position in the unfolding narrative can hardly be underestimated. After all, the letter's intended audience was made up of men steeped in eighteenth century societal hierarchies and the attendant strategies and practices of representations.

Three phrases directly convey Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf's claim to authority over Samuel Johannes: "have the right to possess and make use of this human being"; "to whom I have borrowed the same"; "I hereby claim my rightful subject." The action-phrases describing Samuel Johannes's doings and situation are of a different quality. They are formulated as actions actively taken by Samuel Johannes, thereby clearly framing him as the perpetrator: "has neglected his obligations so much"; "has let himself be enticed to leave this place"; "ran away." Contrary to that, three phrases express his subservience to the Countess and actually negate his capacity for action: "he himself is not sui iuris and cannot decide to do as he likes since he is a trueborn serf"; "until he has been set free and given a valid passport and letter of manumission by me as his sole lordship"; "owes me the expenses for his education [...] and therefore must remain in subjection to me."

The report of the Unwürde court (document 4) is quite different. In it, all action phrases describe Samuel Johannes as an active participant in events: he sought out von Hund; he asked for employment as tailor; he left, when he decided his time in Herrnhut was up; he explicated his position; and he refused to go back.

None of the action phrases regarding the case of Samuel Johannes are specifically about coercive labor extraction, apart from him being employed as a servant in the household of Baron von Schell for three weeks. Likely, the reason for this is that the main motivation for him being with the Moravians was rooted in the symbolic value of his presence as a convert from a faraway, "heathen" place. The element of coercion is obvious in the Countess's claims of authority over Samuel Johannes, the control

she exerted over his mobility and labor when she ordered him to Herrnhut and “lent” him to Baron von Schell, and in the attempts to have him returned to Herrnhut.

Coercion becomes more tangible when including the numerous emic labels assigned to Samuel Johannes into the analysis. They refer to contemporary categories of dependence or subservience and were used to specify or circumscribe his affiliation to the Countess.

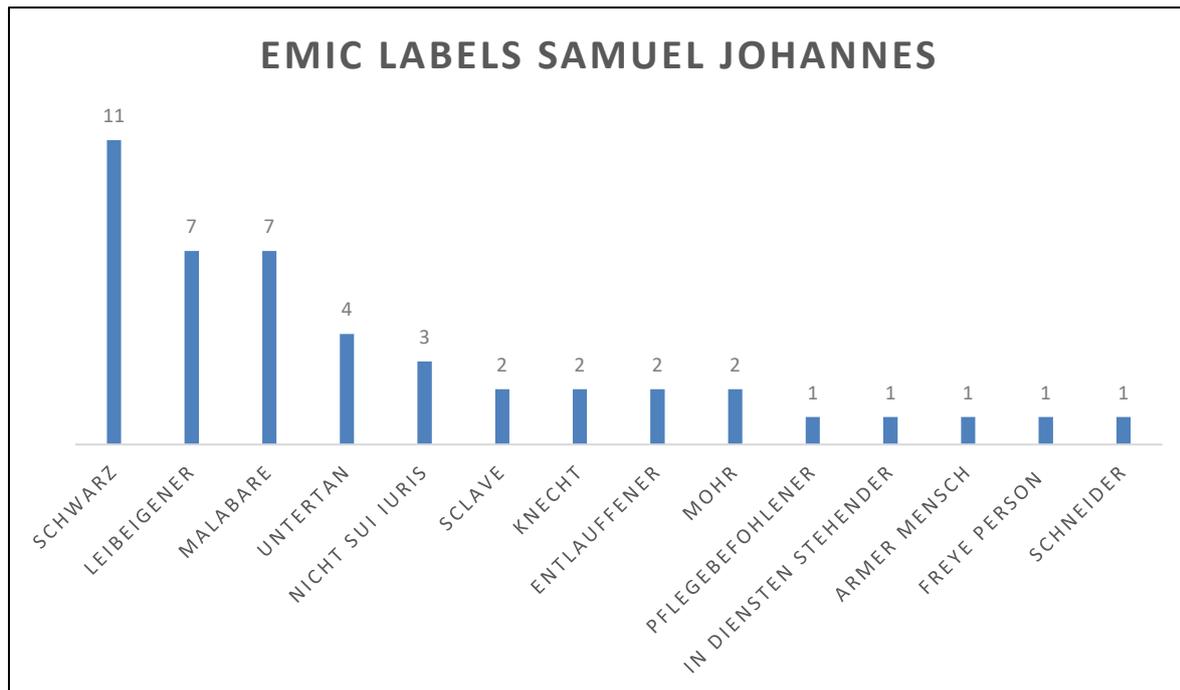
Emic labels in Erdmute Dorothea von Zinzendorf’s letter:

1. schwarzer Malabare (black Malabar)
2. gebohrener Slave (born slave)
3. armer Mensch (poor man)
4. wilder Slaven (wild slave)
5. Leibeigener (serf)
6. Pflegebefohlener (ward)
7. nicht sui iuris (not sui iuris) / in dominica poestate
8. ein wirklich leibeigen gebohrener (a true born serf)
9. undankbarer Mensch (unthankful human)
10. mein rechtmäßiger Unterthan (my rightful subject)

Emic labels in the Unwürde court memorandum:

1. der Mohr (the “Moor”)
2. der schwarze Samuel Johannes (the black Samuel Johannes)
3. freye Person (free person)
4. der Schwarze (the Black)

A quantitative analysis of all emic labels in documents 2–13 and 15 clearly underlines the significance of specific labels, all of which are first used (and established) in document 2, thus confirming its significance.



Quantitative analysis of emic labels regarding Samuel Johannes in documents nos. 2–13 and 15. For this figure, subjective and attributive uses of labels have been amalgamated.

Seven times, Samuel Johannes is labelled a “Leibeigener” (“serf”). He is designated a “Malabare” (“a Malabar”) seven times. Four times he is labelled as “der Schwarze” (“the Black”). But if we include “schwarz” (“black”) used as a modifying attribute (six times “black Malabar,” see above; one time “black Samuel Johannes”), then he was characterized in eleven instances by what his German contemporaries perceived to be the color of his skin. Four times Samuel Johannes is labelled an “Untertan” (subject) or “rechtmäßiger Untertan” (“rightful subject”); three times he is described as not being “sui iuris”; twice he is referred to as a “Knecht” (manservant); three times the attribute “entlauffener” (runaway) is employed. Only twice is Samuel Johannes labeled a slave (“Slave”); both instances occur in the letter of Erdmuthé Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund.

When ranking emic labels by the frequency with which they were used in the dataset, the phenotypical classification (“black” or “Black”) clearly heads the list, with the ethnic label “Malabar” being a strong third. Other sources from the Unity Archives show that the latter term was commonly used within the Moravian community when referring to Samuel Johannes. “Leibeigener” or “leibeigen” is the second most often used label. If the labels “Leibeigener,” “Unterthan,” “Slave,” “Knecht,” “not sui iuris,” and “Entlauffener,” “Pflegebefohlener,” and “in Diensten stehender” are lumped together, we see a very pronounced surplus of labels denoting dependence and subservience vs. ethnic/phenotypical markers (22 vs. 18 instances). Of course, this is easily explained by the nature of the matter discussed in the sources and the need to make a case for his arrest and return. What is more astonishing is the variation of different labels employed to denote subservience (at least five).

Of special interest is the emic label “Mohr” (“Moor”), which was employed two times. At that time, it was an often-used term in German language, if somewhat amorphous. It was applied to persons of African descent but also to other individuals considered dark skinned, without a connection to a specific continent. It also overlaps with the semantic field of “heathen,” and with that closely related of “Mauren” (in English this is the same term: “Moor”) or “Sarazenen” (“Saracens”), thus bearing a distinct connection to Islam. To complicate matters further, in eighteenth century Germany there seems to have been a distinct association of “Mohr” with the function of representative servants of foreign origin, a well-documented feature of baroque culture of representation (and by no means confined to aristocratic courts). Unsurprisingly therefore, the term “Mohr” was used widely by German speaking Moravians, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century (Köstlbauer 2021).

Of the documents analyzed here, the term is found only in two documents not authored by Moravians: document 4, the report of the Unwürde court administrator, and document 15, the passport which enabled him to travel safely to Berlin. Considering the small size of the textual sample, the rare use of the label may be a coincidence. Another possibility is that it is evidence of a midcentury change in Moravian discourse and terminology, in which the old term “Mohr” had already been replaced by colonial terminology of slavery and race. Or, it might have resulted from a more or less conscious choice to refuse Samuel Johannes an appellation often used to designate the honored representatives of the mission (as evinced in Moravian neologisms like “Mohrenliebesmahl” or “Mohrentag”). Whatever the reasons, one thing is obvious, though: to the Unwürde actuaries and to Karl Gotthelf von Hund, an Indian with what was perceived as dark skin who had a connection to an aristocratic household was automatically designated a “Mohr”—and this was consistent with contemporary discourse. It is also consistent with the false information supplied by von Hund to Countess Zinzendorf in document 5. There he not only claimed that Samuel Johannes had left for Dresden when he was actually hiding on von Hund’s estate in Gebelzig. He also claimed that Samuel Johannes intended to seek employment at the Saxon court there, presumably as a so-called “court moor.”

A significant challenge is presented by the polysemic nature of the term “Leibeigener” / “leibeigen,” which becomes evident in the dataset. In contemporary German language usage, it was a sort of blanket term applied to a range of institutions and practices of feudal labor relations which could differ widely, and also often had more specific names (Blickle 2003). For example, in Upper Lusatia (and parts of the electorate of Saxony) the majority of peasants were “Erbuntertanen,” which roughly translates as hereditary subjects (Knothe 1885). Such “Erbuntertanen” also toiled on the estate of Berthelsdorf. From the seventeenth century onward, the mandates and ordinances regulating status and obligations of subjects and lords concentrated considerable power in the hands of estate owners to the detriment of the subjects. The “Erbuntertanen” were bound to the land they owned, they owed labor services to the lord of the manor, and their mobility was restricted. Nevertheless, there seems to have been a lot of variation in actual practices, and specific, more constrained agreements between subjects and lords could and did exist (the Berthelsdorf estate was such a case). In colloquial usage the term “Leibeigene” was prevalent in Upper Lusatia, too, and was also used by Zinzendorf and other Moravians when referring to the local “Erbuntertanen.”

In the documents the term “Untertan” (subject) appears as well (four times, see documents 2, 3, 10, 11), but there is no indication that it was actually meant to refer to the “Erbuntertanen,” as the latter were usually called “Leibeigene” (see above). Also, “Untertan” (subject) was an even more general term than “leibeigen.” It encompassed all sorts of different categories of subservience at the same time, and its meaning was entirely dependent on context.

So, the term “leibeigen” was quite vague in its referral to feudal labor regimes in the Empire. However, as if to exacerbate its polysemic nature, “leibeigen” was also used synonymously with “slave.” One reason for this may have been the literal meaning of the term – owning the body – which also fits slavery. But more importantly, eighteenth century German law scholars relied on Roman Law as a subsidiary source of law wherever imperial law and local ordinances did not offer explicit regulations. This was part of a process of legal standardization taking place since the seventeenth century, which often was to the detriment of local custom or oral legal arrangements. In Upper Lusatia (as elsewhere), that meant that stipulations concerning *servi*, *glebae adscriptii*, or *colonii* were increasingly used to define and characterize the status “Erbuntertanen” as well. While laws and ordinances of Upper Lusatia expressly refuted a conflation of serfdom and slavery, there, too, dependency was constantly assessed through the categorial apparatus of Roman law (Blickle 2003; for discourse on slavery and serfdom in Prussia, see Mallinckrodt 2016).

In most of the documents generated on behalf of the Countess Zinzendorf or in response to her, the term “Leibeigener” (serf) was used synonymously with the term “slave.” This interpretation is plausible for the following reasons:

- In the letter to Karl Gotthelf von Hund (document 2), Samuel Johannes is called a “Leibeigener” and a “würrlich leibeigen gebohrener Leibeigener” (a true born serf). Since Samuel Johannes definitely was not born in Berthelsdorf or another Upper Lusatian estate to serf parents, this can only reflect on his unfree status in his native country.
- “würrlich leibeigen gebohrener Leibeigener” appears as a parallel expression to “gebohrener sclave” (born slave) in the same document.
- In documents 10 and 11, Samuel Johannes is characterized as a “Leibeigener” who had been bought in East India (“in Ostindien erkauffet”) and “rightfully given” to the Countess by his erstwhile master.
- The clearest evidence of the synonymy of “Leibeigner” and slave is to be found in document 11. This is a letter in the name of Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to the Saxon authorities in Barby to hand over Samuel Johannes to the Berthelsdorf judge. Samuel Johannes had suddenly appeared in Barby, his former home, by the end of April 1754, and had been put under house arrest with the local Moravians. A pro nota to the letter reports that the Royal Superintendent and the Bailiff in Barby refused his extradition on the grounds given by the Countess because they were of the opinion that “there were no Leibeigene in Germany” (“weilen keine Leibeigene in Deutschland vorhanden”). If the two officials had rural serfs in mind, their statement would have been utterly false, but obviously they were speaking of slaves. Like many Germans at the time, they considered slavery something alien, either a thing of the past or something practiced in other countries. As slavery did not exist in Saxon and in imperial law, they felt they could not send Samuel Johannes back based on a claim of slavery — at least not without involving the elector’s court Dresden (“ohne Vorbewußt des Hofes”). Therefore, they proposed that Samuel Johannes’s extradition should be based on him being a runaway servant. This had the additional benefit of not involving them, except for the provision of a passport.

Confronting the polysemic nature of the term “Leibeigenschaft” and its synonymous use with slavery, it makes sense to take a closer look at the two instances where the word “Slave” (slave) was actually used. As mentioned above, both instances are from document 2, the Countess’s letter to Karl Gotthelf von Hund. Labelling him a “true born slave” emphasizes how strong was his affiliation with unfree status. Slavery was not something that had happened to him because of bad luck, like being a war captive. No, he was born into this status, it had been part of his existence right from the beginning. This has some significance considering the Moravians’ understanding of social hierarchy, where everybody was put in their place by god and should strive to do their best in this position. Based on the Pauline epistles, this was repeatedly used by Moravians to legitimize slavery (Koestlbauer 2021). Samuel Johannes’s description as having been a “wild slave” when he was given to Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf in 1742 obviously refers to him having been what Moravians considered “heathen,” and someone who had to be educated in the faith and led to baptism.

There remains a slight possibility that in the letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea to Karl Gotthelf von Hund both meanings of the term—serf and slave—exist side by side. This possibility rests on the fact that in various instances Count Zinzendorf had been using banishment to nearby Berthelsdorf as a disciplinary measure against wayward inhabitants of Herrnhut (see Peucker 2015; Petterson 2021). Moving there meant submitting to the “Erbuntertänigkeit,” becoming a subject of the lord or lady of the manor and giving up the freedom from serfdom guaranteed to the inhabitants of Herrnhut in the much-touted manorial commandments from 1727. As the ordinances of Upper Lusatia forbade forcing someone into serfdom, this has to be understood as a form of social disciplining within the Moravian community. It was not something that could be done to individuals who earnestly wanted out or who were considered beyond redemption.

Ordering Samuel Johannes from Barby to Herrnhut may have been such a measure. If we follow this line of thought, he was called to Berthelsdorf to live there as an “Erbuntertan” until he would have shown remorse and would eventually be allowed back into the congregation. Having no actual use for him on the manor, where a more rural skillset was needed, Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf “lent” him to Baron von Schell. The problem with this interpretation is that for the actual outcome it made no

difference whether the Countess considered Samuel Johannes a Berthelsdorf serf or a slave. I deem it very likely that before the events narrated here took place, she had never felt the need to dwell on the legal category best describing Samuel Johannes's relationship to her.

Implicitly, both instances situate slavery outside Europe. Samuel Johannes was a "wild" slave because he came from a far away, wild place, where slavery was commonplace, where people were born into slavery. When labelling the older Samuel Johannes in Germany he is referred to with the German term "Leibeigener." Why is that? A definite answer remains elusive. One reason may have been that Erdmüthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf and the Berthelsdorf court officials, like the authorities in Barby, were reluctant to imply colonial (Dutch) or Indian slavery persisted indefinitely in Germany. Or maybe "leibeigen" was deemed the more understandable term in German (which may seem paradoxical to us but not to contemporaries who were used to the terminology and surely better inured to handle its context-sensitivity). In the latter case, using the term "Slave" for Samuel Johannes's origin and heritage would have merely accentuated his foreign origin and, indeed, the foreign roots of his subservience.

Of interest, too, is the labelling of Samuel Johannes as Erdmüthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf's ward. Document 2 tells how Christian Dober before his death in 1743 recommended Felix to the Countess's care and "free disposition" once more (no archival evidence of this could be found). This introduces a moral underpinning of the Countess's claims. The letter describes how the Countess ensured Samuel Johannes received a proper religious education and was baptized. Describing Samuel Johannes as a "wild" slave emphasized his "heathen" origins and thus the gratitude due to the Countess for facilitating his conversion. It also details the expenses spent on his upbringing, allegedly amounting to one thousand *Reichsthaler*. This was a hefty sum. In Bavaria in the first half of the eighteenth century a trained craftsman earned between forty and eighty *Reichsthaler* per year. Probably that was an exaggeration, after all Samuel Johannes was brought up in the children's home. The argument concludes with the assertion that Erdmüthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf did everything "which can be expected from lords, parents, and guardians for a serf and ward." Thus, the letter constructs an asymmetrical relationship between countess and runaway not only on the level of mistress and slave/serf but also on the levels of parent and child, guardian and ward, and debtor and creditor. The whole patriarchic order is marshalled for the Countess's cause.

When we link the above emic labels to the types of documents, a few additional observations can be made. The labels slave, serf, subject, ward ("Slave", "Leibeigener", "Unterthan", "Pflegebefohler"), and sui iuris/in dominica potestate were all employed in official documents produced by the Countess's party and addressed to other nobles and officials (documents 2, 3, 10, 11). When Moravians corresponded amongst each other, they referred to Samuel Johannes simply by his name (documents 7, 8). But the Berthelsdorf Actuarial Paul Schneider referred to him as "the Black" or "runaway Black" (document 6, pro nota to document 10). This difference can be explained through the nature of the documents. Documents 7 and 8 are private correspondences, exhibiting the rhetoric of intimacy typical for Moravian letter writing. In contrast, the other two documents are short memos concerning the search operations. Their offhand, seemingly pejorative labelling of Samuel Johannes might be due to the position taken by the author as a representative of the law, but it might also be identified as a racialized perception, reducing the delinquent to a "Black."

Moving to the end of this semantic analysis, I will explore the potential of antonyms to better understand the perceptions of Samuel Johannes and his relationship to Erdmüthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf. To us, slavery, serfdom, and indeed most forms of early modern servitude would seem as having their opposite in freedom. But our idea of freedom as a central societal value and inalienable human right was not shared by early modern European societies. Nevertheless, in connection to slavery and serfdom the usage of the term freedom, or freedoms, is well-documented in early modern sources. Looking at the terminology which the analyzed texts situated in opposition to terms like "leibeigen" or "Slave" may help us better grasp the specific meaning accorded to these.

Only in the documents not produced by the Countess's party does Samuel Johannes appear as a legitimate actor: the Unwürde court's memorandum (document 4) reports how "he presented himself"

to Karl Gotthelf von Hund, how he was actively asking for work as tailor, how he “left” or “went away” from his last position in Herrnhut. But it is the emic labels in this document that prove most interesting. In this source Samuel Johannes for the first time is labelled as free, namely a “free person” (“freye Person”)—even though this is only formulated as a possibility by the messengers from Herrnhut. What characterizes a “free” person in the documents, was first and foremost control over one’s own mobility. Conversely, restricted mobility or mobility controlled by someone else was a characteristic of slavery as well as Upper Lusatian “Erbuntertänigkeit,” but could also pertain to servants.

It is quite telling that neither “leibeigen” nor “enslaved” is invoked in Daniel Michln’s letter (document 9). This supports the assumption that von Hund and the letter’s author did not consider Samuel Johannes’s predicament as part of a wider anti-slavery or anti-serfdom agenda. The freedom mentioned here—if Samuel Johannes had been able to get it—was the basic freedom to control his own mobility and to decide on his own economic strategies. It did not make him an equal to others beyond his social rank and it still would have left him reentering into situations of dependency, likely as a servant.

Document 9, the letter by Daniel Michln in Unwürde to Samuel Johannes, is the only one explicitly referring to “freedom.” It contains Karl Gotthelf von Hund’s advice to find employment and a lawyer in the Prussian capital. To the lawyer, Samuel Johannes should tell everything to find out whether someone could have “pretensions on him” (“ob jemand praetension an Ihn haben könnte”) and whether something could be done about “his freedom” (“wegen seiner Freiheit”). The use of a noun instead of an attribute might be read as an indication of a more abstract, more encompassing notion of freedom, a natural right to be (re)claimed. And, considering the lively masonic interests of Karl Gotthelf von Hund, this may very well be true. On the other hand, the unnamed “pretensions” on “his” freedom point to a more discriminate understanding of freedom.

Of further interest is the use of the antonymic labels “(not) *sui iuris*” (document 2) and “in *dominica potestatis*” (documents 10 and 11) in three documents written in the Countess’s name. The Roman law expression *sui iuris* meant not being in someone else’s power (i.e., *alieni iuris*) and characterized the legal status of those in the dominion of the Roman *paterfamilias*, like for example children or slaves. The term was always used in conjunction with the label “true born serf” (he is not *sui iuris* [...] since he is a true born serf”), which here clearly meant “slave” (see above). So, in Samuel Johannes’s case not being *sui iuris* but “in *dominica potestatis*” essentially was a consequence of being a slave. At the same time, it was an attribute that could be affixed to many forms of dependency or subservience, therefore it cannot be regarded as a singular signifier of slavery. Avoiding (or not caring about) explications of slavery, this terminology was used to describe Samuel Johannes in an almost generic way as total dependent of the Countess, having no autonomy in his choice of place and mode of living.

A label that is curiously absent from all the documents in the file is “Moravian.” After all, Samuel Johannes was Member of the Church, albeit a wayward one, and his actions also signified a willingness to break with the religious community. Partly, that is due to the nature of the records. Concerned with the legal and administrative side of Samuel Johannes’s unauthorized departure from Herrnhut, they firmly stayed within the terminology and forms of legal discourse. They did not dwell on church or communal matters. Two letters exchanged by Moravians containing references to the case (documents 7 and 8) also concerned themselves solely with the search and arrest of Samuel Johannes. In the few extant sources pertaining to Samuel Johannes’s later life, the events of 1754 are referred to only obliquely. This was quite typical for Moravian writings of the time, which stressed harmony, brotherly love, and the bond with the Savior, and tended to describe conflict in vague language. The *Lebenslauf* (memoir) written after Samuel Johannes’s death in 1763 only mentions a “persisting confusion of his mind,” which was resolved when the “Good Shepherd” led him back “into the flock.” Nevertheless, it is opportune to keep the Moravian dimension in mind, because it doubtlessly existed, even though it remained a hidden presence in the records.

Conclusion: subjugation by labelling

The documents discussed here, especially the letter by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund, provide a rare insight into the semantic ambiguities and intersecting concepts of societal hierarchy and servitude. Their terminology shows a marked indifference towards categorizations of dependency. I argue that this did not result from ignorance. Firstly, there was no well-established and definite legal categorization applicable to enslaved people brought from colonial slaving zones into German principalities. Secondly, it seems evident that neither Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf nor the Berthelsdorf patrimonial court felt any need for such a category. To them, everything in Samuel Johannes's biography indicated that he was not free, and they simply assembled points of evidence. Essentially, they asserted the fundamental rightfulness of her claim by piling on a multitude of mutually reinforcing labels signaling dependence and subservience, hoping that one of them would stick. One might say they proved and ensured his subjugation by labelling him. Ironically, none of the labels put forward stuck. Instead, it was the ordinances against runaway servants that eventually provided the basis for the transport of Samuel Johannes from Barby to Herrnhut.

But was this a straightforward reentry into an established coercive relationship? This question leads us to an assessment of the forms of coercion faced by Samuel Johannes. Whatever the labels and categories invoked by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf and the men helping or cooperating with her, Samuel Johannes very clearly was considered someone who had to follow orders. Equally clearly, his not doing so merited coercion.

Samuel Johannes's departure and subsequent return were an obvious turning point in his relationship to the Moravian community and to Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf. To better discuss the different forms and levels of coercion existing in this case, I distinguish between three consecutive phases:

- a) Phase I: Samuel Johannes's life in the Moravian community before his departure in March 1754
- b) Phase II: Samuel Johannes's escape and absence from the Moravians (March 26th, 1754, to late April 1754)
- c) Phase III: after Samuel Johannes surrendered himself and was brought back to Herrnhut

Phase I:

In light of the little we know of Samuel Johannes's life in the Moravian community, it seems that before his short stint as a valet in the Herrnhut household he had been well integrated into Moravian communal structures. If he experienced forms of coercion, they probably were mainly rooted in the hierarchies and disciplinary regimes of church, school, and workshop. In fact, the transfer from the service of Christian Dober to the Marienborn children's home may very well have seemed a very positive event to Samuel Johannes. Without doubt, the Moravians provided a caring environment, they eventually made him a church member, and they saw enough in him to continue investing in his education—for some time at least. The aspect of coercion is much more evident in Samuel Johannes's removal to Herrnhut and his serving in the household of von Schell. Social hierarchy, church discipline, and potentially his personal subservience to Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf all came together to force him follow orders. Still, there is no indication that slavery was ever brought up during this period or even towards its end.

Phase II:

Samuel Johannes leaving the service of Baron von Schell in Herrnhut very likely was the first occasion that his slave status was invoked by the Moravians. As has been pointed out, in the documents analyzed here the actual term slave ("Slave") was used solely in connection with the colonial origins of Samuel Johannes. The other documents refrain from that terminology and do not tie the coercive measures taken against him to an unfree status he brought with him from the colonies. The resultant ambiguities were accepted by all but the bailiff and royal superintendent in Barby.

Part of the reason for this is that the correspondences analyzed here had the prime motivation of having Samuel Johannes returned to the Countess's or the Moravians' control. The aim was to quickly

find the most expedient way to create the prerequisite for the lawful apprehension and extradition of Samuel Johannes. It might have been a very different matter if the whole thing 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, the events remained a purely administrative matter.

On one level, the coercion in this phase is quite straightforward. Men were sent out to persuade or to physically force him to return, authorities were asked to apprehend him. The action phrases and emic label discussed above make it very clear that Samuel Johannes's departure was considered a serious breach of established order. They are all about Samuel Johannes's subservient position, his obligations, and his neglect thereof.

Other forms of coercion (potentially) effective in this case are less obvious at first glance. Without proof of affiliation, friendly contacts, let alone any sort of recommendation, Samuel Johannes's prospects were dim. Unlike other wayward Moravians, he had no familial networks or community of origin to return to. In addition, there would have been the real threat of running afoul of provisions against vagrancy. As far as his economic circumstances are concerned, Samuel Johannes likely put his trust in his skills as a tailor or in being able to find employment as a servant. But without networks and affiliations this was not much to bank on. So, here pressure was exerted on the fugitive both on an economic and on a normative level. Samuel Johannes's eventual return to Barby despite his initially successful escape may have been caused by his inability to garner enough support, and the resultant experience of isolation as well as the danger of sliding into destitution.

Phase III:

This phase sees the culmination of coercive measures employed against Samuel Johannes. After surrendering himself to the Moravians in Barby, coercive measures were adopted to keep Samuel Johannes from getting away a second time. He was put under house arrest (document 8). Later he was transported to Herrnhut guarded by the Berthelsdorf judge. There, too, he was locked up at first. As has been pointed out already, such measures in themselves do not indicate slavery. We do not know whether in the subsequent dealings between Samuel Johannes, the judge, and the Moravians in Herrnhut, slavery was invoked, like it was in the letters by Erdmuthe Dorothea von Zinzendorf to Karl Gotthelf von Hund. Maybe the term was only used in the communication between two nobles. What we can say is that it would have made no difference in regard to the measures taken. Arrest, bodily punishment, temporary banishments, shaming, etc. were all part of the legal and social instruments at the disposal of the Herrnhut leadership in dealing with subjects, *Erbuntertanen*, and church members.

As if to make sure the Countess's authority was not challenged any more, within a few months after his return to Herrnhut, Samuel Johannes was sent to the Moravian town of Bethlehem in Pennsylvania, where he spent the remainder of his life. Nothing in the sources tells us whether he was considered a slave there and if so, how it influenced his position. By crossing the Atlantic, he entered a colonial slaving zone where slavery was widespread and obvious. This included Bethlehem, where several enslaved Africans were employed at the time. In contrast to them, however, Samuel Johannes was not designated a slave in the Bethlehem records, nor was he labeled a "Negro," a term used synonymously with slave in the colonies. Instead, he is repeatedly referred to as a "Malabar." This specific ethnic label suggests that he was regarded to be in a separate category of sorts. Furthermore, his childhood and education in Marienborn and Barby may have trumped the stigma of his slavery background.

All things considered, it might be more fitting to regard Samuel Johannes's return into the Moravian community as an entry into an adapted relationship of dependency: from a once hopeful member of the church living in the aristocratic surrounding of Marienborn and Barby, he became a wayward Moravian brother (Moravians called each other brothers and sisters) who was strictly disciplined, and then a lowly brother living in a Moravian community tucked away in the colonial backcountry of Pennsylvania.

The fact that Samuel Johannes was or had been a slave lay dormant for several years and only became invoked when he exited a labor and social context he experienced as coercive. In the (ultimately successful) attempt to enforce Samuel Johannes's reentry into subjection, slavery appears as just one of several overlapping labels signaling subservience. Even in this extreme situation, it does appear as a clear-cut legal category, but more as one marker of subservience among many: an imported colonial status, interpreted through the lens of Roman law, tacked on to a shifting, liquid set of forms of coercion.

My starting premise was that the status of slavery in the eighteenth-century Roman Empire was deeply ambivalent and ill defined. What I took away from writing this article is a new realization: categories like slavery seem even less important than I anticipated. The actors involved seem to have acted based on the desired outcome of events: coercing Samuel Johannes once more into subservience or successfully evading subservience, respectively. The Countess and her party were not thinking in terms of categories and they were arguing in a discursive field that did not provide them clear categories but rather a number of overlapping labels they could use to denote inferiority of status, dependency, and subservience. Likewise, the coercive measures applied by Erdmuthé Dorothea von Zinzendorf and her claims of far reaching authority cannot be said to simply derive from the fact that Samuel Johannes was an enslaved man, who had been brought from Southern India to Europe as a child and presented to the Countess Zinzendorf. There can be little doubt that Samuel Johannes was in fact enslaved. But as this analysis demonstrates, the forms of coercion applied in his case simply did not differ from those applied to other subservient groups. Had the term slave not been spelled out in one of the documents, the status of Samuel Johannes may as well have remained hidden. This cautions against the usefulness of categories like "slavery" or "serfdom" in studying histories of coercion. The story of Samuel Johannes shows that while slavery existed in the early modern Empire, it confounds an understanding of slavery as something singular and exceptionally drastic, that can be easily identified.

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