



## **Mauritania's Abolition Movement**

**Anthony C. Andrist**

Independent Researcher, Sydney

### **Abstract**

The Haratine identity movement in Mauritania emerged during the 1970s and has challenged the social acceptance of subordination and subjugation to the ruling class. This paper examines the persistent struggles of the Haratine community against systemic slavery, racial marginalisation, and political exclusion in an ethnographic study. Despite legal abolition, slavery persists via entrenched social hierarchies and religious misinterpretations that justify oppression. The Mauritanian government's denial of slavery, along with the silence of Islamic scholars, perpetuates an environment of injustice. Local abolitionist groups, such as SOS Esclaves and the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), have emerged as central forces in challenging the deeply ingrained structures that maintain the Haratine's oppression. These movements seek not only to dismantle the institution of slavery but also to redefine the social and political landscape of Mauritania by advocating for equality, dignity and human rights. True abolition in Mauritania requires a fundamental shift in societal attitudes, legal enforcement and political representation. Without full recognition of the issue at all levels, the structures of racial and economic exploitation will persist.

### **Introduction**

This article is based on my field research in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania during the winter of 2015-2016. It provides an ethnographic account of the abolition movement and the Haratine community's determination to achieve justice and upward mobility. Despite growing resistance, the fight has not ended. The government's continued denial and minimisation of slavery's existence continue to hinder progress, reinforcing structural barriers that keep the Haratine marginalised.

Global awareness through the internet and social media coupled with NGO collaboration and increased international scrutiny has created a more visible movement,<sup>i</sup> positioning their struggle within a larger, transnational fight for human rights and self-determination. The push for abolition continues to this day.

This paper argues that the battle for abolition is not only a struggle against Mauritania's entrenched hierarchies but also against the imperial and economic forces that sustain them. Recognition of equal opportunity for the Haratine identity demands more than just legal recognition, it requires the dismantling of the power systems that continue to dictate who is seen, heard and valued (McDougall 2016).

### *Early Politics*

The independence of Mauritania from the French in 1960 was well received by many of the elite Beidan (tribes of Arab-Berber origin). This was their return to power under the new banner of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The nation began its statehood under the French-appointed authority of Mukhtar Ould Daddah, a Beidan law graduate from the University of Nouakchott. During their colonial period the French<sup>ii</sup> prolonged the internal dispute between the clerical class (Zawaya) and the Arab (warrior class) by favouring Zawaya with government positions, such as head of state, over the dominant Arabs (Pettigrew 2007, p.66). What was left out of the equation of independence was the place of the Afro-Mauritanians and the Haratine<sup>iii</sup> in society. These marginalised groups represented a greater number of the population than the Beidan, and both of them predated the Beidan in the area. What was significant is that neither of these majority groups were given political representation by the colonial power. Independence irresponsibly left a continuum of the previous one thousand years of Arab-Berber stronghold and domination in the region.<sup>iv</sup>

### *Nouakchott*

Like many cities in West Africa, Nouakchott is a cross section of the region's cultural diversity cramped within a bustling niche of activity. The middle of the day in the Capital Market can be a penetrating bombardment of noise. People shouting for customers to fill crowded cars departing for the city's periphery. Music shops blasting sermons of local imams and competing with advertisement recordings (in a disturbingly endless loop) yelling for phone cards and money exchange. Somewhere off in the distance, a donkey's bray calls out, a familiar cry away from asphalt and traffic jams. Close to a million people are juxtaposed between the encroaching sand dunes of the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic Ocean. What was once a small cluster of tents at the edge of the desert is now the commercial and political hub of a nation (Chenal and Kaufmann 2008, p.166).

The spectacle of daily life easily distracts from the idea that slavery is taking place within a country described as one of the highest rates of slavery per capita in the world (Global Slavery Index 2023, p.78; See also

Guth, Anderson, Kinnard and Tran 2014).<sup>v</sup> In reality, slavery in Mauritania is complicated, caught up in a traditional social hierarchy of privilege and the vastness of the Sahara. The practice of slavery that exists today remains mostly unchecked, or even ignored, by authorities. Another issue is that the practice of slavery is taking place within a relatively small minority<sup>vi</sup> and in some of the most remote regions. The marginal aspect of the practice enables it to be widely dismissed in the country as non-existent. Although legally abolished a fourth time in 1981 (Fleischman 1994, p.84), the persistence of slavery has ignited the country's activists to fight against the enslavement of forgotten victims, and people's passive acceptance. Government attitudes of denying the existence of slavery fuel public opposition and undermine the significant impact of slavery and its eradication. Since French colonial rule, slavery has widely been overlooked and oversimplified by outsiders.<sup>vii</sup> A conspiracy of silence has discouraged people in the country to discuss or accept that racial tension exists. The urban population boom of the 1970s and 80s invariably gathered together a spectrum of people and attitudes. Nouakchott, as a result, is a meeting place for a myriad of political voices and the birthplace of Mauritania's abolition movement.

## **Abolition Begins: EL HOR**

### *Identity Crisis*

During two severe drought periods between 1968 and the early 1980s a large loss of viable agriculture and pasturage influenced the urban migration of Haratine and others from rural areas (Chanel and Kaufmann 2008, p.166). Many within these newly established communities formed political groups and organised themselves against the slavery taking place in villages. The city gave political activists greater mobility than the village, blending in among large populations of Afro-Mauritanians and other Haratine. The slave master's authority was no longer unchallenged as in the restrictive isolation of the village. A new social dynamic emerged from amongst urban flight. The small town of less than two thousand inhabitants in 1955 (Chanel and Kaufmann 2008, p.164-166), became the political catalyst of Haratine autonomy.

I sat with Boubacar Messaoud, a political activist since the 1970s and one of the founders of Mauritania's abolition movement. EL HOR (lit. The Free) was formed in 1978 by Haratine activists as the nation's first underground abolition group. Boubacar explained to me the beginning of the group EL HOR, and how it initiated the use of the title Haratine. "One proof that it started at that time is that the organisation, the name, EL HOR is the organisation of the liberation of Haratine. So they use [*sic*] the term

[Haratine] at that time to qualify themselves”. EL HOR was not only working for the liberation of slavery, but also the emancipation of the Haratine from the Beidan system and their own mentality of enslavement. The term itself is an acronym – E, L, H, OR. It stands for Emancipation, Liberation, Haratine, and Organisation. It also translates directly in Arabic as “the free,” giving it a double meaning. The recognition of Haratine autonomy emerged as an identity that was neither from the Beidan (their former masters) nor from the Afro-Mauritians. Haratine are Arab speaking, with ancestry in Mauritania, and are not Beidan.<sup>viii</sup> The first step after recognising their autonomy was to create, *en masse*, an identity that defined them, and this was the beginning of the term “Haratine”.

They first needed to accept an independent identity and then adopt being Haratine. Many of them initially resisted using the term, he explains, “At that time, it was seen as a bad word, a pejorative word. If you said to a Haratine: ‘You are Haratine,’ you would have a fight”. The term is literally “newly freed” and is now openly used in the country among former slaves and slave owners alike. It is now a common term for those who were “slaves” of the past. He described the ideas behind the formation of the group:

*When they started this idea of liberating themselves they [named it] EL HOR, the organisation of the liberation of Haratine... they framed it in that way because they first wanted to liberate slaves and then to emancipate them from the white domination — from the Beidane. That's why they had liberation and emancipation. Liberation from slavery and emancipation from the domination of the masters. We are Haratine and we are proud of it. That was a huge change.*

The tension between Boubacar and the accepted Beidan way of life came through in our interview. His demeanour is visibly nervous, tense, quickly jumping to conclusions, and easily excitable, prompting a sense of distrust of outsiders. Boubacar’s personality emerged through the course of the second interview as a determined activist committed to the recognition of rights for the Haratine and for claiming their rights. We discussed the existence of slavery in the country, the denial of the government and larger society, inculcation of the slaves at a young age, and how the slave owners manage their position of authority. Boubacar’s seeking of autonomy for the Haratine is openly criticised in the country for dividing national unity. Many people I spoke to were negative and unrelenting in their opinions, convinced that this approach of raising awareness emphasises difference and will lead to more problems of division. Division through racial identity is actually more along the lines of what the government is trying to do as they draw lines

between Arab and non-Arabs (Kohn 2011). The purpose of the abolition movement was not to deal with the problems of slavery in a way that was politically correct or socially sensitive, but to effectively confront racial discrimination and eliminate physical and psychological oppression.

The beginning of EL HOR and the adaptation of a single autonomous identity strengthened the political and psychological force of the Haratine.<sup>ix</sup> The political balance between Beidan and Afro-Mauritians tipped as a result of the Haratine removing themselves from the political shadow of the dominant group. The historical tension between these three has been at ends for generations and came to a head during the Mauritania-Senegal War of 1989 (Fleischman 1994, p.13). As a result, the government has succeeded in exaggerating the rift of identity between the Haratine and the Afro-Mauritians. Boubacar is directly involved with international organisations and easily facilitates discourse in French. Language is a clear distinction from the country's Arabic identity and the Beidan who are in power.

Boubacar explained the political dilemma that the Haratine are facing regarding their own political autonomy: "The issue is that they are separated between two communities. Right? You have the community of Beidan here. You have the community of Afro-Mauritians here. And you have Haratine here". Demarcation of cultural and political lines reflects the country's environmental gradient between the vast desert of the North and the lush sub-Saharan tropics of the South. Mauritania is along a fault line of ecology and historic tribal division. Traditionally, the Arab and Berber tribes dominated the North while the African, non-Arab tribes of the Haalpulaar, Wolof, and Soninke lived beyond the harshness of the Sahara. The Northern tribes migrated south and eventually imposed control over the entire region (Handloff 1990, pp.7-9). The overlap of the geographical and the political within Mauritania has created a unique and dynamic environment. Boubacar expanded on the political realities, "Now, the Beidan want to have all the Haratine amongst them. Because they speak Hasaniyya [the local shared dialect]". The linguistic diversity in the country is often used against the Afro-Mauritians regarding citizenship (Salem 2021). The government ostracises the ethnic minority and in some cases refuses them identification (Fleischman 1994, p.34). Here again, the tension between the groups plays out through politics, "The majority<sup>x</sup> the Black [Afro-Mauritians] want all Haratine because they have the same colour of skin, right? So two people pull them, want to include them". He emphasised the tension inherent in the region<sup>xi</sup> and the drive for autonomy "We don't want to be neither Afro-Mauritians, neither Beidan, because Beidan means, *abeyad* — means white". There was a rising tone in his voice, "We are not white. We're black.

The only relation between Beidan and Haratine is slavery. They're not part of them. They are their slaves. We are Haratine and we are proud of it". For me this was the summary of what it meant for Boubacar to be Haratine. It was not just the affirmation of his own racial heritage but more so the distinction of whom the Haratine are not, that they are their own independent group from among a history of tribalism. They wanted to be Haratine and recognised as unique, not the slaves or even ex-slaves of the Beidan, and not Afro-Mauritanian.

When I asked him what tribe he was from, he stated, "I have yet to find my tribe". He stands clearly in opposition to the social norm of association — that Haratine identity comes from the Beidan tribes, as former slaves. This stern opposition emphasised the importance of ingraining an independent autonomy from the slave owners and from the Afro-Mauritanians. The Haratine must accept their independent political agency and recognise that they are cut off from their own ancestry in a similar way Africans were during the Atlantic Slave Trade, ending up in the Americas and parts of Europe with no connection to their past, other than as African. The Beidan tribes were the owners of slaves. These tribes took slaves as captives and integrated them into the Arab/Berber tribal identity (Fleischman 1994, p.93). The social and political domination of the Beidan remains as an accepted dynamic for many (McDougall 2016).

A major challenge to Mauritanian abolition is the complicated racial and tribal identities that are enmeshed within mental acceptance of hierarchy (Fleischman 1994, p.89).<sup>xii</sup> Traditional social ranks are widely accepted in Arab and African culture (Handloff 1990, p.21), based primarily on lineage, and inevitably race. This traditional thinking can lead to the idea of social norms being fixed within a framework of inequality, built on racial difference (see also Salem, 2009; Fanon). The slave owners are Beidan, which are a mix of Arab and Berber background and fair-skinned. The Beidan are distinguished from the Haratine, who trace their roots to settlements along the Senegal River and other parts of the South (Fleischman 1994, p.81). The problems that Boubacar faces are not just Haratine associating with Beidan tribes. But the greater challenge is to find how Haratine will hold an equal place in the society. This is a challenge both internally and externally. Boubacar and others recognise that the Haratine are in need of structural change within their political and legal surroundings as well as a psychological change of accepting the system as it is (Jenkins 1992, p.76). Abolition is a movement of empowerment for the Haratine to realise their potential within an abolition-driven reformation of Mauritanian society. The vision of unity is to see a nation that stands together for an eradication of

slavery and recognition of Haratine, Afro-Mauritanians, and Beidan as equals.

We discussed the necessity of a unified stance for abolition and its challenges. “If it’s only Haratine, who will do the work, then it will lead to separation — which [the Haratine] don’t want”. He advocates for justice and wants to see the nation work together to eradicate the social and psychological problems promoted by slavery. Unfortunately, a large number of the Beidan I spoke with were unable to agree with his approach. They are convinced raising awareness of identity is disruptive, emphasising more difference, and counter-productive to the social harmony that exists in much of the country. One Beidan stated openly that the abolitionists are corrupt and devour the money they collect from outside. The abolitionists are blamed for seeking European and American sympathies in order to gain more wealth and political strength in the country. This is seen as threatening by many practicing Muslims, both Beidan and Haratine, because it indirectly promotes secularity, or a way of life devoid of the country’s religious Orthodox identity.

### ***Structures of Persistence***

*Consequently, de facto slavery in Mauritania continues to be a slow, invisible process which results in the “social death” of many thousands of women and men.*

Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery (Gulnara Shahinian, 24 August 2010)

*Considering the long history of slavery, however, progress in Mauritania towards eradicating slavery over the past decade represents the first steps on a long road ahead. It is crucial that the country’s robust legislation to combat slavery be fully and effectively implemented, with real consequences for perpetrators and tangible reparations to victims of slavery.*

Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery (Tomoya Obokata 21 July 2023)

The enabling of the elite is to believe that they deserve to be in power, the acceptance of subjugation and inferiority (Fanon 1994, p.10-11). The way that the Beidan maintain their subjugation of the Haratine is through inculcation of the slave in religious meaning and the support of corrupt

judges and legal practitioners who encourage the slave master and ultimately the Beidan elite. Boubacar expressed his frustration with the avoidance of responsibility, “They deny this... the prime minister said, I think, ‘Those are cases, those are people that you brought from Mali. Those are not Mauritians’. You know? So, how can you end this?” The negotiation of justice is used in order to maintain a racial hierarchy. The cases of slavery are still cases of abuse and violations. The denial of fundamental rights to dignity for the Haratine illustrate the detrimental attitude of entitlement and privileged authority.

### ***Recognition***

From the onset of abolition in Mauritania there has been an underlying disdain, and perhaps resistance, to accepting the idea that the Haratine have a right to be free and equal in the society. It is this perceived social hierarchy that many of the elite and the government utilise for keeping themselves in powerful positions. Local abolition groups are directed at fighting first for the end of abuse in the name of slavery, and for the government to accept that slavery actually exists. Following this it is then necessary to look at larger social and psychological problems affecting the community of Haratine. These collective problems ultimately affect the entire society, but how can they be addressed if only a portion (who are mostly the victims) of society recognises them? The government claims that what exists is actually “vestiges” of slavery, and that slavery no longer exists (Shahinian 2010a, p.6). Boubacar makes the point, “Why would they need to make new laws [to combat slavery] if it doesn’t exist?” Most of the Islamic scholars in the country are also able to divert the subject, claiming that what is taking place has no basis in the religion (Thurston 2012b, p.66). I spoke with a Mauritanian who described how the Islamic conquest stopped in Tunis, and the social construction of slavery in Mauritanian was actually based in tribal raids.<sup>xiii</sup> And herein lies the crux of the problem: between the denial of existence and the denial of responsibility, a particular group of people are facing continual abuse and loss of rights, based on their identity. Generations of racial exploitation under the guise of religion have occurred, since the Arab-Berber slavery began — violating the rights, and innocence of a people.



## ***Religion of Inculcation***

What many prominent Islamic scholars from the country are saying is there is no slavery, meaning *slavery* defined through a religious lens. What is taking place is not sanctioned in Islam. At the same time, there are no scholars, that I know of, who are standing up to the government and saying that the violations taking place are wrong. So, discrimination and marginalisation continues unchecked. Out of the eight prominent Mauritanian scholars that I personally spoke with, none of them accepted the existence of slavery. There were some who refused to speak about it entirely, saying they had no details of what was happening in the country and could not make a judgement. One particular imam in Nouadhibou told me, “Slavery [in Islam] is not, these [historical meanings]. Slavery is service”.<sup>xiv</sup>

The government then follows along with its rhetoric, claiming there are no cases of slavery or discrimination in Mauritania, and also claims the cases being brought are people from other nationalities. So there is recognition that a crime is taking place but instead of speaking against the crime, they deny justice for the victims.<sup>xv</sup> Along with this, many of the slave owners claim that they have a right to own the Haratine, abuse, rape, and deny them dignity. So how can this abuse end if there is no clear wrong being addressed? The work of SOS Esclaves and others is bringing cases to the government to recognise the reality of what is happening in the country. But the mentality of the Beidan elite is road blocking the recognition of Haratine rights, specifically. Boubacar explained the steps needed to move forward, “It is possible, that the Haratine and the Beidan be equal, but [the] Beidan have to change their mentality. They have to admit that there is slavery first, and we should work together to end it”. He continued saying this admission is not a reality. Most of the Beidan they do not want to accept what is happening. Along with collective denial, they are claiming to combat slavery by establishing tribunals in regions across the country (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.6; see also Platforms, 2014). He continued, expressing his disappointment with the country’s leaders, “This is not what is happening now, they deny it. The president denies it; the prime minister denies it. So, if you deny it, how can you work on it?<sup>xvi</sup> It is not a matter of creating courts, because they created courts”. The legal system has in itself fallen under international criticism due to the lack of enforcement and buffering of slave owners with more lenient sentences.<sup>xvii</sup> The United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery visited Mauritania in 2009 commending the 2007 law criminalising slavery. The follow up visit in 2014 saw progress through implementing a 2012 constitutional reform and a roadmap to combat the vestiges of slavery in 2014, that fell again under

critique of not doing enough.<sup>xviii</sup> Later visits included 2016 (Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights), and also 2022. Both highlighted important steps that have been taken to ratify legislation and move in the right direction to eradicate poverty as well as slavery. The remaining challenges are still racial inequality, political exclusion and the existence of slavery and their dependency on the ruling class.

Attitude towards entitlement is the underlying interpretation of the laws, legal meanings, authority, and judgment. *Who is right and who is wrong?* is without an objective response. The people who are dominating the political and social sphere are the minority ethnic group. If the attitudes within political structures reflect power, then the environment of change and revolution of the ways of inequality will always find resistance. The onus of justice is on those in authority. Again, there must be a new way of seeing the structure. There must be a reformation or revolution of vision and of attitude. The system must change. The Afro-Mauritanians and the Haratine want to be heard and to discuss new ways to interpret the system, new ways to define the system. The fundamentals of the system must be revolutionised in new ways. In this sense, abolition is challenging the system to be restructured and redefined today.

## **Against the Grain**

### *The Imam*

It was a mild winter's day in the capital city. Kids were playing outside as we drove between the buildings on what wasn't really dirt, more a soft grey sand — the colour and smell of used motor oil, infused with the tar. We were far enough from the main road no longer to be afflicted with the endless noise of congested traffic and large trucks. It was a couple of hours before midday — most of the local congregation was still at work — and the hustle before the Friday prayer service had not yet begun. We stopped and got out in front of a one-story building and Mohamed Mahmoud abruptly came out to meet us - a tall thin man, at ease with small curly tufts of short grey hair on his dark brown skin. He came to this area in 1990 and was a former slave, owned by a Beidane family just north of Nouakchott. He was the *imam* (or spiritual leader) of the local mosque. *The Mosque of Commanding the Right and Forbidding the Wrong* was visible from his front door, about two hundred meters away.

Riyadh is a small neighbourhood on the south side of Nouakchott, adjacent to the capital's largest and renowned district, Arafat. Inside the dark grey cement house, the plain walls stood with a cold depth as a single lightbulb swung from the ceiling and the small windows let in a faint idea of

daylight. He spoke with a matter-of-fact tone, slow and measured. I felt that for him, the ubiquitous nature of hardship, as with most people in poverty, is accepted as part of life. We sat on thin foam mats and listen to his childhood, how he was separated from his mother at a young age. He was about eight or nine years old located just north of Nouakchott when his former master passed away. After the funeral he was sent to work for one of the sons who was in a small town, about six hundred kilometres east. He lived with his new owner doing agricultural work and other physical labour. He mentioned the place of the slave in society “The slaves here — are a vehicle [lit. a thing that gives]. Do you know a vehicle? So you can ride him to get your destination. *Bismillah*. A slave is a vehicle. We arrive at the destination, upon him”. This type of nonchalant resignation to slavery is common. The people who work as slaves or domestic labour are familiar with exploitation and racial stigma. Between poverty and the political domination of the Beidan, many are left with little to no options.

## **I, AM HERE**

Distinctions of social class are an integral part of traditional Mauritanian society. The institution of slavery is expressed as racially structured and oppressive in nature (Fleischman 1994, p.79), emphasising difference. For many, there is a justified exploitation of race through misinterpretation of religion (Brhane 1997). Mohamed understood the nuances of his situation, and distinguished carefully, between the religious tenets and the cultural practice of slavery. “The tradition in Mauritania”, he said, “is that the slave, the blacksmith, and the pastoralist — they’re nothing at all, nothing, nothing at all”. This distinction is reinforced in a religious space. He went on to explain, for most Haratine, seeking knowledge and joining the congregation in the mosque was not valued. Some Haratine in the rural areas find the company of Beidan discouraging, especially in the mosque. He elaborated on the marginalised experience and indifference within the Haratine community before their awareness began. “People who are called Haratine, or slaves, at that time [didn’t have] anyone to ask. They didn’t see [education] as important. For them, [seeking knowledge] didn’t occur to them”. There was a collective distraction that would be the advantage of the slave owner. Ignorance was keeping the slaves occupied in their work and indirectly preventing them from critically questioning their place in society. He expressed the disinterest among the Haratine community, “They didn’t ask, it didn’t matter to them. [The Haratine] would become accustomed to this — [it was] not important for [them]. The prayer in the mosque — they wouldn’t even go at all”. Their reluctance to be in the mosque

was not uncommon. I have spoken with several Haratine directly from the small village where I lived; they felt discouraged and many times worked during the time of congregational prayers. It was usually the older Haratine that could be seen in the mosque; perhaps their retirement from the heavy physical work gave them enough reason to join the others in the village. Again, if they felt stigmatised, they would pray elsewhere.

Social privilege was visible in religious propaganda such as “the Paradise<sup>xix</sup> of the slave” (see Esseissah 2015, p.). Although this and other ideologies are bereft of any religious foundation, those who did not know better, accepted it. Mohamed explained how this type of information, although falsely attributed as Islamic law, is passed on with perceived religious authority. He mentioned a popular saying from the Beidan, confirming this idea propagated to the slaves, “By God, [the masters] would say this for sure. ‘The paradise of the slave is under the feet of his master’.<sup>xx</sup> This with [the Beidan] — it is like as if it was [sacred] text and ruling, as if it was revealed”.<sup>xxi</sup> He continued to explain other precepts and the underlying inability of the Beidan authority to be challenged by the uneducated. “One of them says: ‘ If he kills [his slave] nothing would reach him [of repercussions]’. This is a belief, but not from the *Sharia* (Islamic law)”. It was clear he had researched the details of these and other precepts. It could have been through his study that he saw the religion being clearly misinterpreted. He came to terms with it by drawing the distinction between learning and ignorance. He explained how the ignorant enable their own demise:

*Look... the ignorant person, is nothing. Because if they are told to go this way, they go this way. If you say to him to go over here, they go over here. If they are told they don't have any problems, they wouldn't have any problems. Someone who doesn't know, doesn't know. He doesn't have anything he dreads... people rely on this. By God, by God, we were learning, and there was no arriving at a place [of realisation] — no life — except with learning. [It was] not possible... because awakening, can't happen while a person doesn't know anything.*

Through the lack of education and without the freedom to challenge authority there remains a people unable to leave what they see as paradise in the next world. The belief and desire for salvation is there, but how can the slave owner be challenged as to how this is achieved, if no one questions his authority or has the resources to understand different meanings. The perpetual cycle of ignorance and acceptance of slave owner propaganda

remained largely unchallenged in Mauritania. The extent of its reality came through as he went on:

*Even now, NOW, there are slaves who are told that: “You are free”. They say: “No, no, no. I don’t need that. I need the paradise, with you, that is under your feet”, like this — they would prefer being a slave to free... our freedom, for us, isn’t anything.*

Mohamed’s ability to critically analyse the social norm — especially authority — is what enabled him to seek answers. When he described his unrest and unsettled feelings with his life, he began to study Islamic knowledge and came to a point where he could distinguish between scholarship and what people were saying.

*What I’m telling you is - I thought and I felt — a displeasure of this life... for example, my awareness, for life and what is concerning it. And every time in my understanding, I would think that this would disappear... I began in myself, something loathed in myself, I couldn’t bear this, and I wondered how could my condition pass.*

The critical self-analysis of his own condition may not have been the direct impetus for change. What was facing him initially was an agitation of who he was, his identity. His calling came in the form of seeking knowledge and he became a leader for the local community, perhaps among those facing the same internal struggles. He talked about the realities of being a visible authority in the community, how not everyone was able to accept it. “Yes, some of them would come, have a look, and they would see the imam and leave. (Laughing) For us, our belief is in God. And we don’t look at any of these things. By looking, you are a slave. But it could be you are not a slave. But visibly, you are a slave”. He did not seem to have any issues whether the Beidan accepted him or not. He arrived at a place in his own realisation and self-confidence that accepted who and where he was. What is interesting in his approach was that he actually was looking for resolution through the tradition and beliefs of the slave owners themselves. He did not reject the entire religion and its principles but studied and was able to distinguish between what the religion said and what was claimed by people who had not studied. His resolve and resignation in his own self-identity had a visible impact beyond just him as an individual. It came through when he was explaining a term to us: “*fard ra ‘si*” (lit: a single head). He explained it as “that happening by itself”. He was using the example of him being present in his current position, “You don’t need that I am here, and I, AM. You don’t

need this to happen, but I, AM— PRESENT”. He raised his voice and his conviction shook in my ears. I tried to swallow and my eyes swelled with tears as I took it all in. He continued to speak. “Disliked by you or liked – I, AM. This is it — [it] happens by itself”. He embodied his realisation. He reached a point that was unwavering and he simply stated it.

### **The Making of a President: IRA**

*We are actors for change — gradual change certainly, but also a radical, definitive break from all forms of coercion, from moral corruption and from the practice of using religion to legitimise unacceptable crimes. We will no longer accept this archaic practice of violent repression (Biram Dar Abeid 2016).*

Opposition to slavery within Mauritania took a new turn in 2008 when Biram Dah Abeid, a former slave, founded the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania). This was an illegal organisation, unlike the more diplomatic SOS Esclaves of which Biram had earlier been a member. The threat of arrest at any point distinguishes the IRA from other abolitionist groups; its members explained to me that their work was not an administration-centred activism like SOS, as they were “constantly in the field”, engaging and seeking the freedom of slaves across the country. As the name implies, IRA is also focused on a revival, or *resurgence*, particularly through religion. This adopts and challenges the inseparable element of religion in the country that the Beidan elite has been able to use to maintain the institution of slavery largely unchallenged by dissenting voices.

The potential of the IRA erupted in protests in April 2012, when members of the group, led by Biram, burned Islamic jurisprudence books in southern Nouakchott, drawing the attention of millions. Thousands gathered the next day in front of the Presidential Palace demanding Biram’s execution (IRA-USA 2015). He was arrested after the protest with other members of the group and wrote a letter from prison formally apologising for actions.<sup>xxii</sup> Although detrimental to a unified platform between Beidan and Haratine the incineration had served its purpose well — to grab the attention of the nation and the world about the religious justification of slavery in the country.

The IRA’s emergence has shown a mixed trajectory of popularity and resistance. The incineration of Islamic texts shocked the country and thrust IRA into the international stage. Biram now travels internationally promoting the IRA’s fight against racial slavery and is not shy of his actions.

He declares that the books he burned legalise slavery and that he burned them, to “draw attention on the prohibition, to refer to them and to use them as justification of the maintenance of slavery practices” (Platforms 2012). No doubt abolition has been the principle generator of discussions about the larger pathways of political representation and human dignity that can bring both slaves and slave owners to a collective understanding of Mauritanian society. He is a rising star in the eyes of many marginalised Mauritians, beyond those enslaved, and a relief to their long awaited representation. This feeling of marginalisation pervades not only the Haratine community, after all, but also the AfroMauritians. The population of Mauritania has long awaited for justice to be served and equality, mentioned in the constitution, to be practiced.

The abolition movement is thus concerned with political autonomy and the independence of Haratine as a group from the slave owners, but it is about more than bringing the institution of slavery in Mauritania to an end. The abolition movement is largely about fighting the belief that people are enslaved by “the will of God” (Conway-Smith 2015; McDougall 2018a) and not given an option to this Divine Ordinance. The larger idea behind abolition is the questioning and deconstruction of the belief that religious principles justify texts that codify slavery. This final approach of deconstruction challenges not only the books that traditional scholars adhere to in Mauritania and across North Africa, but also the assumption that challenging the application of the texts is an attack on Islam in Mauritania and specifically the Beidan elite identity. This conflict has begun to untangle rights to applications of the law and how the principles of Islam need to be practiced. The religion has underlying principles that fundamentally do not contradict any of the principles that the IRA subscribes to, including human rights, equality, and dignity (Platforms 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the divide between the enslaved and the former slave owners has grown, making political representation an urgent necessity for the Haratine. From the onset of the abolition movement, they have led the charge, but what has emerged extends beyond their cause alone. The struggle has evolved into a broader fight against racial marginalisation, and what McDougall (2018b) calls “Mauritania’s history of genocide and contemporary practices of discrimination”. This movement directly challenges the entrenched power of the elite Beidan and the structures of inequality that sustain it. While previous criticism was directed at Abdul Aziz (Lamlili 2016), today Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, although sitting his second term, is again the target of disapproval.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The meanings of marginalisation extend beyond politics, pervading cultural definitions of Blackness and Whiteness (Fanon 1994, p.84). The IRA has demonstrated that the fight is not only against political and religious ideologies but also against the very foundation on which they are built. As SOS Esclaves applies international pressure for policy reform and Mohamed Mahmoud reclaims his voice through traditional teachings, the IRA is reshaping the concept of nationhood and dismantling the positions of traditional scholars that religious justification is built on and manipulated to uphold racial hierarchies. This new vision of Mauritania is one of tolerance, equality, and dignity for all people that my research has sought to explore.

Beyond abolition, the movement is reclaiming the religious principles of equality and justice,<sup>xxiv</sup> challenging cultural distortions that have exacerbated the divide between former masters and slaves. This collective awakening has given rise to new political possibilities, positioning the IRA and its leader, Biram Dah Abeid, as formidable challengers to the ruling establishment including the presidency itself.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The emergence of the internet and social media platforms and apps has not been always positive. See: Obokata 2023; Kah 2021; Lewin 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Mauritania was officially included in the AOF with the six other French West African territories—Senegal, the French Sudan, Guinea, Ivory Coast (present-day Cote d'Ivoire), Dahomey (present-day Benin), and Niger. (Handloff 1990, p.17).

<sup>iii</sup> The Haratine held a distinctly different position to the Afro-Mauritians. See: Denna 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> Originally Mauritania had been a part of the French Occidental (OAF), headed from Dakar. It was after the French appointed a Beidan government that Mauritania began to gradually withdrawal interest from Black African nations and align more with an Arab identity of North Africa and the Middle East. The Arabisation of Mauritania began in 1966 (Fleischman 1994, p.93) through compulsory Arabic language in public schools and government communication. Within two decades of independence the monopoly held by the Beidan began to unravel. It was through multiple factors, such as the racial violence against Afro-Mauritians and the Haratine developing political autonomy (separating themselves from the traditional Beidan identity), that Beidan political control was challenged.

<sup>v</sup> Created in 2013, the Global Slavery Index offers comprehensive discussions about the state of many of the world's countries, though there



have been some criticisms regarding methodology (see Gallagher 2014, 2016).

<sup>vi</sup> Although the Haratine are approximately 35-45% of the country's population (Fois and Pes 2012, p.153), the estimates of slavery by foreign NGOs can fluctuate from 1.058 to over 20%. According to MRG the Sub-Saharan population is near 25% and the Haratine at 45%. See: *Mauritania* 2019.

<sup>vii</sup> See First-World sensationalised reporting Bales 2012; Brown 2015; Okeowo 2014; and Finnegan 2000.

<sup>viii</sup> His concept of a socially distinct racial identity parallels the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s United States. (See also: Muñoz 2007)

<sup>ix</sup> Durkheim (1975, p.160, 161) discusses a similar idea of the dualism between our sensations and our morality, the individual and the collective; in a way these beginnings of EL HOR demonstrated a reality that existed within the individuals' ideals that was greater than the individuals.

<sup>x</sup> Although listed as minorities (see Minority Rights Group International 2013a, 2013b), the Haratine are a larger population size than the Beidan. Although contested, the CIA World Factbook (1994) delineates the three ethnic groups as 40% Haratine (Black Moors), 30% Beidane (White Moors of Arab-Amazigh descent) and 30% Afro-Mauritanian (Sub-Saharan Mauritians from the Senegal River Valley). What is notable here is that both the Haratine and Afro-Mauritanians are politically marginalised and lack representational power in a country of 4.7 million (2022 estimate).

<sup>xi</sup> When we think of the interface between two mediums, such as the edge of a coral reef or the edge of a forest, there is a variation in the ecology, such that the productivity increases numbers and types of species. Similarly, when there is the cultural 'edge effect' (Mollison 1991, p.26), such as between the intersection of the Arab desert and the African tropics, there is an embodied tension, or energy, that manifests. This energy is particularly beginning to manifest from the rise of Haratine as independent political players.

<sup>xii</sup> Similar to the rise of the Algerians against French domination and the "liquidation of all untruths," (Fanon 1963, p.250), for the Haratine there is a collective need to coexist and triumph through Haratine liberation.

<sup>xiii</sup> Village raids between tribes was common in Bedouin society (Handloff 1990, p.8. 9). In terms of the legitimacy of slavery, Islam accepts combat sanctioned by the state (Hanson 2007, p.89-92) as the only means to enslave another person.

<sup>xiv</sup> The way he explained it was that slavery is similar to a type of obligation or restriction that is placed on those captured in battle, sparing their lives. This description gives the idea of slavery as something that is not the

historical slavery, the exploitation and abuse, of dominant civilisations, something that is somehow more humanitarian (see McDougall 2005, p.958).

<sup>xv</sup> Similar principle to victims of sexual assault. See: Whitson 2023.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Haratine are not like one community who thinks together. There are many who are still related to their masters who say:“ It doesn’t exist.” But there are others, like Biram, who say:“ No. It exists and we got to fight it.” Or “every day on the street, to fight it”. To answer your question precisely, “If the Beidan as the President and the Prime Minister of the country, etc., will continue to deny that slavery exists, so there is no way to work on it, and the other Haratine who think that it exists, they will continue fighting for it. Maybe they will take weapons to continue this fight and there will never be national unity,” There will be “separation.” Boubacar Messoud (personal communication).

<sup>xvii</sup> This can be seen in cases such as the right of inheritance where legal cases are reclassified for more lenient sentences (See: Garciandia, Ryan and Webb 2020, p.10).

<sup>xviii</sup> The saga of enacting practical and positive change has been an ongoing frustration, as policy incrementally gets better for the disempowered. See: Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.9; Human Rights Council 2016; Platforms 2015.

<sup>xix</sup> This is the eternal bliss of the next life anticipated by those who are believers and commit to right action: “But those who believe and do good works are the company of paradise, wherein they will abide” - The Quran (2:82).

<sup>xx</sup> This is akin to the familiar prophetic saying, paradise is beneath the feet of your mother (An-Nasâ’i 2007).

<sup>xxi</sup> Islamic law is derived from revelation, prophetic action, and the consensus of religious scholars. The explanatory texts then, are renditions of these three combined. The weight or validity of revelation supersedes the scholarly explanation, because it is a direct source. The point is that without education, there is no critical understanding when information such as “the paradise of the slave,” can be passed as scholarly or even revealed text, for the ignorant.

<sup>xxii</sup> See also Platforms 2012. This was not the end of his encounters with authority. Dah Abeid was jailed in 2014 and 2018, neither event discouraging his persistence nor deterring his momentum. He was runner up in every election in which he participated over the last 11 years. See: electionguide.org 2022.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Quashing dissent is a typical authoritarian characteristic, see: *The Authoritarian Playbook* 2022, p.13; see also: *Public criticism faced by arbitrary arrests in Mauritania* 2020; BTI 2022 , n.d.; Mohamed 2024.

<sup>xxiv</sup> These principles are universal. Justice and equality, ironically are spoken of highly in Western circles but play out very differently in the Global South.

## References

- Abeid, B.D. (2016). *Biram Dah Abeid testimony, Front Line Defenders*. Available at: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/testimonial/biram-dah-abeid-testimony>.
- An-Nasâ'i, A. bin 'Ali (2007) 'Chapter 6. Concession Allowing One Who Has A Mother To Stay Behind', in H. Khattâb (ed.), N. al-Khattâb (tran.) *English Translation of Sunan An-Nasâ'i*. Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, vol. 4, p. 27.
- Bales, K., (2012). *Disposable people: New slavery in the global economy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brhane, M., (1997). *Narratives of the past, politics of the present identity, Subordination and the Haratines of Mauritania*, volume 1. University of Chicago, Department of Political Science.
- Brown, S., (2015). August 28. Black lives matter – except Biram Dah Ould Abeid's. <<http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/259933/black-lives-matter-%E2%80%93-except-biram-dah-ould-abeids-stephen-brown>>.
- BTI 2022. (n.d.). BTI 2022 Mauritania Country Report. [online] <<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MRT>>.
- Conway-Smith, E. (2015). October 19. *'Slaves by the will of God': why Mauritania has the highest percentage of slaves in the world*. <http://www.globalpost.com/article/6671326/2015/10/19/slaves-will-god-why-mauritania-has-highest-percentage-slaves-world>.
- Chenal, J. and Kaufmann, V., (2008). 'Nouakchott', *Cities*, 25(3), pp. 163–175. doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2007.12.001.
- Denna, Z.A.S., (2018). *The Politics of The Haratine Social Movements in Mauritania (1978-2014)*. In *Social Currents in North Africa: Culture and Governance after the Arab Spring* (pp. 117-142). Oxford University Press.
- Durkheim, É. and Bellah, R.N., (1975). *On morality and society: Selected writings*. 11th edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.149-163.
- Electionguide.org*. (2022). *IFES Election Guide | Country Profile: Mauritania*. <<https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/137/>> .
- Fanon, F., Sartre, J.-P. and Farrington, C. (trans), (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books, pp.200-250.
- Fanon, F. and Markmann, C.L.L., (1994). *Black skin, white masks*. New York: Avalon Travel Publishing.
- Esseissah, K., (2015). "Paradise is under the feet of your master": The construction of the religious basis of racial slavery in the Mauritanian

- Arab-Berber community', *Journal of Black Studies*, 471, pp. 3–23.  
doi: 10.1177/0021934715609915. 65
- Finnegan, W., (2000). A slave in New York: From Africa to the Bronx, one man's long journey to freedom. *The New Yorker*, 60, pp.50-61.
- Fleischman, J. and Watch, H.R., (1994). Mauritania's campaign of terror: State sponsored repression of black Africans. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Fois, M. and Pes, A. (eds.) (2012). *Politics and minorities in Africa*. Rome: Aracne.
- Gallagher, A., (2014). *The Global Slavery Index: seduction and obfuscation*. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/anne-gallagher/global-slavery-index-seduction-and-obfuscation>>.
- Gallagher, A., (2016). *Unravelling the 2016 Global Slavery Index. Part one*. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/anne-gallagher/unravelling-2016-global-slavery-index>>.
- Garciandia, R., Ryan, M. and Webb, P. (2020) Volume 5, issue 1 Advancing the Enforcement of Anti-slavery Legislation in Mauritania, *Journal of Modern Slavery*. <[https://slavefreetoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Advancing\\_the\\_Enforcement\\_of\\_Antislavery\\_Legislation\\_in\\_Mauritania.pdf](https://slavefreetoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Advancing_the_Enforcement_of_Antislavery_Legislation_in_Mauritania.pdf)>
- The Global Slavery Index 2023* (2023). *Walk Free*. <<https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/05/17114737/Global-Slavery-Index-2023.pdf>>.
- Guth A, Anderson R, Kinnard K, Tran H. (2014). Proper methodology and methods of collecting and analyzing slavery data: an examination of the Global Slavery Index. *Social Inclusion*. 2:14–22.
- Handloff, R. E. & Library of Congress. Federal Research Division., (1990). *Mauritania: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress.
- Hanson, H.Y., (2007). The creed of Imam Al-Tahawi. Zaytuna Institute, pp. 89-92.
- IRA-USA, (2015). April 28. *Anniversary of burning Malikite law books*. <<http://ira-usa.org/anniversary-of-the-burning-of-malikite-law-books/>>.
- Jenkins, R., (1992). *Pierre Bourdieu*. New York: Routledge, pp.66-102. 66
- Kah, A.S. (2021). *The Role of the Internet in Fueling the Growth of Human Trafficking in The Gambia, CIPESA*. <<https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/the-role-of-the-internet-in-fueling-the-growth-of-human-trafficking-in-the-gambia.pdf>>.
- Kohn, S., (2011). *Fear and statelessness in Mauritania*. <<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/fear-and-statelessness-mauritania>>.

- Lewin, E. (2019). *Technology can help us end the scourge of modern slavery. here's how*, *World Economic Forum*.  
 <<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/04/technology-can-help-us-end-the-scourge-of-modern-slavery-heres-how/>>.
- Marlin, R. and Mathewson, S. (2015). *Enforcing Mauritania's Anti-Slavery Legislation*, *Minority Rights Group*.  
 <<https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/mrg-rep-maur2-nov15-eng-2.pdf>>.
- Mauritania (2019). *Minority Rights Group*.  
 <<https://minorityrights.org/country/mauritania/>>.
- Mauritania - *The World Factbook* (1994). *Central Intelligence Agency*.  
 <<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mauritania/>>.
- McDougall, E.A. (2005). 'Living the legacy of slavery', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 45(179–180), pp. 957–986.  
 doi:10.4000/etudesafricaines.15068.
- McDougall, E.A. (2016). *Life in Nouakchott is not true liberty, not at all: Living the legacies of slavery in Nouakchott, Mauritania*, *OpenDemocracy*. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/life-in-nouakchott-is-not-true-liberty-not-at-all-living-legacies-of-s/>>.
- McDougall, E.A. (2018a). 'What Is Islamic About Slavery in Muslim Societies?' Cooper, Concubinage and Contemporary Legacies of 'Islamic Slavery' in North, West and East Africa. Palgrave Macmillan eBooks, pp.7–36. <[https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59755-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59755-7_2)>.
- McDougall, A. et al. (2018b). *Double Jeopardy, Africa Is a Country*.  
 <<https://africasacountry.com/2018/12/double-jeopardy/>>.
- Minority Rights Group International (2013a). *Black Africans - minority rights group*. <<http://minorityrights.org/minorities/black-africans/>>.
- Minority Rights Group International (2013b). *Haratin - minority rights group*.  
 <<http://minorityrights.org/minorities/haratin/>>.
- Mohamed, A. (2024). Mauritania's President Ould Ghazouani seeks re-election amid regional security crisis. [online] AP News.  
 <<https://apnews.com/article/mauritania-election-sahel-slavery-migration-35479970ef70361b7d44580e4493595e>>
- Mollison, B. (1991). *Introduction to Permaculture*. Tyalgum, Australia: Tagari Publications.
- Muñoz, C., (2007). *Youth, identity, power*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.  
 <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/08/freedom-fighter>>.
- Obokata, T. (2023). A/HRC/54/30/add.2: Visit to Mauritania | ohchr, OHCHR.  
 <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5430add2-visit-mauritania>>.

- Okeowo, A. (2014). A Mauritanian Abolitionist's Crusade Against Slavery. [online] *The New Yorker*
- Pettigrew, E. (2007). Colonizing the Mahadra: Language, Identity, and Power in Mauritania Under French Control. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African studies*, 33:2-3.
- Platforms, P. (2012). June 7. *Statement of Biram Ould Abeid from prison*. <<http://unpo.org/article/14382>>.
- Platforms, P. (2014). January 9. Haratin: Mauritania to set up special slavery tribunal. <<http://unpo.org/article/16732>>.
- Platforms, P. (2015). January 23. Mauritanian Roadmap insufficient to combat consequences of slavery. <<http://unpo.org/article/17883>. 68>.
- Salem, Z.O. (2021) ‘“Hands off my citizenship!” Biometrics and its politics in Mauritania’, in *Taylor and Francis Group*. Milton Park : Routledge, pp. 203–220. <<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003053293-15/hands-citizenship-zekeria-ould-ahmed-salem-nora-bardelli>>.
- Salem, Z.O.A. (2009). ‘Barefoot activists: Transformations in the Haratine movement in Mauritania’, in *Movers and shakers: Social movements in Africa (African dynamics)*, eds Ellis, S. / and van Kessel, I. Leiden: Brill Academic Pub, pp.156-177.
- Shahinian, G. and Human, UN. (2010a). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Including Its Causes and Consequences, Gulnara Shahinian*. [online] United Nations Digital Library System. <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/685518?ln=en&v=pdf>> \.
- Thurston, A., (2012). ‘ Shaykh Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew (b. 1963), a Salafi Scholar in Contemporary Mauritania’, *Annual Review Of Islam In Africa*, 11, pp. 64–67; 69.
- Whitson, S.L. (2023) *Mauritania: Rape Survivors at Risk, Human Rights Watch*. <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/05/mauritania-rape-survivors-risk>>.