

# **Defining Diversity in Mauritania's Abolition Movement**

Anthony C. Andrist (BA)

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Research (MRES)*

Department of Anthropology  
Macquarie University  
Sydney, Australia

Supervisor: Dr Chris Vasantkumar  
June 2017

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Statement of Authorship.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>9</b>
I. Mauritania's the place .....	9
II. Early Haratine politics .....	11
III. Abolition as a political force .....	13
IV. Senegal and the Afro-Mauritanians.....	13
V. The next wave of activism: beyond abolition .....	15
VI. Discussion on methodology and scope.....	16
VII. Literature.....	17
VIII. Limitations.....	18
<b>The Politics of Abolition .....</b>	<b>19</b>
I. Urban Haratine.....	19
i. <i>Nouakchott</i> .....	19
ii. <i>Abolition Begins</i> .....	20
iii. <i>Lineage</i> .....	23
iv. <i>Unity</i> .....	26
II. Structures of Persistence.....	29
i. <i>Mentality of injustice</i> .....	29
ii. <i>Recognition</i> .....	29
iii. <i>Forget the Past</i> .....	32
iv. <i>Translating Law</i> .....	36
v. <i>Courts</i> .....	37
III. Religion of Inculcation .....	39
i. <i>Mentality of a slave</i> .....	40
ii. <i>Authority of a Father</i> .....	41
<b>Against the Grain .....</b>	<b>44</b>
I. The Imam.....	44
II. I AM HERE .....	45
III. Taking a Stand .....	48
IV. Meanings of Freedom .....	52
V. Resolution.....	55
<b>Islam Reformed.....</b>	<b>57</b>
I. IRA in Arafat .....	57
II. Biram and the Formation of IRA .....	59
III. Religious Meaning.....	59
IV. The Making of a President.....	61
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>65</b>

References.....	67
APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL .....	74

## **Abstract**

Meanings of identity and recognition are mobilising forces within Mauritania's marginalised class of newly freed slaves (Black Moors or Haratine). This thesis explores the meanings and approaches to freedom and the abolition of slavery, within and alongside, the Haratine community and manifestations of agency in Mauritania, particularly around ideas of self-worth. The Mauritanian government officially ended slavery in 1981 (Marlin and Mathewson 2015, p.3) and since that time has failed to address structural racism, the existence of de-facto slavery, and religious attitudes toward inculcation of the Haratine. These external factors are additional to an already disenfranchised community. This ethnography examines narrations of empowerment and the embodiment of agency that go against societal and structural forces of discrimination, to demonstrate that human resilience and mobilisation are transformational meanings of identity.

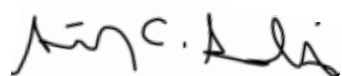
*O My servants, I have forbidden oppression for Myself and made it  
forbidden amongst you, so do not oppress one another<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> On the authority of Abu Ghifari, (may God be pleased with him) from the Prophet (peace and blessings of God on him), from the sayings that he relates from his Lord. Transmitted by Imam Muslim.

## Statement of Authorship

This is to certify that the following thesis is all my own work, except where acknowledgement has been made to the work or ideas of others. It has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anthony C. Andrist', is positioned above the 'Signed:' line.

Signed: .....

Anthony C. Andrist

## Acknowledgements

Thank God, first and last. I would like to also acknowledge my brothers and sisters of Mauritania for sharing with me, supporting me, and teaching me about the world we all take part in. Special thanks for those who gave me time and insight into their ideas and understandings, primarily Sheikh Saleck Ould Siddina as my teacher and friend, Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Saleck for his unwavering support and energy, Sidi Ould Baty and Mohamed Ould Moine for their insight and support, Boubacar Messaoud and the members of SOS Esclaves, Sarah Mathewson of Anti-Slavery International and her facilitation of the interviews, Yahya Ibrahim Yahya for his support and tolerance of my company, Bilal Mahmoud for his time, and finally Mohamed 'Esa and Mohamed Dady of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), who generously allowed me to spend time with them. I am also deeply grateful to the men and women of Tagant who have let me into their homes and villages as one of their family.

My sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr Chris Vasantkumar, for his guidance, support, and distillation of clarity on this project. A heartfelt thanks to the professors and staff of Macquarie for the department's financial and intellectual support, especially Associate Professor Chris Houston for all his time and effort, Associate Professor Kalpana Ram and Dr Jaap Timmer for their encouragement, Professor Greg Downey, Associate Professor Lisa Wynn, and Dr Aaron Denham for their support and assistance with any ethical questions. My deepest respect and admiration to the talented cohort that I have had the benefit of writing and sharing ideas with, especially within our writing group. A sincere thank you to Avril Bryant and Liz Norsa for helping with last minute revisions.

On a personal note, many thanks to my young girls, A'laa, Israa', and Maryam, all of whom have patiently supported me in my absence and assisted me with the critical analysis of my work. To Um Samier for all her patience along with her supportive and understanding family. Thank you to Iman Dandan and her husband, Bahjat Alaadel, for their mutual support and engaging conversations. Thank you to my sister Enas Rachwani and her family for all their effort and support with this project. To my parents Charlotte and Anson Andrist, a humble

thank you for your unrivalled energy and excitement for learning, without whom none of this would have been possible. Finally, to my loving, patient, and supportive spouse, Sahar Dandan, for all the energy and time expended redirecting me to achieve the desired outcomes, thank you again. May God bless you all.

This paper is dedicated to my teachers and guides in life, Murabit Al Hajj Ould Fahfou, Murabit Mohamed Alamin Ould Abdur Rahman, Murabit Ahmed Fal Ould Ahmedena, Shiekh Abdullah Ould Ahmedena, the Sharif, Mohamed Zain Ould Qasim, may your lights continue to shine for us all.



# Introduction

## I. Mauritania's the place

I first heard about Mauritania from a mutual friend in England. Yunus was the director of the Muslim Welfare House in Seven Sisters, North London. I had recently converted to Islam<sup>2</sup> and was asking for advice about an Arabic speaking country to study and learn more about Islam from traditional scholars. "Go to Mauritania. They have *pure Arabic*<sup>3</sup> there. They still sit on the floor and write with a [wooden] board and pen." There was a teacher from California Yunus had met in England. He encouraged me to visit the Californian's teacher somewhere in Mauritania. It sounded intriguing and I was without any commitments. I soon left the UK and went back home to the United States. I looked up the Mauritanian embassy and organised a visitor's visa for three months. Within a year from that first conversation, I was flying back across the Atlantic to Madrid and planning to catch a bus south, across the Mediterranean and through Morocco, then across the border into Mauritania. My haphazard plan worked out. With barely the ability to speak a sentence of Arabic, I travelled through Morocco and eventually landed in the very village where the Californian teacher had been in the 1980s. It was a traditional Islamic school, a *madrassa*, where they had been teaching traditional Islamic texts for generations. It was a remnant of the schools of the tenth century North Africa established during the migration of the Almoravids into the Western Sudan (Handloff 1990, p.9). I felt at home, somehow, in this strange place, with the teachers and groups of students around. I had obligations back in the United States and after a few months in Mauritania, I was again in Spain, this time to meet an imam in Granada, who was from the village I had just visited. The following year I returned to Mauritania, this time staying for over two years in the village. I went back to the United States to visit family and gather enough money to return as soon as I could to the village.

---

<sup>2</sup> The conversion of Islam is a verbal profession of faith with conviction in one's heart.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of language existing in any state of purity is idealistic and false. What most people refer to when they speak about "pure Arabic" is as that which came through the revelation of the Quran and the prophetic sayings (hadith).

During one of my trips home my mother showed me a clipping from the New Yorker (Finnegan 2000) about a Mauritanian slave who had escaped and was living in New York, Moctar Teyeb. I asked some friends in Mauritania about slavery. Most of them were dismissive, “That’s just lies,” they would assure me, “there’s no slavery here. Where have you seen slavery?” I never thought I did. I never saw the abuse, especially the things the article mentioned – punishing a runaway slave by tying their legs around a camel intentionally left thirsty for weeks, then leading the camel to drink so the slave’s legs are pulled out of their hip sockets (Finnegan 2000, p.50). I didn’t see that. I saw racial discrimination. I saw the young Black Moor (Haratine) boys being given chores at the same time the White Moor (Beidan) kids had to study. I heard the way people spoke to the Haratine - *their Haratine*. I remember visiting a friend’s date palms when he commented to his worker, “When those dates are black, just like you, then pick them.” I didn’t see physical harm or hear of any rape or a master killing their slave’s infant child, being left in the sand to die. These types of crimes occasionally surfaced out of international media, exposing a different Mauritania<sup>4</sup>, but what did I know? And where was this slavery happening? All of these stories seemed make-believe.

I later heard from abolitionists and human rights organisations how abuse was taking place in Mauritania, mostly in the empty northern desert or in remote regions to the east, where slave owners were less educated and largely unregulated by authority. This all seemed contradictory to my experience. The benefit I had from living at a madrassa was that, although there was racial division, the entire community was learning or helping the students learn. There were some Afro-Mauritanian students, or even students of dark brown complexion that came to study, whether they considered themselves Beidan or Haratine - I never asked. The racial division seemed voluntary, in other words people seemed casual about who they were around. In the United States there are many regions that are well and truly racially divided, even to the extent people can be killed in some

---

<sup>4</sup> See Weinberg 2005; Platforms 2013b, 2016b.

areas. The racial division observable in Mauritania was not new to me. If anything, it was less tense, quite a natural segregation. But was it? As I spent more time out of the village, I became familiar with the Haratine in the area. From day-long walks, visiting isolated hamlets, on the way to another village or just stopping at a few tents grouped together, several kilometres out of the school's vicinity. I was called a friend of the Haratine, although I never understood the details of Mauritanian history or the delineated political structures ingrained in tribal society. I understood more when I was back in the United States as I learned about Arab society and Mauritanian history. Mauritania historically defines class stratification between social groups. At the top are the social elite, clerics (Zawaya) and military (Arab) that make up the Beidan. Next are the pastoralists (Znaga) and blacksmiths (Mu'allim); the slaves ('Abid) and griots (Igawin) make up the lower levels of society (Handloff 1990, p.11). I have understood these groups based more within the social landscape than a division of labour (see McDougall, Brhane & Urf 2003, p.54). The government's ongoing political disruption and unrest has been a series of power struggles between the Zawaya and the Arab elite (see also Toure 2012). In other words, the political marginalisation of the Haratine has happened in the region since the earliest contact with Arab-Berber society (Handloff 1990, p.14). The term 'Abid is literally slaves (sing. 'Abd). What has developed since the country's final abolition of slavery (Marlin and Mathewson 2015, p.3) is an additional identity of the freed slaves or Haratine (lit. newly free; m. sing. Hartani)<sup>5</sup>. From what I have understood through Mauritians, the popular opinion is that slaves (freed slaves included) and Igawin are seen as sharing an equally devalued position (Brhane 1997, p.5; Esseissah 2015, p.15) from other groups. Although amongst themselves there are levels or preference, such as a freed slave over a slave.

## **II. Early Haratine politics**

The independence of Mauritania from the French in 1960 was well received by many of the elite Beidan. This was their return to power under the new banner of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The nation began its statehood under the

---

<sup>5</sup> There are some authors who describe Haratine as three stages: free, slave, and in between (McDougall 2015b). I haven't understood this third sub-division from any Mauritians, but I have clarified the two divisions of slave and freed slave.

French-appointed authority of Mukhtar Ould Daddah, a Beidan law student from the University of Paris (France). During the colonial period the French prolonged the internal dispute between the Zawaya and the Arab by favouring Zawaya with government positions, such as president, 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 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 at a political disadvantage. The Afro-Mauritanians were able to maintain nominal representation, but the Haratine were not 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.

Senegal played an integral part in the Mauritanian region through trade routes, such as the port of Dakar and the Senegal River (Chenal and Kaufmann 2008, p.164). The caravan routes across Mauritania connected North Africa to areas further south via Senegal or Mali. These routes slowly facilitated urban spaces following the establishment of Nouakchott in 1957 (Chenal and Kaufmann, p.163). Originally Mauritania had been a part of the French West Africa<sup>6</sup>, 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<sup>7</sup>. 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-Mauritanians and the Haratine developing political autonomy (separating themselves from the traditional Beidan identity), that Beidan political control was challenged.

---

<sup>6</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), Niger, Haute-Volta (now Burkina Faso) and Togo. (Handloff 1990, p.17).

<sup>7</sup> See also Diallo, 1993.

### **III. Abolition as a political force**

Mauritania is a country plagued with dominant regimes and disrupted governments since its independence. The volatility during regime changes and overbearing political periods, meant Mauritania has never held a unified representational government. President Mokhtar Ould Daddah was deposed in the 1978 coup as a result of the country's political instability. The combination of heavy drought periods leading to urban flight and financial strains due to the involvement against the Western Sahara Polisario brought Colonel Mohamad Khouna Ould Haidallah to power. About the same time, political dynamics between the Haratine and the Beidan began to emerge. These changing dynamics addressed the disproportionate numbers of Haratine and Afro-Mauritanians in government as well as the ongoing issue of slavery. Activists for the abolition of slavery increased in Nouakchott (Messaoud 2000, p.295) and the movement quickly gained momentum as the urban migration continued through the 1970s and 80s.

EL HOR was formed around 1978 as the first known abolition organisation in the country. The initial stages of EL HOR was a grassroots movement determined to raise awareness and help the marginalised Haratine free themselves from subjugation. Its primary goals were both liberation and emancipation of the Haratine race<sup>8</sup> (see Messaoud 2000, p.296). From these objectives, the group began to push for an independent identity and no longer saw themselves as the property of the Beidan elite. Their newly defined Haratine identity was not Beidan and not Afro-Mauritanian. The political autonomy of the Haratine challenged Mauritania's One-Party politics (Moore 1965) and the Beidan domination.

### **IV. Senegal and the Afro-Mauritanians**

The Senegal River Valley is often a source of productive farming, and was the established political and geographical divide between the two countries (Fleischman 1994, p.13). Although Beidan live on the northern shore of the river, many of the Afro-Mauritanians have a long, established history and extended

---

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

family ties on both sides of the river, extending to Senegal and other parts of Africa. There are many points of tension that contributed to the violence in both Mauritania and Senegal. Among the main grievances were land ownership and the Mauritanian government supporting state-led violence and an unjust distribution of arable land (Fleischman 1994, p.42). These factors, compiled with heavy periods of drought, dramatically increased racial tension between the Beidan, Haratine, and Afro-Mauritanians. The tension came to head in April 1989 following a disagreement over grazing rights between Senegalese farmers and Mauritanian pastoralists, resulting in the killing of two Senegalese – reportedly by the Mauritanian army (Fleischman 1994, p.13). Race riots took place in Senegal and the shops owned by Beidan in Bakel, Dakar, and other towns were looted, the shop owners, in many cases, were brutally killed as a response to the killing of the two Senegalese. Retaliating anti-Senegalese riots erupted in the cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, brutally attacking Senegalese and Afro-Mauritanians - as racial identity prevailed over nationality. The Mauritanian riots were under President Maaouiya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya and served not only as a response to racial violence in Senegal but, also to drive further division between Arabs and Afro-Mauritanians. This rift was a continuation of the earlier ‘Arabisation’ project mentioned above. Tens of thousands of Afro-Mauritanians were forcibly expatriated across the river and hundreds were killed, raped, and tortured (Fleischman 1994, p.13). Although the Senegalese authorities also expatriated Mauritians, the violence was disproportionately extended in Mauritania, being more directed at the removal of racial groups and control of the Senegal River Valley. The Mauritanian government established military bases and the continued expulsions, arrests, and killings were reported until 1993 (Fleischman 1994, p.14). The racial violence eventually subsided but left behind permanent repercussions of division and inequality.

International humanitarian groups openly criticise the government for perpetuating racial violence in various forms<sup>9</sup>. Several politicians of Afro-Mauritanian background were removed from the government because of these practices. The forced removal of Afro-Mauritanians from their own land was

---

<sup>9</sup> See also Bullard 2005; Diallo, 1995; Mark 2012; Toure 2012.

driven by the army and replaced by Beidan and Haratine. The Haratine were also enlisted against the Afro-Mauritanians as militia groups to enforce the violent removal of Afro-Mauritanians (Fleischman 1994, p.28). What resulted was increased tension between the Haratine and the Afro-Mauritanians. The government denies its involvement in the violent removal of Afro-Mauritanians (Fleischman 1994, p.72). Racial tension in the country has never been sufficiently pacified, because of Beidan strategy to create tension between the groups. Only within the last three decades have the Afro-Mauritanians and Haratine begun to articulate their anger collectively against the Beidan elite through political abolitionists such as the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritanie or IRA), and their president Biram Dah Abeid. Biram announced during his recent release from prison in May, that he would run for president again in the 2019 elections - after coming second in the 2014 presidential race. The potential of Biram winning the most influential seat in Mauritanian politics represents the disposal of Beidan elitism and a beginning of Haratine representation.

## **V. The next wave of activism: beyond abolition**

The increase in Haratine activism has begun to manifest through different voices and projects. From the founders of EL HOR, Boubacar Messaoud partnered with a prominent Beidan, Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, to begin SOS Esclaves. They are a successful abolition group that receives support from international NGOs and fights for stronger laws and enforcement against slavery. Messaoud is also the newly elected president of the local Haratine Alliance (*Mithaq Al Haratine*). Another former member, Moctar Teyeb, began an NGO against slavery with two others in the United States, and continues to lobby and write against the practice of slavery in Mauritania (Stillwell 1999). Messaoud Ould Boulkheir was a civil servant (Salem 2009, p.161) who's early participation as a Haratine activist began with EL HOR and soon involved him in national politics as Speaker of the National Assembly and head of his own political party, the People's Progressive Alliance (APP).

One of the most disputed issues of Mauritanian politics has been the lack of representation of Haratine as well as Afro-Mauritanians. A member of SOS Esclaves informed me even the representation of Haratine in politics is not accurate because they only represent a race, while in reality, they may align themselves more with Beidan policies and possibly fail to represent the views of the Haratine<sup>10</sup>. Although political representation has begun to change over the last few decades, the awareness of structural inequality and marginalisation has emerged as a much more pertinent topic (Ellis 2009, p.157). The rising popularity of demonstrations and outspoken voices of the Haratine has now permeated Mauritanian public space in a way that cannot be ignored. The tipping point of power inequality has become unavoidably closer. What we are now seeing in Mauritania is the distribution of Beidan authority unto a former silent majority. It is the critical voices, such as Biram's and other Haratine, that the world is now beginning to listen to. The political activism of the Haratine has in itself, emerged from the door of abolition and the Haratine seeking not only freedom but agency and recognition in a Beidan dominated society

## **VI. Discussion of methodology and scope**

The fieldwork used was taken from a two-month visit, between December 2015 and January 2016, to Mauritania in the areas of Tagant, Assaba, and the cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. I also draw on the past of experience of my extensive visits between 1998 and 2003, mostly to one area in Tagant (*l'Hsirrah*) along the southern edge of the state. The qualitative data I took from my informants was through recorded interviews, through an English translator from French (such as with SOS Esclaves), or my translation was used directly when spoken in the local dialect of Hasaniyya or modern Arabic (local discussions, the Imam, and the IRA interviews). Many of the informal discussions came through friends, and friends of friends, that I have met from previous trips to the country. Discussions with Islamic scholars came through personal contacts in the country and were mostly with people I had not met before (with the exception being my teachers). From the twenty-four interviews and discussions I had, the only interviews I was able

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Colonel Oumar Beibacar, Nouakchott, January 2016.



to record were the Imam and Boubacar Messaoud. The interview with Messaoud was taken in his office and the Imam, members of the IRA, one former Qadi (Muhammad Alamin), and Sheikh Muhammad Hamdan Ould Tah were taken in their homes, albeit a private room. The discussions with other religious leaders and the general population took place in public settings, with the exception of the discussions with Sheikh Muhammad Fadl Ould Muhammad Alamin, that took place at his school office. All of the above discussions were in Hasaniyya and without informants, except with Boubacar Messaoud, who refused to speak in other than French, out of fear that he would be misunderstood.

The target group was abolitionists, Haratine activists, Islamic scholars and teachers, along with shop keepers and friends that have become familiar with me over the years and are comfortable to speak about this sensitive topic. My participants were restricted to adult males and close friends that were female. It was not within the scope of this work, nor the cultural norm, for a male foreigner to interact with unfamiliar females, outside of a passing conversation. Admittedly, this leaves a massive gap in terms of research participants, and potentially further research can be carried out through collaboration with other female researchers or activists<sup>11</sup>. Another apparent caveat in the research would be the study of other groups in Mauritania that have slaves outside of the Arab community<sup>12</sup>.

## VII. Literature

This thesis relies heavily on UN reports and Human Rights organisations to relay the crisis of the current human rights violations vis-à-vis the social uplifting of one of the country's minority groups. The work of Gulnara Shahinian and the UNPO were used often, as well as the reports from Amnesty International, SOS Esclaves, and Anti-Slavery International. The historical accounts of Mauritania are generally drawn from studies of the Africa, West Africa, and the Sahara Desert. Some of the primary works are those from Martin Klein, Garba Diallo, J. Fleischman, and the country study of R. E. Handloff. The subject of slavery has taken more of an international forum due mainly to the progression of human rights organisations,

---

<sup>11</sup> See McDougall 1998 for an ethnographic study.

<sup>12</sup> See also Cleaveland 2015.

such as the Walk Free Foundation (who publish an annual Global Slavery Index), along with Amnesty International, Free the Slaves, and Anti-Slavery International. These efforts have also been joined with the reports of the United Nations and the media of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisations (UNPO), and CNN. The subject is not without scholarly works, but specifically to Mauritania, again, the work is limited and even more so without French input. The social research that has taken place specifically in Mauritania relies heavily on a few fundamental authors and works, namely Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, Ann E. McDougall, as well as significant research from Alice Bullard, and Cédric Jourde. Along with this are the invaluable theses of Meskerem Brhane, Abou A. Toure, and Khaled Esseissah. Although social research has taken place in Africa for decades and more specifically West Africa, it is much more recent that Mauritania has begun to draw specific attention and minority issues have taken a front seat in the discussion. The references to academics works in both French and Arabic are not within the scope of this research, due mainly to my lack of both languages. Although, I have gone through several of the Islamic texts on Maliki Jurisprudence in Mauritania, the demand for contemporary academic voices to be heard cannot be overestimated. This grave shortcoming not only points to the need for further research but also for the fundamental acquisition of both French and Arabic to do this subject justice, and to remain true to its geographic location within French West Africa.

## **VIII. Limitations**

This work is not exhaustive to the subject but is an opening of a conversation about the ethnography in Mauritania – ultimately a personal experience of Haratine society. The literature extends beyond the capacity of the English language and restricts this work to more of a personal experience than a comprehensive study. I have set out to the field with enthusiasm and reflective observation. My hope is that through the initiation of discussing the lives of a marginalised people that the critical theories, challenges and solutions will become all the more attainable.

# The Politics of Abolition

## I. Urban Haratine

### *Nouakchott*

*Despite the apparent lack of water, no hinterland to speak of, salty soil and harsh climatic conditions, the foundation stone was laid on 5 March 1958. In effect, a city was created ex-nihilo, one which straddled the ocean and the vast sandy plains of the Sahara desert.*

Nouakchott  
(Chenal and Kaufmann 2008, p.163)

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 once described with the highest rate of slavery per capita in the world<sup>13</sup> (Global Slavery Index 2014, p.68)<sup>14</sup>. In reality, slavery in Mauritania is complicated, caught up in a traditional social hierarchy of privilege and the vastness of the Sahara (Ould Ahmed Salem 2005, p.492). 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>15</sup> and in some of the most remote regions. The marginal aspect of the

---

<sup>13</sup> See also Guth, Anderson, Kinnard and Tran 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Although relatively new to the scene (2013), the Global Slavery Index offers comprehensive discussions about the state of many of the world's countries. That said, there have been some criticisms regarding methodology (see Gallagher 2014, 2016).

<sup>15</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%.

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), slavery's persistence 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>16</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***

*We are Haratine and we are proud of it. That was a huge change.*

Boubacar Messaoud<sup>17</sup>

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 population of Nouakchott at that time was expanding 20 percent during the 1970s. It was between 1970 and 1981 the city grew from 40,000 to over 200,000 (Chanel and Kaufmann 2008, p.166). 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.

---

<sup>16</sup> See first world sensationalised reporting Bales 2004; Brown 2015; Okeowo 2014; and Finnegan 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

I sat with Boubacar Messaoud, a political activist since the 1970s and one of the founders of Mauritania's abolition movement. EL HOR was formed by Haratine activists as the nation's first underground abolition group. Messaoud 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."<sup>18</sup> 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-Mauritanians. Haratine are Arab speaking, with ancestry in Mauritania, and are not Beidan<sup>19</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.*

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

<sup>19</sup> This concept of a socially-distinct racial identity parallels the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s United States. (See also Muñoz 2007).

*Liberation from slavery and emancipation from the domination of the masters.*

The tension between Messaoud 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 to outsiders. In our second interview, he was determined to first clarify misunderstandings from our first meeting, we had spoken previously about the psychology of the Haratine and inequality but without a translator it quickly became frustrating and abruptly ended. During our second meeting, he seemed more at ease speaking French with the translator than he was tolerating my attempt at the local dialect. Messaoud's personality emerged through the course of the second interview as a determined activist committed to the recognition of and rights for the Haratine and claiming their rights. We discussed the existence of slavery in the country, 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. Messaoud's seeking of autonomy for the Haratine is openly criticised in the country for dividing national unity. The majority of my Beidan friends held negative and unrelenting 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>20</sup>. The political balance between Beidan and Afro-Mauritanians 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

---

<sup>20</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.

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-Mauritanians. Today's political climate is again shifting towards the alignment of Haratine with Afro-Mauritanians against slavery, as well as the Haratine candidate in the past presidential election, indicates the fragility of a dominating minority and the strength of collective political activism.

### ■ *Lineage*

*My father didn't know his last name. My father got his last name from his grandfather, and his grandfather got it from his grandfather, who got it from the slave master.*

Malcolm X  
(City Desk interview, 17 March 1963)

*I have yet to find my tribe.*

Boubacar Messaoud<sup>21</sup>

Messaoud was born in the 1940s and raised in colonial Mauritania as a slave in the south, near the city of Rosso. He shared with me his story of how he cried when he was refused entry to the local primary school because he needed his master's consent. His persistence to attend eventually appealed to the sympathies of the teacher and one of his master's relatives to enrol him. He later pursued a degree in architecture in southern Mauritania and eventually settled in Nouakchott. Messaoud's preference to speaking French over the local Arabic dialect clearly indicated the influence of his education as well his upbringing along the Senegal River, where a majority of the population is non-Arab. The official language of the country is Arabic, while Hasaniyya, Pular, Soninke, and Wolof are recognised national languages (Shahinian 2014). Although bureaucratically marginalised, French is widely spoken among the educated and between foreigners. It is the common language among Francophone Africa and taught throughout primary schools as well as universities in West Africa. In Mauritania, French is taught alongside the Arabic, resulting in neither language becoming as fluent as other countries (Salem 2009, p.169). This commonality gives the French language and culture a substantial greater reach into the Afro-Mauritanian community, who have larger geographical connections to non-Arab tribes outside of Mauritania

---

<sup>21</sup>Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

such as the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Soninke, and Bambara who originate from Senegal, Mali, and other parts of West Africa. Messaoud 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.

Messaoud 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-Mauritanians 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 settled in 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<sup>22</sup>. Messaoud 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-Mauritanians regarding citizenship. The government ostracizes the ethnic minority and in some cases refuses them identification papers (Fleischman 1994, p.34). Here again, the tension between the groups plays out through politics, "The majority<sup>23</sup> the Black [Afro-Mauritanians] 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 and the drive for autonomy "We don't want to be neither Afro-Mauritanians, neither Beidan, because Beidan means, *abeyad* – means white." There was a rising tone in his voice, "We are not white. We're black. The

---

<sup>22</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>23</sup> Although listed as minorities (see Minority Rights Group International 2013a, 2013b), both the Afro-Mauritanians and the Haratine are a larger population size than the Beidan. What is notable here is that both of these groups are politically marginalised and lack representational power in the country.



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 Messaoud 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, to be lumped into a group with Africans. Ultimately, their unknown lineage creates a dilemma of identity (see Brhane 1997, p.222).

When I asked him at our previous meeting 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 emphasized 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 recognize that they are cut off from their own ancestry in a similar way many 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<sup>24</sup>.

This traditional thinking can lead to the idea of social norms being fixed within a framework of inequality, built on racial difference<sup>25</sup>. 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 Messaoud 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. Messaoud and others recognise

---

<sup>24</sup> See further discussion about the discourse of slavery in McDougall (2002).

<sup>25</sup> Similar to the rise of the Algerians against French domination and the "liquidation of all untruths," (Fanon 1963, p.250; see also Ould Ahmed Salem 2009), for the Haratine there is a collective need to coexist and triumph through Haratine liberation.

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 (see 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 amount of the Beidan I spoke with were unable to agree with his approach. They are convinced raising awareness of identity is disruptive, emphasizing 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 sympathies (as well as the United States) 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 fundamental identity.

## **Unity**

*We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*

Dr. Martin Luther King  
(*Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, 16 April 1963)

*Mauritania is an Islamic Republic, indivisible, democratic and social.*

(Article 1, *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania*)

Messaoud formed his own organisation, SOS Esclaves, in 1995 with Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane. Abdel Nasser is a Beidan, and former slave owner, now living in France (Sutter 2012) and currently on the Board and International Council for the Human Rights Foundation. The beginning of SOS was a visible step in the direction

of unity between Haratine and Beidan. The idea that abolition involves everyone, that we are all intrinsically caught up in a type of mutuality. The vision to combat slavery through equality and a combined effort is a benefit for the entire country. The approach of Messaoud is collective effort, locally and internationally, producing a worldwide result (Sutter 2012; Bales 2012, p.247).

Messaoud's vision for the country is systematic cooperation towards abolition. For everyone must first recognise that slavery exists, then unite to establish social equality. "We should work together, Beidan and Haratine, in order to help it disappear," he continued, "if it's only Haratine, who will do the work... then it will lead to separation". He explained the necessity for a unified effort to end slavery. "If they do it together, then there will be national unity. There will be unity between the two community [sic]. And the slavery will end. But if only Haratine do it, it will be separation," reemphasising the distinction between unity and separation lies in a combined effort. This emphasised the problem of slavery, along with racial discrimination and injustice in the country, is not exclusively for the Haratine. The entire society is affected by slavery, past and present. The imperative lies on the society to eliminate social problems together for the benefit of all of society. The existence of slavery and continued marginalisation of race must be acknowledged before they can be solved. Current political authority and influence remains in the hands of an elite minority who benefit by denying the issues and prolonging inequality (see also Diallo, 2009).

Mauritania's government openly claims the inexistence of slavery (Shahinian 2010a, p.6). Their denial is supported in part by the historic positions of Islamic scholars, consulted in 1980 by President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla. Among the three positions, the majority held that slavery was either invalid based on its illegal origin, or invalid due to the inability to distinguish between legal and illegal origins. There was a third position, held by about five percent of those consulted, that protested from the discussion because they felt it was not the position of the government to abolish slavery. The government decided in 1980 that slavery is not valid under Islamic law and it was declared abolished on 9 November 1981 (Salem 2009, p.166). Although a step toward racial equality was made by officially abolishing slavery, racial domination continued taking place under those that

followed the opinion of the scholarly minority and believed slavery to be Islamically sanctioned. Recently, one highly respectable Islamic scholar has announced slavery in Mauritania as invalid (Thurston 2012, p.66). The current lack of Islamic backing allows slavery (or the oppression and exploitation of a people, aptly renamed the “vestiges of slavery,” (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.4) to continue to be neglected by the government because for them “slavery does not exist” (Shahinian 2010a, p.6). The “social death” of a people through inequality and psychological domination persists (Shahinian 2010b, p.2). Messaoud identifies the denial of slavery and the refusal of the government to openly fight it as some of the most significant problems today. SOS Esclaves expanded the initial work of EL HOR becoming more visible and exploring international relationships to eliminating slavery.

Slavery’s prolonged resistance is also associated with the excruciating unresponsiveness of social development in the country. I was told by several Beidan that the “backwardness” of the country maintains the institution of slavery. Racism and social inequality are two lingering social ills holding the country in an anachronism of tradition (McDougall 2005, p.964). The issues of poverty and corrupt government policy equally contribute to the resistance of abolition by creating a sideshow of social trauma and lingering humanitarian crisis (Fleischman 1994, p.164). SOS Esclaves fights to bring awareness of slavery’s existence and resist the acceptance of Beidan domination. I spoke with Beidan lawyers, Islamic scholars, shopkeepers, and friends, the majority of whom agreed, that slavery does not exist. Or, what does exist is not Islamic, and therefore not sanctioned slavery<sup>26</sup>. Many of the public that I spoke with hold onto an idea of Mauritania being “a nation united” and having “national equality” (Serge 2009, p.4). This rhetoric is hard to swallow when the few political positions that are held by other than Beidan are said to be Haratine or Afro-Mauritanians from wealthy or educated households and align with mainstream Beidan policies <sup>27</sup>. The

---

<sup>26</sup> At this point in time, I will not be entering into a discussion on the derivation of Islamic law. The matter of slavery in today’s modern context, including among the Muslims, has deteriorated into a demeaning form of racial discrimination, psychological control, physical abuse, and destruction of human dignity - none of which is sanctioned in the religion of Islam (Lewis 1990, p.54) but has been accepted as a religious practice among angry and abusive people who lack compassion for the sanctity of human life (see Lewis 2016).

<sup>27</sup> This was based in conversations with a retired Colonel (Oumar Beibacar) at SOS Esclaves, January 2016, as well as some personal friends who confirmed it.

emergence of the Haratine today as political representative of their own struggle and recognition is based within a larger arena of Beidan elite. The active struggle against violations of individuals (as victims of abuse) and against the community (as a discriminated ethnic group) begins to carve out and shape the role of Haratine as respected members of society. The larger structures holding up ideas of racial difference and inequality take the form of government policy, laws, and religious interpretation.

## II. Structures of Persistence

### ■ *Mentality of injustice*

*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)

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. Messaoud 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*

*The president denies it, the prime minister denies it... so, if you deny it, how can you work on it?*

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 slavery actually exists. Following this is then looking at larger social and psychological problems affecting the community of Haratine. These collective problems are ultimately affecting 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). Messaoud 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 2012, 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>29</sup> (Handloff 1994, p.9). 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. 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, the scholars who have stood up to the government and saying that the violations taking place are wrong, are not publicised<sup>30</sup>. So, discrimination and marginalisation continues unchecked. The government then follows along with its

---

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Village raids between tribes was common in Bedouin society (Handloff 1990, p.8). In terms of legitimacy for slavery, Islam accepts combat sanctioned by the state (Hanson 2007, p.89-92) as the only means to enslave another person.

<sup>30</sup> Sheikh Muhammad Ould Sidi Yahya and Muhammd al Hasan Ould Dedew have both come out against slavery as well as Muhammad Mukhtar Ould Sad, a former member of IRA. These voices, although attracting large followings, are not heard enough and the media remains biased to complying with government policy (see Ould Ahmed Salem, Zekeria. 2001. “Prêcher dans le désert: l’univers du Cheikh Sidi Yahya et l’évolution de l’islamisme mauritanien.” *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 14-15:5-40).

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. 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. Messaoud 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 admittance is not a reality. Most of the Beidan they do not want to accept what is happening. At the same time as 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? 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>31</sup>. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery published recommendations following a visit in 2010 (Shahinian 2010b), although acknowledging that the government has made steps to combat slavery, there remained a need for stricter laws against discrimination and further enforcement of the 2007 slavery act. The Mauritanian government's eventual response was a Roadmap to combat the vestiges of slavery in 2014, that fell again under critique of not doing enough (see Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.9; Vetraino & Mathewson, p.11; Platforms 2015).

---

<sup>31</sup> For example, the court may rule that a dispute between a master and their slave over inheritance (which is a clear violation because of ownership of the slave), will be determined as an inheritance dispute.

Attitude of 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 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.

### ***Forget the Past***

*Their fight; their struggle is not about the masters of yesterday. Or the masters [of the] past, no. They are talking about slave owners today.*

Boubacar Messaoud<sup>32</sup>

How the future in Mauritania will play out is largely dependent on the level of engagement between the government and the abolition groups. Abolition groups, such as SOS, want to address the problem of what is taking place today and not dwell on the problems of the past. The recognition of the abuse and violations taking place are again, primary. In other words, the progress of combating slavery and its legacy of abuse needs a concerted effort. The past holds a great deal of pain for the Haratine. According to Messaoud the Haratine are not holding on to their anger, saying that all their families and ancestors owned slaves, and that because of that they are upset, no. He continued, "But what they are saying is 'The past is the past. Let us work together on the slave owners today. And help us end it.' But, the president, the prime minister and other Beidan say: 'No. We don't have it today. We did have it in the past but it is - doesn't exist now.'" This refusal to accept today's problems is an obstruction of moving past abolition. Beyond the denial of the government is the influence of this attitude into the rest of the population. So

---

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.



that the idea that slavery does not exist, becomes dogma. And because of the remoteness of slavery in practice, even Haratine have told me that there is no slavery today.

The abolition of slavery was declared in France on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, 1848. In the colonies, such as Mauritania, abolition came after several attempts. It first was imposed through French colonization in 1905 (Handloff 1990, p.) and then again it was implied within the constitution of the newly independent nation (Serge 2009, p.3-4) in 1960. The final implementation was in 1981 under President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah, as the last country in the world to abolish slavery (Sutter 2012, p.3). Although, legally slavery was not allowed, the law to criminalize slave owners was not constructed until 2007 (Global Slavery Index 2016, p.124). In 2014 Mauritania published a Roadmap to Slavery in response to international pressure (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.6). There was an implementation of a tribunal in three regions assigned specifically to handle to cases of slavery in 2015 (Platforms 2014). In 2015, the country declared slavery a violation of human rights (Global Slavery Index 2016, p.124). All of these steps were visibly set to combat the existence of slavery in the country and counteract what the government refers to as the “vestiges” or “remnants” of slavery (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.4). The new laws relieved some of the international pressure but neglected to deal with the larger issue of discrimination towards the Haratine as well as the group’s independent autonomy. From the Beidan lawyers and Islamic scholars I spoke with, they seemed to accept that Mauritania was a unified country of independence and opportunity for all people. The abolition activists, such as SOS Esclaves and IRA however, articulated many of the violations of the government and their concern with the neglect and marginalization of the deep-seated problem of racial discrimination.

The laws regarding abolition and other areas of human rights have repeatedly come under fire from international audiences. How these laws violate and their extent is difficult to assess. Due to the difficulty involved in organizing abolition groups in the country that openly criticise the government, most of the data collected by the international community comes through one or two channels of

transmission <sup>33</sup> . The main crux of international condemnation was the ineffectiveness of current laws by not being strict enough or having an efficient system in place. There was also a lack of enforcement and attitude of law enforcement agents, on all levels, showing disregard for stricter amendments to the law and blatant discrimination (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.9).

Since 1981 the laws brought about in the country have shown reinforcement of the racial bias and support to the power dynamic in favour of Beidan authority. These laws have been criticized by the UN and several NGOs regarding the practicality and lack of consideration for marginalised citizens (Shainian 2010b, p.21). A solicitor I spoke with described the abolition law of 1981 as initially “a joke”. Compensation was required for the slave owners within the law, following Islamic law and the relinquishing of one’s property<sup>34</sup>. There was no such financial support for the freed slaves. Not only that, but even if the apparent “owner” of the slaves had no relations or connection to them, they were still able to seek compensation based on their perceived “ownership”. I spoke with a retired Colonel<sup>35</sup> from the Mauritanian Army at our meeting who described the abolition law, “The law that was passed in 1981, was a law that reinforced slavery.” Although, externally it was seen as abolition, the details were supporting the idea of slavery. “The law was meant to abolish slavery. Actually it says that, ‘Oh we abolished slavery in 1981, and there is no more slavery’. That law actually reinforced slavery. In the same law, it says that slave owners should be paid, you know?” He explains how, “The compensation wasn’t given to the slaves, but to their owners.” So the ownership of slaves was acknowledged and justified through the law. He went into the details and the contradictions of the 1960 constitution:

*The reason why, it reinforced slavery, because the former law, the Constitution of 1960, it says all Mauritians are equal. It did not*

---

<sup>33</sup> Multiple NGOs are partnering from outside of Mauritania to combat the realities of abuse and human rights violations on the ground. What is crucial at this point is the involvement of organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to continue investing and training members of the local NGOs to become more effective in their field. There is a large disparity between the amount of work needed in the country and the number of organisations that are able to do it.

<sup>34</sup> Since the slaves were technically “property” of the slave owner, and there was financial compensation for their “loss” (ref). This, in turn, allowed the slave owners to claim their ownership openly and even gave them incentive to claim the slaves that they possibly had no connection to, except through ownership. Both of these responses indirectly reinforced the concept of slavery and the domination of Haratine.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Colonel Oumar Beibacar, Nouakchott, January 2016.

*approve of slavery in any sense. Then the new law that says we need to compensate slave owners - that it recognized that slave owners had a legitimate right.*

The compensation for slave owners was one-sided and denied the loss or hardship for those who were actually *owned* by other people. The historical proof or debate about the existence of slavery as an Islamically valid institution is problematic and should be dealt with openly. At the moment, there are only laws in place to benefit the already privileged minority. The former Colonel described the manipulation of the law to suit the elite:

*You have a legitimate right, but in order to disown you from this legitimate right we will compensate you. So in this sense, it gives legitimacy. This is what [is] meant by "It reinforced it." Because in the slave owner's mind, yes, it was good.*

The reformation of Mauritania's Constitution and ideas of a legal system requires manoeuvring between interpreted traditions of Islamic law and external definitions of human rights. These two legal dynamics between religion and human rights are seemingly in opposition and frequently erupt in the form of social hostility (Salem 2009, p.159). This misunderstanding is frequently exposed through external media sensationalism and oversimplifies the multidimensional cultural nuances of the country. There are several positions of Islamic scholars both within and outside of the Mauritania. Other laws, such as the Land Reform Law also displayed elements of conflicting power structures.

The land reform law of 1983 created problems by stating that the title rights go to the head of the tribe (Fleischman 1994, p.46). This move again undermined the concept of equal share of the land, which could potentially be of agricultural value. Agricultural land is, in most cases, toiled by the Haratine from the area and the harvest can either be shared with the Beidan as their rights of ownership, or left to be distributed as their share of labour. The idea of serfdom is in contrast to other parts of the modern world where the workers on the land are the ones with the most right to ownership (Bales 2012, p.112-13; Salem 2009, p.166). The former Colonel discussed how the law disrupted local dynamics "The way it works

is that, in the law, the government says that land belong to the tribe. And who owns the papers is the chief of the tribe.” This was indirectly reinforcing the power of slave owners and disempowering those who worked the land. The slaves were originally caring for the land of the slave owners, and were without rights of ownership (Fleischman 1994, p.42). The ex-Colonel continued to explain, for example, he himself is a Beidan, but he doesn’t own the land. The land that the tribe owns belongs to the head family. He clarified the result of the law on the ground “So, when the law came they should distribute the territory to everybody and everybody has his share, but they didn’t. They kept the land in its ways and only the Haratine would work the land that belongs to the tribe.” These are reminiscent of how land ownership and serfdom worked in Mauritania prior to abolition. The established uneven distribution enabled the ownership of the land to remain in the hands of the powerful and to be largely accepted as the norm. It was relatively common for the owners of an agricultural area to establish productive workers on the land and extract a small fee or tax (Fleischman 1994, p.39) from the harvest. With the onset of heavy droughts and a loss of not only viable land but also a mass migration of workers to urban areas, the land has essentially lost much of its productive value and brought about new dynamics regarding land care (Chenal and Kaufman 2008, p.164).

## **Translating Law**

*Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.*

Article 2.1

*International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*  
(Adopted by UN General Assembly, 19 December 1966)

The laws in Mauritania play a crucial role in both establishing a familiar power structure for its citizens and demonstrating its role in the larger global community. This second role is important because after the country’s independence there have been numerous attempts at reform and alignment with international regulations and treaties (see also Marlin & Mathewson 2015, pp.3-

4). The country is currently drawing increased attention and severe criticism at its attempted human rights initiatives (Shainian 2010b, pp.20-23). The willingness of Mauritania to align with international human rights is becoming more common as the international community raises its awareness to these critiques. International and local NGOs are focused on two specific developments from the government in Mauritania, namely the drafting of effective laws and responsible enforcement of the new legislation.

SOS Esclaves has established itself in the country as a local intermediary between the practical application of Mauritanian law and the larger standards of an international human rights agenda. There is a significant reliance from local NGOs to an international framework, which determines the effectiveness of human rights in the country. The in-between position requires a calibration within the field of vision and is the primary work of local NGOs - defining the laws and practice through the lens of international human rights. The local NGOs are *translating* international meanings in local terms, as Merry (2006) explained. This process serves as a conduit to relate local practice to larger bodies such as the United Nations and others, bringing investigations and reports into the country that show its extreme neglect regarding international human rights and the disparity between the population and understanding an international framework of human rights (Pagden 2003).

## Courts

*[They created] special courts, to judge cases of slavery. But when you put somebody who has the same mentality as the president, or as the master, then they will never accept that there is the slavery.*

Boubacar Messaoud<sup>36</sup>

The tribunals for cases of slavery came about in 2015 (Platforms 2014) and again reinforced the power dynamic of the Beidan to be in control. Messaoud told me that the attitudes of the judges, and similarly the police and other law officials, are representative of the Beidan and both support and encourage the dominant mentality of slave owners. We spoke briefly about how equality could play out in

---

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

such uneven dynamics, “It is possible, that the Haratine and the Beidan be equal. But Beidan have to change their mentality.” Currently, the acknowledgement of slavery is crucial to moving ahead. “They have to admit that there is slavery first, and we should work together to end it,” Messaoud conceded. “But this is not what is happening now. They deny it.” The attention of SOS is directed at the underlying attitude or denial from government, beyond just the letter of the law. The work of local activists is to ultimately bring ideas of accepting the existence of slavery, in order to combat slavery, as well as the larger problems of discrimination. “The president denies it; the prime minister denies it,” he pleaded. “If you deny it, how can you work on it? It is not a matter of creating courts, because they created courts.” Much of the work that is being implemented by the Mauritanian government is seen as insufficient by human rights activists (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.9). Following the Roadmap to Freedom (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.6) there was an organisation from the government set up for humanitarian work, called Tadamoun (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.4). All of these initiatives by the government have fallen under severe criticism (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, p.4). The first obstacle that Messaoud pointed to was the attitude of the Beidan, that of the slave master. This, he explains, is influencing the government’s denial on the issue and other areas of resistance such as the courts and the legislation. Further problems occur when the victims of slavery are actually intimidated or refuse to stand against their former abusers due to fear of losing their children or being shunned by the community. Because many victims are uneducated, authorities often times deny them their rights or side with the perpetrators (Marlin & Mathewson 2015, pp.17-18; Platforms 2013b) to negotiate out of pressing charges. These complications create inaccuracy in determining numbers of documented slavery and related crimes. Also, because of the relative shortage of NGOs on the ground in Mauritania and the lack of cooperation by the government to eradicate something they view as non-existent, there are limited means to validate the claims being made.

### III. Religion of Inculcation

*Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery,  
None but ourselves can free our minds*

Bob Marley  
*Redemption Song*

Out of the eight Mauritanian Islamic scholars that I spoke with, none of them accepted the existence of slavery<sup>37</sup>. There were some who refused to speak on it entirely, saying they had no details of what was happening in the country and could not make a judgement. There were others who described the situation in Mauritania as devoid of following any Islamic law and simply stated it was not sanctioned slavery. They simply did not know what it was. One particular imam in Nouadhibou told me, "Slavery [in Islam] is not, these [historical meanings]. Slavery is service." 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). Again, all of this does not address the issue of the ownership of slaves being largely unregulated. Slave owners claim that their right to own Haratine is sanctioned by religion and this sounds convincing enough considering the religious texts and contemporary scholars clearly mention slavery. But is it the slavery of *service* or the slavery of one's own whims? The problem becomes seemingly contradictory when looked at through the religious principles of equality and justice (The Quran 5:8)<sup>38</sup>. So generations of racism and oppression find refuge in the guise of religion, and the result is the inculcation of an entire people.

---

<sup>37</sup> These participants were from Beidan background. Some of them were my former teachers from Tagant, some were students that had moved out of the madrasa and begun their own schools. Some of them were scholars from Nouakchott and known through mutual friends (such as Sheikh Muhammad Ould Sidi Yahya, Sheikh Hamdan Ould Tah, Qadi Muhammad al Amin, and the head of the *Majlis Fatawa* in Abu Dhabi, UAE, Mufti Muhammad al Amin).

<sup>38</sup> Cleary 2004, p.51

## ■ **Mentality of a slave**

*But the multigeneration slave, the slave descending from many generations, he is a slave even in his own head. And he is totally submissive. He is ready to sacrifice himself, even, for his master. And, unfortunately, it's this type of slavery that we have today — [the slavery] American plantation owners dreamed of.*

Boubacar Messaoud  
*Slavery's last stronghold*  
(CNN interview 2012)

I spoke with Salimata, from SOS who explained the difference between the Haratine who accept slavery is taking place and the ones who do not, “Some Haratine, will tell you it doesn’t exist. Usually the ones who tell you it doesn’t exist belongs to the rich families. The rich families own land and they could give it to the Haratine.” This was an oversimplified way of describing how Haratine would accept slavery. Many of the Haratine and Beidan accepted the idea of Mauritania being a united nation. I once asked the woman who pounded the sorghum in the village if they were slaves. She told me they were no longer slaves, but the money they made for working seven days a week was close to thirty dollars a month. Not *technically* slaves. Some of my Beidan friends in the city agreed, there was not much difference between a menial wage and slavery. Messaoud clarified that not every Haratine is the same:

*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 says “No. It exists and we got to fight it.” Or everyday on the street, to, 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 weapon to continue this fight and there will never be national unity,” There will be, “separation.”*

So here is a clear indication that the problem of division lies within the Haratine as well as the population of Mauritania. The government is in denial, and people



can easily believe the government if they don't see the abuse of slavery that takes place. Alignment with the Beidan is akin to power and many do not want to accept that they are be treated differently. For many, it is just a name of the past that they wear now as "Haratine" instead of slave. For a few, such as the people SOS and IRA are helping, the idea of slavery is very real as is the idea of being exploited for physical labour. This is a massive problem for a few and a very small issue for many. So in the case of Haratine and the exploitation there are only a few groups that are able to have a discussion with them, there are only a few groups that can speak on the reality of what is happening. For the most part, if there are Haratine that are in denial then a variable of how the people are treated and their understanding is different, e.g. between exploitation or being a slave by name. Messaoud explained the fundamental social issues facing the Haratine are racism, the continuous dismantling of the nuclear family, and a lack of distinct identity.

### ***Authority of a Father***

The problem is not just a mental complex of the Haratine but the inculcation (Fleischman 1994, pp.94-5) of authority in the child. Alienation of the Haratine takes place on different levels. Messaoud explained "there is alienation... through religion, particularly." The religious dilemma of misinterpretation that has been taking place in the country. He continued to explain that this occurred "because the clerics [Muslim scholars] throughout centuries have inculcated in the mind of the slaves that they are to accept their conditions." That is to say, submission to these social conditions is disguised as a religious injunction and "that this is decided by God in some ways... and slaves accepted that."

Another level of alienation was "that the slaves do not... have fathers. Most of them, they do not consider their fathers their natural biological fathers as their fathers." So the authoritative position is dominated by the slave master, particularly the mother's. "It is their master that becomes their father and their mother in life, and... everything."

From a young age, children are exposed to the authority of the master of their mother. The mother, in many instances, obeys and serves the master. According to Messaoud, some children may not even see their father – especially if their

mother's family is from a different area. The owner of the family wants to maintain control of the mother as well as the children because the line of ownership is matrilineal. In many cases, the owner refuses the mother to live elsewhere and both mother and child stay with the mother's master. This exploitative relationship is an ongoing resource for the tribe. The sons of the slave mother are usually allowed to leave; but the daughters must stay. For the most part, this relationship continues even if there are added elements of physical and psychological abuse.

Messaoud goes on to explain "In the villages, this alienation still exists... when [a slave] comes and he sees a woman that he wants to marry, who is a slave too, the master of the woman would say 'Yes. We agree to marry the woman. But she is going to stay with us, here, in our tribe.'" So the woman remains with the tribe and the children from this woman are the property of her master. This added leverage of maintaining the slave mother and her children gives incentive to not only enforce domination over an entire social group but also neglect the role and fundamental influence a father figure has in the family.

Messaoud continued to explain the problem "So the authority upon the child is not the authority of his father, but of the master. He is the one who sets up the model." In other words, the father has no visible authority over the child. "The son look [sic] at the master as being his real father. The biological father is just a generator." Although, he explained this is overly simplistic, Messaoud elaborated further on the greater impact on the child<sup>39</sup>.

*The father is there and the child he may know that this is my father. But due to the education [that] inculcates in the mind of the child that "this is your master and the authority belongs to him. Not to your father." So it is during the upbringing that all these elements, of "who I am" and "who is my authority", etcetera, are inculcated... in the mind of the child.*

---

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion on Bourdieu and childhood development see Jenkins (1992, p.88).

The image of an authority figure is crucial to the development of the child (see Karen 1998). The impact that the mother's master has over the child, is substantially greater than that of the child's own father. Messaoud continued to show the unevenness in these fundamental relationships, "the father, he cannot claim [authority], because himself, he is a slave in most of the cases." Here there is a conflict of what appears to be the natural hierarchy around the child and the determined constraints in the society exacerbated through slavery or ownership of one's father. He continued to explain the social atmosphere, "A free man do not marry a slave [sic]. Only a slave marries slaves." So through the social boundaries of marriage there are limitations to the complexity of the parent/child relationship (see Karen 1998, p.27). The complexity extends to the child, because of the domination of the father, [he has] a second class position in the society. Messaoud illustrated again the helplessness of a slave, through material possession "So he himself, is the slave of another master. So what he, what himself, and what belongs to him, belongs to somebody else - not to him." The lack of ownership for the slave along with imposed authority is further emphasized when the slave's only tribal identity is that of his master's. Messaoud is aware of the harmful effects of not having autonomy and responded soundly in our first meeting when I asked about his tribal identity, "I have yet to find my tribe." This resonating feeling of "who I am" begins with childhood and continues into adulthood. The complications of racial identity and disconnection of ancestry for minorities has a similar history for African Americans (X and Haley, 1992, p.257). The political tension is emphasized for the Haratine who are seen as belonging to two distinct groups at the same time – the Arab-Berbers of North Africa and African tribes of the South. It was a feeling of political independence that Messaoud instilled within the identity of Haratine. Without a religious imperative, SOS was built on the foundation of an international human rights and challenged meanings of freedom within the Haratine community.

# Against the Grain

## I. The Imam

*By looking, you are a slave. But it could be you are not a slave. But visibly, you are a slave.*

Mohamed Mahmoud<sup>40</sup>

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 of a soft grey sand - the colour and smell of used motor oil, infused with the tan. We were far enough from the main road to no longer 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

---

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Mohamed Mahmoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

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.

## II. I AM HERE

*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...*

Mohamed Mahmoud<sup>41</sup>

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), emphasizing difference. For many, there is a justified exploitation of race through misinterpretation of religion<sup>42</sup>. Mohamed understood the nuances of his situation, and distinguished carefully, between the religious tenants 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 there 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

---

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Mohamed Mahmoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

<sup>42</sup> See also Brhane 1997

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. During my stay in Tagant years before, I spoke with several Haratine directly, they felt discouraged and many times worked during the time of congregational prayers without an option. It was usually the older Haratine that could be seen in the mosque; perhaps their retirement and decline in capability from the heavy physical work gave them enough reason to join the others in the village. Again, if they there was any ridicule from the Beidan, they would pray elsewhere.

Social privilege was visible in religious propaganda such as “the Paradise<sup>43</sup> of the slave” (see Esseissah 2015, p.). Although this and other ideologies are bereft of any religious foundation<sup>44</sup>, 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’. This with [the Beidan] - it is like as if it was [sacred] text and ruling, as if it was revealed<sup>45</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*

---

<sup>43</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>44</sup> This is akin to the sound familiar prophetic saying, “Paradise is under the feet of your mother.” (Sunan an-Nasa’i 3104).

<sup>45</sup> Islamic law is derived from revelation, prophetic action, and the consensus of religious scholars. The explanatory text 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.

*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.*

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 than free... our freedom, for us, isn't anything.*

Mohamed's ability to critically analyse the social norm – especially authority - is what enabled him to seeking 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." 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 resolve 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 HERE. You don't need this to happen, but I AM HERE, 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 PRESENT. This is it - [it] happens by itself." He embodied his realisation. He reached a point that was unwavering and he simply stated it. This resolve was reinforced when he stood his ground during the political elections in Nouakchott. He was confronted with the tribe of his former master.

### III. Taking a Stand

*And my politics is not something you have power over. I was under your command before and you left me weak, you kept me ignorant, you kept me as a slave. And I didn't see anything [as a result]. Now, I need politics for myself.*

Mohamed Mahmoud<sup>46</sup>

Democratic elections have only officially begun to take place in 1992 (Fleischman 1994, p.). Since the country's independence there have been several coups d'état, military takeovers, dictatorships, and One-Party politics (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009; see also Moore 1965). The Haratine make up about forty percent of the population, many of them still identifying with their master's tribe and align with the political views of the family. For the Beidan, this political reinforcement is relied upon to influence election results. If the family or the larger tribe supports

---

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Mohamed Mahmoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.



a candidate, there is expectation that the Haratine from their family will support their choice. It is this underlying social pressure, again widely unchallenged, that facilitates Beidan favouritism in Mauritanian democracy. It was here that Mohamed stood his ground and offered a logical reason to not “go with the flow” during the election process. He describes the day he received visitors regarding his choice of candidates. “The masters<sup>47</sup> came to me at the time of the election of Messaoud [Ould Boulkhair: a Hartani, one of the founding members of ELHOR and at this time was running for National Assembly from the APP]. I served them like I served you. And I didn’t know what they wanted.” Typical visits among familiar friends and acquaintances are not direct, but is generally first spending some time with their host and enjoying the hospitality. After a while the conversation becomes more directed. He went on to describe the visitors getting to the point. “After the midday and after everything was finished, they said there is an election, and there is Mohamed Yahweh, and Ould Mayghah – someone from *Yadao ‘Alay*,” (a local tribe). The visitors continued as he quotes them verbatim, “We decided, with our uprightness, our rectification, and this and that, and we are supporting him [Mohamed Yahweh]. And we need you to support him.” It was a familiar scene and in a way it was expected. What was becoming more and more apparent regarding the political climate was the representation of Haratine candidates as well as more urban Haratine becoming interested in the election process, empowering themselves and enacting change for their community. This situation was also increasingly taking place because after the drought periods, many of the Haratine who had lived closely with their masters had now begun to experience the seemingly autonomous aura of the city. Mohamed’s refusal was rational. He explained why his involvement in the election was not going to be as they expected:

*My response was, I said to them “If one of you was running for an election, from you [the collective tribe], then I would support him. But if there was someone running for election who was not from you, and he doesn’t know me and I don’t know him or any of the*

---

<sup>47</sup> *Asyad*, (sing: *Sayed*) Lit: master; used colloquially to define a slave master; also used as an honorific title or an honoured member of the Prophet Muhammad’s family, *Bani Hashim*. Here it is possible he was using the term loosely, meaning *Beidan*, because his master actually lived two days east of Nouakchott.

*positions [he is taking], and I don't benefit from him in any need – your calling me to [support] him – this doesn't affect me”.*

It was clear, the position he was taking. His frustration with tolerating such abuse and control had reached its end. He continues to explain his outrage, in a clear tone. “And my politics is not something you have power over. I was under your command before and you left me weak, you kept me ignorant, you kept me as a slave. And I didn’t see anything [of benefit].” Mohamed confronts them squarely; unable to keep the past hidden, he described his new position. “Now, I need politics for myself. I know what it is to rectify me and I am able to bear it. And won’t take your politics over my own. Because your politics, over me, has put me in the place that I’m in now - from being left out.” He went on to explain their reaction. After they left him, they went out and complained to one of the neighbours, saying “What Mohamed did was not right,” and they went away, and he did not see them after that. He was laughing playfully when he recalled the incident, having no remorse. When the neighbour saw him later and asked him, “Did so and so visit you?”

He responded, “Yes. I didn’t say anything wrong. I said ‘I’m not going to [*lit.*] lay my head on them.’ I’m not going to lay on them<sup>48</sup> They were finished with me, and I was finished with them.” It was in this seemingly fluid interplay between a master’s jurisdiction and a slave’s passive acceptance of boundaries that was evolving to become more of a defined space. As Haratine gained political representation in the country, there was more need to support their cause and work for the collective autonomy and progress of the group.

It was after the election of ‘Uthman Ould Ya’li that they built the local mosque and asked him to be the imam. He accepted the role and described the stigma of being imam. “At that time the people said: ‘That is the Mosque of the Slaves.’ It was a strange thing. The ‘Mosque of the Slaves’ had become famous? We never knew it as the ‘Mosque of the Slaves’, and it ended up the Beidan would not pray in it.” Mohamed’s acceptance of who he was came through, again without remorse. It was later that a young educated Beidan man came to the mosque and began to

---

<sup>48</sup> The idea of “laying one’s head,” in a submissive, needy way. The idea is that he was not feeling obliged to them.

pray with them (following Mohamed's lead). He described how the young man appointed himself to lead the Friday congregational prayer and the community accepted it. "He said, 'I'm going to pray the Friday prayer with you [as imam].' We agreed. It was my father and [some] older men." Although there was no apparent compulsion to let him lead, generally the education of the Beidan men is more formal and rigorous than others in society and begins at a younger age. The young Beidan most likely had a higher degree of education. Mohamed explained his simple acceptance, "The community saw him as important and loved him for this. I also saw in him, the character of Islam<sup>49</sup>. I saw him like this. We prayed with him Friday congregational prayer." It was some time later that members of this Beidan's family arrived and began to discourage the young imam from praying with them. The young man prayed imam for Friday prayer but would pray behind Mohamed for the remaining prayers in the week. The family refused to pray with them and began the construction of a second mosque in the same area. He spoke regarding the distance; "There was nothing between them. But here they didn't like it, because there was a slave [leading the prayer]. They preferred that they build this mosque." He described the legal implications of two mosques in the same area. "In Islamic law, if the mosque is close to another mosque, it is built under the management of another mosque. By Islamic law, this is called auxiliary mosque." He described how the event eventually came to a dispute due to the proximity of the new mosque and they went to the Bureau of Islamic Affairs to settle the matter. "[The Bureau] measured between the mosques, and found it very, very, very close. They said 'This is not possible. This is too close.' And they said 'Now we are going to make a document to rectify between you.'" They addressed both parties together, "You, Mohamed, you are the imam. And you, that need to build the mosque, are contingent to Mohamed. Do you accept this?" Both parties accepted the terms of contingency. Although the mosque had not yet been erected, the construction had started. What followed was the disbanding of the whole project. Unable to accept the terms after leaving the Bureau, the Beidan moved away and the young man felt pressure from his family to also leave. "The imam left. He moved and ended up living in Arafat [nearby this area in the

---

<sup>49</sup> This is in reference to a person's forbearance and good judgement - hallmarks of an educated scholar.

southern Nouakchott].” Ultimately, the social pressure of praying behind a Hartani overcame the young man. “When he was leaving he told me, ‘It’s not possible that I pray in this mosque, because there is talk,’ like this and that, ‘it’s not possible.’” This demonstrates the greater forces of racism and the restrictions of social influence even for Beidan. Mohamed had resigned the matter to social pressure, “The people placed [a doubt] in his heart, and after this he left.” After standing up to his masters and the mosque dispute, Mohamed’s resilience took another step to independence: seeking an opportunity to leave the capital and gain his written freedom<sup>50</sup>.

#### IV. Meanings of Freedom

*[If you] don't get the freedom from the master then you have the Hurratu-l Haidallah [lit: Freedom of Haidallah]. This is less - this is not as significant. And this is what I'm telling you from the society - this is what happens. There is the high and the higher – you're free and it's not - you're not really free.*

Mohamed Mahmoud<sup>51</sup>

What seems to resonate throughout my experience with Mohamad Mahmoud was his dedication and acceptance to work within a religious paradigm that, on the surface, could be seen as completely against him. His ability to examine and “weed out” the cultural misinterpretations was inspiring. It was after his run in with several Beidan regarding the election and the questioning his eligibility as an imam, that he turned his energy to acquiring his official (written) freedom. He explains his visit with his former master, “After that, I went to my master. The one who sent me away to the north. He was from Guerrou [a town about 600 kilometres east of Nouakchott].” Here again the interplay of hospitality and leisure pervades the visit. “I stayed during the middle of the day... he was very generous, was a very good person. He gave me hospitality, gave me all of that. It was the [time for] midday prayer. I said that I was going to go.” The time of the prayer is announced out loud from the mosque and signals a gathering for most of the men in the area. The prayer itself takes approximately ten to twenty minutes and is

---

<sup>50</sup> This is the act of *mukatibah*, where a slave is proclaimed free by his/her owner, typically in a written letter.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Mohamed Mahmoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

generally followed by people greeting each other and conversing on their way out. In Mauritania, the prayer in the mosque is a largely practiced activity and also is used to dissect one's day, planning activities before or after the prayer. Mohamed takes his cue to leave, but briefly states the purpose of his visit and reasoning. He recalls the conversation:

*Now write the paper for [my] freedom. You - don't have anything of [available] work... you don't occupy me with anything. And you don't give me anything [financially]. And I, likewise, don't give you anything. Then, write for me my freedom. And [his master] said "Yes. Of course, of course," [lit. By God, by God].*

This is a turning point. Although Mohamed had been leading the prayer previously, traditional scholars have clarified that a slave is disliked to be an imam, and should be avoided. So seeking his undisputable freedom actually removed him from this criticism. Although many Beidan follow a religious justification to avoid praying behind Haratine, the racial discrimination exceeds good judgement. Regardless of whether a person is free or slave, there is no avoiding the stigma of being Haratine. He went on to explain the *degrees of freedom* between the government's intervention under President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah and having it in formal writing.

*Because what the state had done -[Haratine] didn't accept it. They say to us, the Hurratu-l Haidallah [trans: the Freedom of Haidallah] is like this. They don't have a right [to grant freedom]. This isn't accepted. It doesn't make any difference for [the slaves]. Freedom, if somebody writes it for you, then you're free. And if you don't get the freedom from the master, then you have the Hurratu-l Haidallah. This is just the freedom of Haidallah. Not real [freedom].*

This downplay of government intervention into Islamic rulings was common. I asked an elderly Beidan and close friend about the intervention of the government. What did they think of President Khouna's attempt to abolish slavery in the 1980s? The response was disdain for his interference. It was a similar

response from my teachers in Tagant. Interestingly, as I looked into it more, some told me that it officially took place under the consultation of religious leaders<sup>52</sup>. Mohamed continued, reiterating the common understanding in society:

*And what I'm telling you is the reality in the community - this is what happens. If the master writes for you [your freedom] then you're free. If the master doesn't write your freedom, then you're free Hurratu-l Haidallah. There is high and the higher - you're free, and us here, we know, you're not really free. You're not really free.*

It was clearly a significant point for him, as an imam and leader. He went on, telling us about the Beidan in his neighbourhood accuse him of still being a slave or the possibility of not knowing his father (another disliked quality of the imam). "It happened that I [brought this] paper [as a proof against] the people that say, 'Perhaps, he is a slave.' 'Possibly there is no [legitimate] father for him.' I am not afraid. Look [holding out his palm, indicating the paper]." Mohamed was very vocal in his refuting the claims of Beidan. It was common to feel justified not praying behind him.

During the interview, we asked Mohamed about how the scholars ruled regarding the government's intervention into slavery and subsequently abolishing it. He was clear that many Beidan did not accept it. I know, from discussing it with an older student from a rural area, that one of my own teachers refused to accept the government's decision. Mohamed commented on the ruling, "Its soundness is weak. They say [that slavery is abolished], but they don't act on it. Because I know some of the scholars and some of the people with them, and they say that which the state has done [ruling against slavery], that this is not accepted." This lack of uniformity and collective agreement indicates not only the breadth of interpretation in religion but also a major challenge faced by not having any head authority. Regardless, the ruling that did take place loses impact when initiated by alternative motives. He explained the result, "They didn't remove their slaves, and they didn't [follow the ruling]. For example, this is talk, that's it. It doesn't have any value." From my own experience, many of the more people in isolated areas

---

<sup>52</sup> Three positions of the scholars. One of them was the invalid position that was a minority.

really do not see themselves aligning with the government, preferring to distance themselves from the idea of a secular society. The traditional social structures allowed for the educated to have religious authority and were sought out to clarify local disputes and rulings.

The problem with static interpretation of traditional text, as happens today in much of the rural areas, is the inability to synthesise both the text and the rapidly changing context, leading to a severe void of applicable scholarship. There is a dire need to utilise Islamic scholars who are well versed in the text and able to confront and have experienced many of the global issues today. It is the fundamental religious tenants that are established around a changing context. Mohamed is aware of the potential ideology of the elite, where religious authority can manipulate justice. His realisation came through the ability to hold on to the tenants of the religion and see the contradictions that have taken place in his life.

## V. Resolution

*Not one of your beliefs will be sound until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. You are Muslim and you oppress me? But Islam bound me with you. And it is not possible that I leave you because of your oppression.*

Mohamed Mahmoud<sup>53</sup>

Mohamed spoke with a contentment. It was his lifelong experience, of what he clarified as injustice, without holding back the rights of others in retribution. “Everyone who oppresses me, I respect them and give them their right, which is what Islam orders me to do.” He emphasised a collective religious principle, “Islam [says] that a Muslim to a Muslim is like a building, they make each other strong (interlacing his fingers). My strength [is fortified] with you.” He established the idea of reciprocity towards good, and the underlying religious interconnectivity, “I don’t harm with what you harm, I help with what you help. I need for you what I need for myself.” These are religious matters, taking into account a higher purpose and a final Day of Requit<sup>54</sup>. Mohamed expands on his belief in this final

---

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Mohamed Mahmoud, Nouakchott, January 2016.

<sup>54</sup> The Day of Judgement or Apocalypse.

retribution, as a part of the Islamic faith<sup>55</sup>, “If you took my right in this world and abandoned it and weakened me – this is on you. And you will see what is to come from this, either of good or of bad.” There is a complete surrender to the what is foreseen as an exposure of all that is taking place in this life and either punishment or reward. “The dealings between creation – the seed is what is harvested. It will be seen, either good or bad. I don’t need to gain evil; I need good. I only need good.” It was his sincerity and conviction that impressed most upon me. Mohamed Mahmoud illustrated a unique approach to agency by challenging those ideologies surrounding him, through the same religious framework that defined him as a slave. It was this counter-narrative to the Beidan that provided a place for him and other Haratine among religious leadership.

---

<sup>55</sup> Mention of this similar concept in other beliefs. Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, etc.



# Islam Reformed

*Who bears the responsibility – on whom do we place the responsibility for what has been done in the name of religion?*

The Great Theft  
(Abou El Fadl, 2005, p. 275)

## I. IRA in Arafat

*Our organization submitted an application for recognition in 2008 and, to this day, has been neither recognized nor authorized by the Mauritanian authorities. Every IRA-Mauritanie activist runs the risk of being convicted of "belonging to an unrecognized organization" at any time.*

Amadaou Tidjane Diop  
(Open letter from Dar Naim Prison, 30 September 2016)

I had not realised how intricate southern Nouakchott was until I was trying to reach a house in the far regions of Arafat. It was late afternoon as the taxi dropped me at an intersection. My fieldwork was nearing its end and a mutual friend had encouraged me to meet up with some members of Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA-Mauritanie or IRA) before I left. The organisation is run by Biram Dah Abeid and several other managing staff, all of whom associate as Haratine. I was given the number to one of the managers in the IRA, Mohamed Musa, to meet up briefly before I left Mauritania. I was given twenty minutes for an initial meeting before they had to attend to other business. It was an unusual feeling to be on a tight schedule in Mauritania, especially after coming from the countryside. Inside the house I met another young man, Sidiya, who was a bit younger than Mohamed Musa, possibly in his mid-twenties. The flat screen television on the wall had the news on. The mood was cordial but overtly edgy, and rushed. I had the impression that this was typical and they were accustomed to an urgency of action. These two worked as coordinators for the area and would have a large network to connect between Nouakchott and the various "offices" in towns and district capitals. There would be even more work on their hands, since the president, Biram Dah Abeid and a few of the executive members were currently imprisoned. We had a brief exchange of ideas and email addresses and soon parted ways.

The idea of being under the threat of arrest at any point seems unique to the IRA, more than other abolition groups. The IRA is an illegal organisation, not like the more diplomatic SOS Esclaves. Although there are a large number international organisations rallying for the IRA be recognised (US Department of State 2016, p.2; Marlin & Mathewson 2015) the government refuses. No NGO in the country receives more international attention than the IRA (Brown 2015). Within the last few years there have been several “raids” on members’ homes and people taken into police custody without explanation, prevented from being able to see their family or a lawyer for several days (Amnesty International 1998; Mathewson & Clarke 2015). Upon my return to Australia our communication abruptly ended, I realised how volatile the political situation was for IRA members. About two months after this, I received an email from Sidiya’s account stating that he had been arrested along with twelve others, and this particular member was willing to continue communicating on his behalf by meeting with Sidiya and sending me his responses. The idea of being arrested was simply expected.

The government sees the IRA as a security threat and this seems to be leverage for Biram’s international reputation. Biram’s humanitarian awards (Platforms 2013b) draw international recognition for his work combating slavery in the country and only seems to result in more pressure from the government. The international recognition opens up networks of international activism and brings concerted pressure back against government policy, often coordinating with SOS Esclaves and others. Demonstrations and political sit-ins against slavery have imprisoned Biram and other members since the IRA began (see also Accueil. 2013). Perhaps his most infamous demonstration, in Mauritania and internationally, was the burning of Islamic texts in 2012. Those books, which he says, support and encourage slavery by explicitly stating a “code of slavery.” This particular act brought his immediate arrest and demonstrations the next day for his punishment and execution. The president declared that Biram would be punished according to Islamic law. Eventually Biram was released from prison, and the IRA profited from recognition within the international activist community and the recently formed IRA had entered the international stage.

## II. Biram and the Formation of IRA

Biram Dah Abeid was born in the 1960's and raised in Mauritania's south, near the Senegal River. His father was born free, but his mother and extended family were slaves. Biram grew up from within the familiar plight of the Haratine. His father encouraged him at a young age to get an education and fight slavery intellectually. It was still during his school years that his outspokenness against slavery began, well before his involvement in politics (Platforms 2016b). During his university study he was an activist and spoke openly against the injustices of slavery. Biram joined SOS Esclaves in 2002 and in 2008 he formed the IRA. Members of IRA explained to me that their work was not an administration-centred activism like SOS, but 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. Because of the inseparable element of religion in the country, the Beidan political and religious elite has been able to maintain the institution of slavery greatly unchallenged by dissenting voices in society. This domination of political and religious space has been the norm since the Arab-Berber conquest from the North (Handloff 1990, p.9). The directive of IRA is to see Islam according to its founding principles of equality and justice (see Platforms 2016b). The IRA sees racial slavery and domination as an interpretation of what were never Islamic principles but later scholarly interpretations. The IRA advocates a return to true religious principles. This approach offers a way for the people of Mauritania to maintain their religious identity and be free from accepting the racial hierarchy that many ascribe to the religion, both within and outside of the country.

## III. Religious Meaning

The IRA sees traditional Islamic legal texts as being the basis of racial slavery and enabling Beidan elitism. Biram and the IRA have established an argument for the abolition of slavery in Mauritania based on what is beyond both political freedom and a collective identity of the Haratine. Their basis for abolition is reforming interpretations of religious principles, in books such as *Mukhtasar Khalil* (Al-Jundi 2003), that have been adopted and taught throughout the country. Specifically, the

books of Islamic jurisprudence<sup>56</sup>, written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, this and other manuals of Islamic law explaining rules and regulations for slaves. Biram has stated these books as the source of the slave master's ideology. Beyond both the basic human rights paradigm and political representation, the IRA argues that dated interpretations are religious propaganda, diverging from the true message of Islam, and being used against Haratine to justify their enslavement. To understand the gravity of the call to reformation, you must understand that the country of Mauritania is, for the record, one hundred percent Muslim. *Madrasahs*, or religious schools of learning, are scattered throughout the country, holding on to a conservative Islamic education based on the books that Biram is openly desecrating. Traditional books, such as *Mukhtasar*, are foundational to the Maliki School and summarise the work of the school's founder, Malik Ibn Anas<sup>57</sup>. The religious discourse in Mauritania is based primarily on the books of *Khalil* and other jurists from early historical periods. These books bring a critical understanding of Islamic rules and regulation derived from the canonical texts of the Quran and the prophetic hadith. How then can the Islamic principles of equality and justice be in such conflict with cherished texts of the religion<sup>58</sup>?

The IRA is fighting to abolish the abuse and racial discrimination that exists in the name of religion. Furthermore, the IRA states that the religion has mistakenly been complicit to abuse and racism based on the misinterpretation of the past scholars and is openly fighting to reform these ideas. The meaning of religion for the IRA is a clear significant cultural identity and encompasses ideas of human and political rights for the Haratine. The challenge is to understand how religion and human rights can be interchangeable in the context of the Haratine, both expressing meanings of autonomy and freedom.

The relationship between seeking traditional models of religion and fanatical religious extremism are not uncommon (see Fadl 2006, p.18; Thurston 2012). One

---

<sup>56</sup> The legal history of Islamic law established several schools of thought as to the principles or approach to derivation of the law from interpretation of the text (see Abdallah 2004). these schools of thought or *Madhabs* are fundamental for establishing the code of law. today there are four existing schools within Sunni Muslims named after their founders: Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi, and Hanbali.

<sup>57</sup> Born in Medina, Saudi Arabia between 708 and 715 CE, he began learning at a young age and was known for his acumen and personal integrity. He spent his entire life in the city of Median teaching and issuing juristic pronouncements (*fatawa*). He was died and buried there in 795 (Wymann-Landgraf 2013, p.33).

<sup>58</sup> This is a question, first of interpretation and demonstrates the nuanced understanding of the law requires an extensive education.

of the IRA's major contestations is the interpretation of Islamic texts by juristic scholars of later centuries, such as the Egyptian jurist, Khalil ibn Ishaq<sup>59</sup>. The difficulty in going into the problems of interpretation and relative application of legal understanding is that the law, in principle, relates back to a specific time, place, and person. In other words, the cultural context has great influence on legal rulings. This is true for most cases, and not the other way around, i.e. that the legal ruling is implemented devoid of cultural context. If the contexts of the legal books of jurisprudence are not understood with this perspective, there can be an entirely unfounded interpretation of the law. This misconception of interpretation goes both ways, in other words, for those who advocate slavery and those who do not. What is relevant to the approach of seeking an early example of the religion is that the interpretation of these texts is in need of religious qualifications, many of which do not exist.

Religion has long been complicit to acts of violence in society<sup>60</sup>. It is important to clarify that it is not the issue of slavery mentioned in the texts, but the promotion of structural violence and discrimination as being part of Islam (Fleischman 1994, pp.90, 91). Ethnocentrism and domination have facilitated the justification of slavery and racial superiority through a guise of religion. The distinction here needs to be made between the religious texts mentioning slavery during fifteenth century Egypt and a valid application of Islamic law in present day Mauritania. This is the work of scholars specializing in Islamic foundational principles and necessitates sound judgement - free of racial discrimination or hatred.

#### **IV. The Making of a President**

The political potential of the IRA erupted in April 2012, when members of the group joined Biram in protest. The burning of Islamic jurisprudence books in southern Nouakchott drew the attention of millions. The country was outraged

---

<sup>59</sup> He is Khalil ibn Ishaq alJundi, from the scholars of Cairo. He was well known for his extensive knowledge, religious scruples, and benefit to others. His knowledge was extensive in Arabic, prophetic hadith, and obligations in the Maliki school. His Abridgement (*Mukhtasar*) was a summary of the teachings of the school Imam Malik and the most agreed positions (Nuraldin 1996, p.186). This book is still taught in Maliki circles of learning as the soundest positions in the school. It is especially relevant to areas of worship, such as the prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. The argument today, because it mentions slavery, is that slavery is a historical anomaly that this book is medieval and irrelevant. I am not entering into the argument at this point but would argue that even today *Mukhtasar* has extremely relevant sections for practicing Muslims.

<sup>60</sup> Some of the worst religious violence then mention how the wars that took place after democracy are far more detrimental.

and thousands gathered the next day in front of the Presidential Palace demanding Biram's execution (IRA-USA 2015). Biram was arrested after the protest with other members of the group and wrote a letter from prison formally apologising for actions (Platform 2012). 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 confrontational approach of the IRA has led to rifts among many of the conservative Haratine (the Imam Mohamed Mahmoud included) and an energetic following among young Haratine activists.

The IRA's recent emergence has shown an incredible trajectory of popularity and resistance. The incineration of Islamic texts shocked the country and thrust IRA into the international stage. Biram travels internationally promoting the IRA's fight against racial slavery and is not shy of his infamous 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 to discussions of larger pathways, such as political representation and human dignity, bringing both slaves and slave owners to a collective understanding of Mauritanian society.

Biram ran the first time for presidency in 2014. He came in second place with 8% of the vote, after President Abdul Aziz, who claimed 82%. The presidential race was boycotted by a large amount of the population. Biram spoke directly to those who withdraw support in protest, claiming the only way to successfully challenge the government, is to support his party with their participation (Platforms 2013b). When Biram was released earlier this year after serving 18 months of a two-year prison sentence, he announced his candidacy for the 2019 Presidential Election. He is a rising star in the eyes of many marginalised Mauritians and a relief to their long awaited representation. This feeling of marginalisation pervades not only the Haratine community but also the Afro-Mauritians. The population of

Mauritania has long awaited the justice to be served and equality, mentioned in the constitution, to be practiced.

Abolition is not just 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) and not given an option to this Divine Ordinance. The abolition movement is also about political autonomy and the independence of Haratine as a group from the slave owners. A larger idea behind abolition is the deconstruction of the religious principles that slavery in the country is built upon and questioning the texts that codify slavery. This final approach of deconstruction is challenging not only the books that traditional scholars adhere to in Mauritania and across North Africa, but also challenging the cultural application of the texts which is interpreted as an attack on Islam in Mauritania and specifically, the Beidan elite identity. What this conflict has begun to unravel is rights to application 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 ascribes to such as human rights, equality, and dignity (Platforms 2012).

Reformation of the political norms is primarily directed at Abdul Aziz (Lamlili 2016), the meanings of marginalisation are beyond politics and pervade the cultural definitions of Black and White (Fanon 1994, p.84; see also McDougall 2005). What the IRA has demonstrated is challenging what is beyond the discourse of political and religious ideologies and attacks the principles that the ideologies are built on. As SOS brings international pressure to reform policy and Mohamed Mahmoud finds his voice through traditional teachings, the IRA is bringing a new idea of nationhood and uprooting the positions of traditional scholars that religious meanings are built on and manipulated against racial equality. It is this new meaning of Mauritania, as a Mauritania of tolerance, equality, and dignity for all people that my research has sought to understand.

A further reach of the abolition movement is to reclaim the religious meaning of the early principles of equality and justice. Cultural domination has crept into the meanings of religion and exacerbated the rift between slaves and slave owners.

Not only this but the meanings of equality and brotherhood have been equally resonating among the Afro-Mauritanians. This collective repression has given way for the cause of IRA and ultimately Biram the potential to challenge to president in the elections.



## Conclusion

The public burning of Islamic books in 2012 and the discussion around the abolition of slavery has taken center stage regarding the fight for human rights and dignity of the Haratine people in Mauritania. The further investigation of Haratine identity demonstrates how religion and political mobility are fundamentally intertwined. It is through the process of descriptive analysis and ethnography of the Haratine people and the abolition movement that I have based my research. The abolition movement has developed in several new directions (see Choi-Fitzpatrick 2015, for a discussion on the global movement). Many of these trajectories are a direct result of the IRA and its work. I personally met with a small group of young Haratine who left the IRA to form an offshoot of the organisation. Haratine activism has never been so dynamic and vibrant as it is in our times.

I returned to Mauritania at the beginning of this year to investigate the activities of Haratine as a group in transition. I wanted to understand the ways Haratine come to terms with the social restrictions that have been put in place around them. What I discovered taking place within a repressive atmosphere of structural racism and social hierarchy, was diverse manifestations of mobility. People are seeking a realisation of identity around dynamics of race, authority, independence, and dignity. It was through the catalyst of the abolition movement that, in a way, has brought the conversation to the table. And now the question needing to be asked, after the state has declared us free, where shall we go from here? It is at this juncture of curiosity and anticipation that I have attempted to describe my experience of Haratine diversity and the manifestations of agency in transition.

This research has posed many challenges and difficulties in its execution. From among the limitations of the study is the need to understand women's stories and their own manifestation of place within the Haratine identity, first and foremost. The restrictions of an advanced technical language in both French and Arabic, also were relevant to my research but helped to keep the significant questions simple and clear.

My interviews with Boubacar Messaoud and SOS Esclaves demonstrated a connection with international human rights and a secular approach to abolition. The benefits of this were a greater connection to the international community of activists and policy makers, such as the United Nations. The added benefit is that through this experienced team of activists there was a more effective approach to Mauritania's government policies and pressure to amend them.

The personal conversation with the Imam, Mohamed Mahmoud, proved engaging and served as a reminder to how the structural racism is able to penetrate both the political and religious arenas. His story was one of empowerment and challenged the misconception of Haratine lacking education or self-sufficiency. This gave a greater meaning to many of the idealistic discourse in the religion that are universal and uphold principles of dignity and belonging.

My brief time with the IRA members was not sufficient enough for a comprehensive study. But the accessibility of an outlawed organisation is not facilitated easily, and left me without a major portion of the study. The brief visit with the IRA opened up room for a more in depth discussions and also clarity regarding the approach of the organisation. My personal allotted time in the country also proved to be a major setback in the research.

The international attention that IRA has received within the past few years has also contributed to my research. The greater benefit from having an example of the IRA has been a connection to a more dynamic and challenging approach to reformation of current norms in Mauritanian society, such as Haratine autonomy and the questioning of the Islamic tradition of slavery.

Suggestions of future research should include further exploration of the Haratine community in areas such as politics and religious meanings. There should also be the possibility a longitudinal ethnographic study that is able to demonstrate personal effects of the country's transitions among Haratine, as the country is hurried through another phase of development. Looking at the campaign of Biram Dah Abeid as he builds momentum, the presidential election of 2019 is a potentially historic moment for the Haratine community and the country.

## References

- Abdullah, U.F., 2004. *Islam and the Cultural Imperative*. Nawawi Foundation.
- Accueil. 2013. From <http://biramdahabeid.org/>
- Al-Jundi, K., 2003. *Mukhtasar Alalama Khalil*. Daar Alrashad alhadeetha. Casablanca, Morocco.
- Anti-slavery International thematic report on slavery in Mauritania for the UN human rights committee, 107<sup>th</sup> session, 11-23 March 2013*. Available at: <[http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/MRT/INT\\_CCPR\\_NGO\\_MRT\\_14502\\_E.doc](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/MRT/INT_CCPR_NGO_MRT_14502_E.doc)>.
- 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, doctoral thesis, 2 volumes. University of Chicago, (online Proquest).
- Brown, S., 2015, August 28. Black lives matter – except Biram Dah ould Abeid’s. from <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/259933/black-lives-matter-%E2%80%93-except-biram-dah-ould-abeids-stephen-brown>.
- Bullard, A., 2002. ‘Mauritanian activists’ struggle against slavery’, *Middle East Report*, 223), pp. 14–17. doi: 10.2307/1559458.
- Bullard A., 2005. From Colonization to Globalization. The Vicissitudes of Slavery in Mauritania, *Cahiers d’études africaines* /3-4, 179, p. 751-769.
- Chenal, J. and Kaufmann, V., 2008. ‘Nouakchott’, *Cities*, 25(3), pp. 163–175. doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2007.12.001.
- Choi-Fitzpatrick, A., 2015. From Rescue to Representation: A Human Rights Approach to the Contemporary Antislavery Movement, *Journal of Human Rights*, 14:4, 486-503, doi: 10.1080/14754835.2015.1032222
- Cleary, T., 2004. *The Quran a new translation*. Starlatch Press, pp.50-59.
- Cleaveland, T., 2015. Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti and his Islamic critique of racial slavery in the Maghrib, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 20:1, 42-64, doi: 10.1080/13629387.2014.983825
- Conway-Smith, E. 2015, October 19. ‘Slaves by the will of God’: why Mauritania has the highest percentage of slaves in the world. Available at: <<http://www.globalpost.com/article/6671326/2015/10/19/slaves-will-god-why-mauritania-has-highest-percentage-slaves-world>>.

- Diallo, G., 1995. *Mauritania - the other apartheid?* Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African studies (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet).
- Durkheim, É. and Bellah, R.N., 1975. *On morality and society: Selected writings*. 11th edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.149-163.
- 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*, 47(1), pp. 3-23. doi: 10.1177/0021934715609915.
- Fadl, K.A.E., 2006. *The great theft: Wrestling Islam from the extremists*. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, pp.11-25; 275-288.
- 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.
- 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., 2012. *Politics and minorities in Africa*. Roma: Aracne, pp.153-173.
- Gallagher, A., 2014. *The Global Slavery Index: seduction and obfuscation*. Available at: <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/anne-gallagher/global-slavery-index-seduction-and-obfuscation>>.
- Gallagher, A., 2016. *Unravelling the 2016 Global Slavery Index. Part one*. Available at: <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/anne-gallagher/unravelling-2016-global-slavery-index>>.
- Global slavery index 2014 - Mauritania. 2014. From: <<http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/mauritania/>>, pp.68-69.
- Global slavery index 2016 - Mauritania. 2016. From: <<http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/mauritania/>>, pp.122-125.
- 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.
- Hall, B. S., 2005. The question of 'race' in the pre-colonial southern Sahara, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 10:3-4, 339-367, doi: 10.1080/13629380500336714

- 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, pp89-92.
- International, A., 1998. *Mauritania: Trial of four human rights defenders*. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr38/002/1998/en/>.
- IRA-USA, 2015. April 28. *Anniversary of burning Malikite law books*. Available at: <http://ira-usa.org/anniversary-of-the-burning-of-malikite-law-books/>.
- Jenkins, R., 1992. *Pierre Bourdieu*. New York: Routledge, pp.66-102.
- Jourde, C. 2001. 'Ethnicity, Democratization, and Political Dramas: Insights into Ethnic Politics in Mauritania', *African Issues*, Vol. 29, No. 1/2, Ethnicity and Recent Democratic Experiments in Africa, pp. 26-30.
- Karen, R., 1998. *Becoming attached: Psychology's effort to understand the power of first relationships and how they impact our capacity to love*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.26-39.
- King Jr., M.L., 16 April 1963. "Letter from Birmingham Jail."
- Kohn, S., 2011. *Fear and statelessness in Mauritania*. Available at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/fear-and-statelessness-mauritania>.
- Lamlili, N., 2016, August 19. Mauritanie - Biram ould Dah Abeid: "Nous n'avons pas de problème avec une communauté, mais avec un seul homme: Mohamed ould. *News (General)*. Retrieved from <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/350500/politique/mauritanie-biram-ould-dah-abeid-navons-de-probleme-communaute-seul-homme-mohammed-ould-abdelaziz/>.
- Lewis, B., 1990. *Race and slavery in the middle east: An historical enquiry*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.54-61.
- Lewis, K., 2016. 'Yazidi woman held as sex slave 'abused every day for seven months', *Independent*, 15 March. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yazidi-woman-isis-sex-slave-islamic-state-jihadist-a6930251.html>.
- Mark, M., 2012. *Slavery still shackles Mauritania, 31 years after its abolition*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/14/slavery-still-shackles-mauritania>.
- Marlin, R. & Mathewson, S., 2015. *Enforcing Mauritania's anti-slavery legislation: The continued failure of the justice system to prevent, protect and punish -*

minority rights group. Available at:  
<<http://minorityrights.org/2015/12/08/enforcing-mauritanias-anti-slavery-legislation-the-continued-failure-of-the-justice-system-to-protect-and-punish>>.

- Mathewson, S. and Vettraino, F., 2013. *Mauritania's culture of impunity for slavery: Failures of the administrative, police and justice systems*. Anti-Slavery International, Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization and Society for Threatened Peoples.
- Mathewson, S. and Clarke, C., 2015. *Joint submission for the Universal Periodic Review of Mauritania, 23rd Session, October – November 2015*. Anti-Slavery International, Minority Rights Group International & SOS-Esclaves.
- Merry, S. E., 2006. 'Transnational Human Rights and Local Activism: Mapping the Middle', *American Anthropologist*, vol.108, Issue1, pp.38–51.
- McDougall, E. A., 1998. 'A sense of self: the life of Fatma Barka', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 285–315.
- McDougall, E. A., 2000. "A Quest for Honour": Slavery, Islam, and the Contributions of Martin Klein to African History, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp.546-564.
- McDougall E. A., 2002. 'Discourse and distortion : critical reflections on studying the Saharan slave trade', *Outre-mers*, vol. 89, no. 336-337, pp. 195-227.
- McDougall, E. A., 2005. 'Living the legacy of slavery: Between discourse and reality (les ayants droit de l'esclavage. Entre discours et réalité)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 45, pp. 957–986. doi: 10.2307/4393527.
- McDougall, E. A., 2015a. Hidden in Plain Sight: Haratine in Nouakchott's "Niche-Settlements". *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, p. 251.
- McDougall, E. A., 2015b. 'The politics of slavery, racism and democracy in Mauritania', *Beyond Slavery*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/e-ann-mcdougall/politics-of-slavery-racism-and-democracy-in-mauritania>.
- McDougall, E. A., Brhane, M., & Ruf, U. P., 2003. 'Legacy of Slavery; Promise of Democracy: Mauritania Enters the 21st Century', *Globalizing Africa*, chapter 3.
- Messaoud, B., 2000. 'L'esclavage en Mauritanie: De l'idéologie du silence à la mise en question', *Journal des africanistes*, 70(1), pp. 291–337. doi: 10.3406/jafr.2000.1232.
- Minority Rights Group International, 2013a. *Black Africans - minority rights group*. Available at: <<http://minorityrights.org/minorities/black-africans/>>.

- Minority Rights Group International, 2013b. *Haratin - minority rights group*. Available at: <<http://minorityrights.org/minorities/haratin/>>.
- Moore, C. H., 1965. One-Partyism in Mauritania. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 3, pp. 409-420 doi:10.1017/S0022278X00006194.
- Muñoz, C., 2007. *Youth, identity, power*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Verso.
- Naudet, J.-B., 2016. 'Pour les maîtres, violer les esclaves est un droit'. Available at: <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20141214.OBS7863/pour-les-maitres-violer-les-esclaves-est-un-droit.html>
- Nuraldin, I., 1996. *Aldibaj Almadhhab fi Ma'arifat A'ayaan Ulamaa Almadhhab*. Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah. Beirut, Lebanon, p.186.
- Okeowo, A., 2014. A Mauritanian Abolitionist's Crusade Against Slavery. [online] *The New Yorker*. Available at: <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/08/freedom-fighter>>.
- Ould Ahmed Salem, Z., 2001. 'Prêcher dans le désert: l'univers du Cheikh Sidi Yahya et l'évolution de l'islamisme mauritanien', *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara*, no. 14-15, pp. 5-40.
- Ould Ahmed Salem, Z., 2005. 'Mauritania: A Saharan frontier-state', *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3-4, pp. 491-506.
- Ould Ahmed Salem, Z., 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.
- Ould Ahmed Salem, Z., 2012. 'The Paradoxical Metamorphosis of Islamic Activism in Mauritania', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 2, no. 206-207, pp. 635-664.
- Pagden, A., 2003. 'Human rights, natural rights, and Europe's imperial legacy', *Political Theory*, 31(2), pp. 171-199. doi: 10.1177/0090591702251008.
- 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*. Available at: <http://unpo.org/article/14382>.
- Platforms, P., 2013a. January 14. *Haratin: Absurd impunity when judge brags about slavery*. Available at: <<http://www.unpo.org/article/15358>>.
- Platforms, P., 2013b, November 6. *Biram Dah Abeid: "You have managed to get the trophy of the first slave state in the world!"* , from: <http://unpo.org/article/16561>.

- Platforms, P., 2014. January 9. *Haratin: Mauritania to set up special slavery tribunal*. Available at: <http://unpo.org/article/16732>.
- Platforms, P., 2015. January 23. *Mauritanian Roadmap insufficient to combat consequences of slavery*. Available at: <http://unpo.org/article/17883>.
- Platforms, P., 2016a. June 3. *Haratin: Biram Dah Abeid looks ahead to 2019 Mauritanian presidential election*. from <http://unpo.org/article/19228>.
- Platforms, P., 2016b. August 18. *Biram Dah Abeid speaks to BBC: Slavery in Mauritania still very much A live issue*. Available at: <http://unpo.org/article/19387>.
- Platforms, P., 2016c. 18 November. *Crackdown on anti-slavery movement in Mauritania continues after release of Biram Dah Abeid*. Available at: <http://unpo.org/article/17712>.
- Rossi, B., 2016. 'Dependence, Unfreedom And Slavery in Africa: Towards An Integrated Analysis', *Africa*, vol. 86, no. 3, pp. 571-590.
- Serge, Z. N., 2009. *Researching the legal system and laws of the Islamic republic of Mauritania* - *GlobaLex*. Available at: <http://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Mauritania.html>.
- Shahinian, G., 2010a. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*. UN Doc A. HRC/15/20/Add.2 (16 August 2010).
- Shahinian, G., 2010b. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*. UN Doc A. HRC/15/20/Add.2 (24 August 2010).
- Shahinian, G., 2014. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*. UN Doc A. HRC/15/20/Add.2 (26 August 2014).
- Society for Threatened People, 2016a. *Esclavage en Mauritanie: échec de la feuille de route*. Available at: [https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte\\_Memoranden/2016/RAPPORTEUR\\_FEUILLE-DE-ROUTE.pdf](https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte_Memoranden/2016/RAPPORTEUR_FEUILLE-DE-ROUTE.pdf).
- Sutter, J. D., 2012. *Slavery's last stronghold*. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.laststronghold/index.html>.
- Stillwell, C., 1999. *Interview with Moctar Teyeb: 'Slavery is a state of mind'*. Available at: <http://www.meforum.org/453/interview-with-moctar-teyeb-slavery-is-a-state>.
- Thurston, A., 2012. *Mauritania's Islamists*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



- 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.
- Toure, Abou A. 2012. Slavery in Mauritania: History, Religion & The New Forms of Exploitation, masters thesis, Northern Arizona University.
- Tsing, A.L., 2004. *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton, NJ, United States: Princeton University Press.
- United States Department of State, 2016. *Mauritania: 2015. human rights report*. Edited by Penny Hill Press. United States: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Weinberg, B., 2005. *Mauritania: Slavery, Ethnic Cleansing, Democratic Opposition*. Available at: <http://countervortex.org/node/1022>.
- Wymann-Landgraf, U.F.A., 2013. *Malik and Medina: Islamic reasoning in the formative period*. Leiden ,The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, pp.33-40.
- X, M. and Haley, A. (1992). *The autobiography of Malcolm X*. 1st ed. New York: Ballantine Books, pp.240-270.

# APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL

Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
(Research)

Research Office  
Research Hub, Building C5C East  
Macquarie University  
NSW 2109 Australia  
T: +61 (2) 9850 4459  
<http://www.research.mq.edu.au/>  
ABN 90 962 801 237



1 December 2015

Dr Chris Vasantkumar  
Department of Anthropology  
Faculty of Arts  
Macquarie University  
NSW 2109

Dear Dr Vasantkumar

**Reference No:** 5201500770

**Title:** *Ethnographic analysis of descent-based slavery and implications regarding the universal concepts of human rights and Islamic rights in Mauritania*

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical and scientific review. Your application was considered by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities)) at its meeting on 25 September 2015 at which further information was requested.

The requested information was received with correspondence on 19 November 2015. The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) considered your responses at its meeting held on 27 November 2015.

I am pleased to advise that ethical and scientific approval has been granted for this project to be conducted at:

- Macquarie University

The HREC also indicated that Mr Andrist should not attend any anti-government protests anywhere during the fieldwork in Mauritania.

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007 – Updated May 2015) (the *National Statement*).

This letter constitutes ethical and scientific approval only.

## Standard Conditions of Approval:

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement*, which is available at the following website:

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research>

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol.
3. All adverse events, including events which might affect the continued ethical and scientific acceptability of the project, must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.
4. Proposed changes to the protocol must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on 9850 4194 or by email [ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au](mailto:ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au)

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures are available from the Research Office website at:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics)

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Karolyn White**

Director, Research Ethics & Integrity,

Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and the *CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice*.

**Details of this approval are as follows:**

**Approval Date:** 27 November 2015

The following documentation has been reviewed and approved by the HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities):

Documents reviewed	Version no.	Date
Macquarie University Ethics Application Form	2.3	July 2013
Appendix B: Research to be Undertaken Outside Australia		
Correspondence from Mr Anthony Andrist responding to the issues raised by the HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities)		19/11/2015
Travel Plans and Risk Mitigation in Mauritania		Received 19/11/2015
MQ Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF): English version		
MQ Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF): French version		
Participant Interview Run Sheet		Received 19/11/2015

The following documentation was noted by the HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities):

Documents noted	Date
Vice Chancellor's delegate approval to travel to Mauritania	24/09/2015
Email correspondence from Ms Maggie Feng, MQ Insurance Manager	15/09/2015
Email correspondence from Sarah Mathews, SOS Esclaves	07/10/2015