

**The Arab Spring's Contagion:  
The Fight against Slavery in Mauritania between Military Coups  
and the Protests of the Youth Movement**

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**Change and Continuity in the Arab World**

**Abstract** - In 1981, military regime formally abolished slavery in Mauritania and some El-Hor leaders – who fought against slavery since 1974 – obtained marginal ministries. In reality, the government did not set up any measures to fight slavery and the Haratines – slaves, former slaves and their descendants – continued to be trapped in slavery. The 1980s saw the birth of another movement, which gave emphasis to the ‘Africanity’ of the Haratines. FLAM (African Liberation Forces of Mauritania) was immediately opposed by the regime, declared illegal and forced into exile in Senegal. The Arabs continued to deny the persistence of slavery, then an El-Hor leader abandoned the movement in 1995 to create SOS-Esclaves, to help people still in bondage. In 2007, the first democratic President of Mauritania enacted laws against the persistence of slavery. The following year, a new military coup brought the fight against slavery to silence. Inspired by democratic developments in the Arab world, to which the Mauritanian elite referred since independence, in 2011 young students took to the street asking for democracy and the fight against slavery had once more become a tool to oppose entrenched powers. The paper uses archival sources, associations' documents and oral interviews to study this subject.

## INTRODUCTION

Placed on the west-southern border of the Maghreb, Mauritania is one of the countries usually referred to when speaking about contemporary slavery. There we can find the latest abolition of slavery (1981), the fourth in the twentieth century for that country, but until 2007 there were no laws punishing the exploitation of slaves. Therefore, slavery has a long history in that country, which had its birth under French colonization.

Despite their *mission civilisatrice*, the French did not fight against slavery in the country, as they had in Senegal or in modern Mali. In Mauritania, they resorted to Arab tribes to control the territory, so maintaining the existent social order.

Independent Mauritania saw the maintenance of the power in Arab hands and, therefore, slavery was denied. It did, however, began to appear in some political discourses and, finally, some freed slaves created the *El-Hor* or ‘free man’ to fight for the rights of the *Haratines*, the community including formal freed slaves and ex-slaves of the Arabs tribes.

The fight against slavery soon became a major topic of the political scene used by regimes, opposition movements and parties to legitimate their power or the right to access it. Moreover, to maintain their dominant position, Arabs carried on a process of *Arabization* of the country, both cultural, linguistic and political. Mauritania had to affirm its Arab identity and to distinguish itself from the rest of the West African countries. The goal was also to include the Haratines in the Arab community to maintain their control from above. The means was to give some Haratine leaders access to the political sphere to canalize their electoral weight and to allow political visibility with Arab leadership.

Formal abolition of slavery took place in 1980-81, but the Haratines remained in a relation of dependence with their formal masters, but not all leaders, who had marginal ministries. New political alliances with Western countries were useful to government to obtain funding from the IMF and the World Bank, funds managed by the Arab elite and used in order to have access to the properties of the lands of the Senegal river Valley, from which about 80,000 black inhabitants were expelled in 1989.

Antislavery campaigns promoted by movements and refugees became popular in the US and Europe, while the discourse about slavery went almost in silence within the country, to resurface in occasion of democratic elections, as in 2007, when the first democratic president of Mauritania was elected and then the first laws against slavery were introduced. Just a year later, another coup blocked the democratic process to power and brought the fight against slavery once again into silence.

In February 2011, some demonstrations took place in Nouakchott, when a youth movement of Mauritanian students went to the street to protest for freedom and reforms, as boys of their age did in Egypt, Tunisia or Syria. The Arab world, to which the Mauritanian leaders referred to build the country and to affirm their control over it, gave the youth movement the inspiration to protest against the regime. One of their requests was the creation of a national institute for the observation of the slavery still affecting the country.

## BUILDING SLAVES, BUILDING STATE

Over the centuries, slavery in that area was mostly carried on by Arabs and Berbers to the damage of the black inhabitants of the southern part of the Sahara borders, especially the Senegal river Valley and Sudanese area.<sup>1</sup> Black people were stolen or bought in markets and used as slaves in agriculture or in breeding, while females were mostly exploited as domestic slaves, usually even sexually abused and, if pregnant, their children became new slaves of the masters. The son of a female slave was a new property of her owner, no matter whether he was the father or a male slave. Slaves being considered animals, the son of the animal-slave was not recognised as son by the owner but claimed as slave. The eventual slave father had no rights of fatherhood above him.

As Berbers were mostly middle-class artisans, some not rich enough to own slaves,<sup>2</sup> the Arabs assumed the leading rule as *hassan*, the warriors elite, while Berbers were usually *zwâya* or *marabouts*, the religious class, maintaining some power due to their religious knowledge acquired previously by Almoravides.<sup>3</sup> In this Arabized society, speaking *Hassanya*, a local version of Arabic mixed with Berber words, at a lower step we find the tributaries or *znâga*, mostly made up of artisans, shepherds and musicians. At the lowest level, the freed slaves *Haratines*, or *hratîn* (sing. *hartâni*), and the slaves, *âbid* (sing. 'âbd).<sup>4</sup>

Slavery was also practiced among Halpulaars, Wolof and Soninke of the Senegal river Valley, and there, as often occurred in the African societies, it was conducted by Blacks on Blacks, but with different circumstances among different ethnicities e.g. harder among the Soninke. The conditions of the enslaved among the Black communities have been sometimes considered more mobile

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<sup>1</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'Un monde sens dessus dessous: esclaves et affranchis dans l'Adrar mauritanien, 1910-1950', p. 127 in *Arab and Berber: The Ideological, Political and Economic Pillars of Slavery in the African Sahel and the Expansion of Islam*, in Kwesi Kwaa Prah, ed., *Reflections on Arab-led slavery of Africans* (Cape Town: CASAS, 2005), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvain Monteillet, 'L'islam, le droit et l'État dans la Constitution mauritanienne', *L'Afrique politique*, 2002, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> The terms used in this chapter are those usually recurring in English literature about slavery in West Africa. They could vary in citations of different authors for the way they transcribe Arabic phonemes, e.g. *haratines* or *haratins* to define the entire community, *haratine* or *hartani* to refer to a single member or as adjective.

because slaves could obtain freedom during their life and the condition of enslavement was different than among Arabs,<sup>5</sup> at the lowest level in the social structure organized by castes.<sup>6</sup>

French colonization, carried on by the end of the nineteenth century, did not change the distribution of the power in Arab society. On the contrary, the French preferred to maintain the pre-existent order and to control the territory recurring to the fidelity of the traditional chief system.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, no direct intervention was taken against slavery as it was in Senegal or in the French Sudan.

At the beginning the conquest of Mauritania, the French tried to apply the General Act of Bruxelles, concerning the freedom of slaves, in those West-African territories already under their control. So, the emancipation of slaves was carried on among the tribes of the territories of modern Mali, where several *Villages de liberté* took place. Those were villages where runaway slaves were protected by their masters, by working on lands and receiving a ‘freedom license’ after three months, a pass giving freedom. In October 1895, 7,931 ex-slaves were living in forty-four ‘Villages de liberté’. About 1,500 per year received a freedom pass.<sup>8</sup>

In Senegal, after fifty years of presence, in 1893 Frenchs made arrangements to fight slavery with the local chiefs, who ‘s’engageaient à interdire tout trafic d’esclaves sur leurs territoires’, by the ‘transformation de leur captifs en simple tenanciers engagés à temps’ to change ‘la condition des captifs, peu à peu, sans heurter aucun des préjugés de la population et sans apporter aucune perturbation dans le régime économique du pays’.<sup>9</sup>

By going to occupy the Mauritanian territories of Trarza, Brakna and Gorgol in 1904, Xavier Coppolani wrote reports for the General Governor of the French Western Africa, who wished ‘sans doute, supprimer ces marchés (d’esclaves), interdire la vente des captifs, de même que vous l’avez

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<sup>5</sup> James F. Searing, ‘Aristocrates, esclaves et paysans: pouvoir et dépendance dans les État *wolof*, 1700-1850’, in Mariella Villasante-De Beauvais, ed., *Groupes serviles au Sahara*, pp. 28-32.

<sup>6</sup> Mohamed Yahya Ould Cirée, ‘L’esclavage in Mauritanie’, in Kwesi Kwaa Prah, ed., *Reflections on Arab-led slavery of Africans*, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> E. Ann McDougall, ‘Un monde sens dessus dessous’, p.125.

<sup>8</sup> Archives nationales d’Outre mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, FM/SG/AOF/XIV, letter 16 Nov. 1895.

<sup>9</sup> ANOM, FM/SG/AOF/XIV, letter 5 Dec. 1895.

fait dans les autres régions où vous dominez'. Coppolani underlined how French commercial interests in those areas were opposed to 'l'œuvre de transformation économique et d'émancipation sociale que vous avez engagée en Afrique occidentale'.<sup>10</sup> In fact, abolition did not take place.

The maintenance of the Mauritanian social organization was followed by the French during the occupation of the country until its independence. Yet, it has been analysed how French colonization introduced measures that had indirect consequences on slavery in Mauritania. The Senegalese and Sudanese emancipation policies already gave to Mauritanian slaves the example that, in some way, the French worked on for freedom. In the early colonization, some slaves moved to the south of the country escaping their masters and local freedom villages took place.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, and more importantly, after the colonization of the country the French Army needed workers for its existence and found them among the Black servants who knew, for the first time, that they could be paid for their work.<sup>12</sup>

This need for workers caused some runaway slaves who left their tribes to reach French 'postes' which needed 'cuisiniers, de boys (employés de maison), d'interprètes, des gardes et de bergers', even if those jobs were mostly applied for by free Haratines. Moreover, the drought of the 1930s caused movement of the Arab nomadic shepherds of the North and emancipations or the abandonment of numbers of slaves.<sup>13</sup> Another important aspect was the possibility to have access to the schools for Haratine and slave children of the villages, created by the French. Even if it was for just a very few part of the poorest population that then created the future leadership of the Haratine community.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ANOM, MRT/IV/1, relation 25 Jun. 1904.

<sup>11</sup> Olivier Leservoisier, 'Les *hratin* et le Fuuta Tooro', p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'Un monde sens dessus dessous', p.123.

<sup>13</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'Un monde sens dessus dessous', pp. 127-33.

<sup>14</sup> Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, 'Espace confrérique, espace étatique: le mouridisme, le confrérisme et la frontière mauritano-sénégalaise' in Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, ed., *Les trajectoires d'un État-frontière. Espaces, évolution politique et transformations sociales en Mauritanie* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004), p. 288.

## **THE DISCOURSE OF SLAVERY IN EARLY INDEPENDENT MAURITANIA**

The independence of Mauritania was characterized by the continuity of power. It remained in the hands of those Arabs who first collaborated with the French. Until its independence, the country had a separate administration but was governed by the Senegalese St. Louis. In 1957, Mauritania had its first internal autonomous government with Mokhtar Ould Daddah, leader of the Union Progressiste Mauritanienne (UPM), who became the first President of the independent country, three years later. ‘There was nothing progressive about the movement, which represented class interests of the traditional pro-French Moorish chieftains’. The UPM was in fact founded in 1948 by Mauritanian notables, to offset the Entente Mauritanienne, a Socialist party, from the possibility of obtaining a seat at the French national assembly granted to Mauritania.<sup>15</sup>

The only lawyer in the country, Ould Daddah was from a Marabout tribe, assuring continuity not only to Arab power but also to French economic interests. The two leading economical sectors of the country, mining and fishing, were largely controlled by European companies. The policies of Ould Daddah were to reinforce the control on the territory and the interests of the Arabs. No democracy was set up. The only official party was the Parti de Regroupement Mauritanien (PRM), formed by UPM and some Entente’s members. Moreover, Ould Daddah carried on a policy of alliances with the Arab World, to mark the membership of the country within the Islamic community. Mauritania became the first ‘Islamic Republic’ and joined the Arab League in 1973, its favourite partners becoming Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Over time, that policy gave no opportunities for the Black communities to have a relevant role in the administration of the French colonial state. In reality, during colonization, many Black-Mauritanians were nonetheless applied by the French in the public administration and in the Army, becoming a sort of middle class, in some way autonomous from the Arab elite. The Arabization of

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<sup>15</sup> Mahfoud Bennounne, ‘The Political Economy of Mauritania: Imperialism and Class Struggle’, *Review of African Political Economy* 12, 1978, pp. 38-39.

the country was therefore also directed against those Blacks,<sup>16</sup> especially after the important role they assumed during the war in Western Sahara in the Seventies, considered a part of the ‘Great Mauritania’ by Ould Daddah already before the real independence of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Just a year after independence, in 1961 Ould Daddah signed the UN Declaration of Human Rights and promulgated the first constitution of Mauritania which affirmed the abolition of slavery: ‘La République assure à tous les citoyens, sans distinction de race, de religion ou de condition sociale, l’égalité devant la loi’.<sup>18</sup> The abolition was just a formal one, however, because law delegated to the *Qadis*, the traditional Islamic judges, the competence on disputes between slaves and their masters. Due to the fact that the *Qadis* had to be paid, usually by gifts, and were of tribal membership, justice was usually denied to slaves.<sup>19</sup> In 1969, the competence was assigned to the Ministry of Justice.

Formally freed, the slaves (*abid*) became Haratines, but it was no more than a symbol of emancipation, as they were considered as freed slaves (*khadara* or *khourth*), recent ex-slaves (*Haratines*) and slaves (*abid*) as the only group which marked their dependence from the ancient masters. If in English literature they are referred to as Black Moors, or those who make up the Arab community together with the White Moors, or the Arabs and Berbers, the local Hassanya used to call them *sudân*, marking their southern origin to indicate their blackness in which emancipation is not possible, as opposed to the leading *bidhân* (beydane). Then, a change in language occurred to mask the continuity of dependence, a continuity that the government itself had later to admit. It was also useful to create within the Arab community the identity around which to build the new independent state. To create the new administration, in 1966, Arabic was declared compulsory, together with French, in the secondary school.

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<sup>16</sup> Mariella Villasante Cervello, ‘Quelque traits de la vie politique de Mokhtar Ould Dadda, premier président de la Mauritanie indépendante’, *The Maghreb Review*, 27 : 1, 2002, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> Mokhtar Ould Daddah, *La Mauritanie contre vents et marées* (Paris: Khartala, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Mokhtar Ould Daddah, *La Mauritanie contre vents et marées*, p. 590.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Botte, *Esclavages et abolitions en terres d’Islam*, (Bruxelles: André Versailles, 2010), p. 214.



The introduction of a language largely ignored by the Black community, which mostly constituted the administrative staff since the French period, was contested and boycotted by Black students and their strikes gave fame to *Le manifeste des 19*, which will have a new life twenty years later, a paper signed by teachers, professors and magistrates in support of the students.<sup>20</sup> It must be said that, still today, Arabic is just spoken by the Arab elite who have access to a complete school education, while the Arabized Haratines mostly speak only Hassaniya and ignore Arabic.

In 1975, the only official party, now called the Parti du Peuple Mauritanien (PPM), adopted a Charter in which it was underlined how Mauritania was the only Islamic Republic in the world which ‘puise ses sources dans l’Islam orthodoxe’ and in the name of traditional Islam the exploitation of man on man will be persecuted, by eliminating ‘tout travail non rémunéré, non contractuel, non garanti’.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, the Ould Daddah’s party affirmed that slavery still existed, but simply as a negative tradition of all the components of the Mauritanian people.

## **MOVEMENTS AND MILITARY COUPS**

In 5 March 1978 a group of Haratines founded a movement called *El-Hor* or ‘free man’, asking for political and educational rights for their community, affirming their alternative identity to the Arab or Black identity and declaring the fight against slavery.<sup>22</sup> All requests were made in the name of Islam and of its egalitarian vocation, to fight against the anachronism of slavery and the distorted use of religion to legitimate slavery. ‘El-Hor intended less to overturn Mauritania power structures or society and more to become a full-fledged and active part of it. The Haratine movement did not develop a radical or revolutionary vision’.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gian Paolo Chiari, ‘Conflitti etnici e integrazione politica in Mauritania’, in *Africa*, 45: 4, 1990, p. 535.

<sup>21</sup> Moktar Ould Daddah, *La Mauritanie contre vents et marées*, pp. 587-9.

<sup>22</sup> Constitutive Charter and other sources available at <http://www.elhor.org>.

<sup>23</sup> Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, ‘Bare-foot activists: Transformations in the Haratine movement in Mauritania’, in Stephen Ellis, Ineke van Kessel, ed., *Movers and Shakers. Social movements in Africa* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 163.

It must be underlined that the founders affirmed to speak for the entire Haratine community but they mostly were really sons of freed slaves, not really representing the different status of the community. We can easily realize that by considering their name. Among the twenty founders, nineteen have the term *Ould*, which stands for 'son of'. This was possible just to the child or man (*Mint* if female) who is recognized as the son by a free man and then by an Arab master or a free Hartani or to men freed as adult. But the previous difference is easily clear because those free by birth by an Arab father have typically holy names (Mohamed, Ismail, Zakarya, etc.), while those freed as adult have Black or Haratine names, as for example M'Barik, Messaoud, Bilal, even if followed by 'Ould'.<sup>24</sup> Slaves are still unable to recognize their sons, who became the property of their masters.

Just four months later, a military coup ousted Ould Daddah, who lost his power principally due to the difficulties in the war fought in the Western Sahara. After the end of the Spanish occupation in 1975, Western Sahara was invaded by Morocco in the north and Mauritania in the south, but war was hard to carry on for a fragile economy such as the Mauritanian one. Its Army was mostly formed by Black-Mauritanians because the Arabs preferred not to take arms against their 'brother' Sahrawis,<sup>25</sup> and subsequently Black officials and soldiers began to ask for political spaces. El-Hor became their first political referent and increased in popularity but he had to wait until 1980 to become really popular within the masses.

Then, eighteen El-Hor members were tried for having denounced the public sale of a 15yr old boy. The Trial of Rosso, from the name of the city where it took place, occupied big space within the media and El-Hor became popular all over the country and abroad. In that period, Mauritania attracted the attention of the Anti-Slavery Society, named Anti-Slavery International by 1990, which conducted studies and reports on local slavery and also published in a famous book by John

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<sup>24</sup> Roger Botte, *Esclavages et abolitions en terres d'Islam*, pp. 235-6.

<sup>25</sup> John Mercer, *Slavery in Mauritania Today* (Edinburgh: Human Rights Book, 1982), p. 32.

Mercer.<sup>26</sup> International public opinion reinforced El-Hor and directed its attention towards the Mauritanian government policy on slavery.

To undermine its increasing force, the new president Ould Haidalla, author in January 1980 of the third coup after Ould Daddah's fall, affirmed the equality of all the Mauritanian people (all were 'brothers'), although by not setting, once again, any measures to fight slavery. At the same time, to balance and assure Arab leadership in the country, *Shari'a* law was imposed. The two measures went in the direction to satisfy Western public opinion and to attract economical supports by allied Eastern countries as Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the fragile system of jurisdiction on slavery created in 1975 was erased by the introduction of *Shari'a* because the decisional power returned to Islamic precepts which were ambiguous about slavery.

The force of El-Hor was not in reality undermined and protests continued. 1981 saw then a decree (ord. No. 81,234, 8 November 1981) declaring the abolition of slavery 'in toutes ses formes'. Owners had to be refunded for the eventual lost of their slaves, but the government did not finance any funds for that.<sup>27</sup>

Another way to weaken El-Hor was found by including some of its leaders into the Arab system of power. Ould Haidalla, and his successor Ould Taya, in the coup in 1984, used to have two Haratine ministries in his government, although in marginal position such as that of Rural Development. This policy assured their support to the existent regime and demonstrated to the Haratines the possibility to emancipate their conditions from inside the Arab community, even if emancipation was simply apparent and instrumental. Moreover, the participation within the government interrupted any possible agreement between El-Hor and the instances of the Black-Mauritanians of the Senegal River Valley.

One of the most important political creations of Ould Haidalla was the Structures d'Éducation des Masses (SEM), to overcome the one-party system. Midway between mass organization and administrative structure, the SEM constituted a hierarchical system of power and of representation

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<sup>26</sup> John Mercer, *Slavery in Mauritania Today*.

<sup>27</sup> Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, 'Espace confrérique, espace étatique', p. 291.

where, at the base, ten families represented a cellule with a chief and ten cellules elected a superior chief. It gave, especially in villages where Haratines were a majority, their first access to the political scene, causing large support from the Haratines to the Haidalla's government,<sup>28</sup> who was, in 1984, deposed by colonel Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. The SEM, created by captain Breika Ould M'Barek, the only military of the *Comité militaires de salut national* (CMSN) of slave origin,<sup>29</sup> were immediately abolished.

All the Mauritanian coups were led by Arab officials against other ex-officials, not really to change the country's policies but to assure a more effective control over them. Then, coups affirmed the continuity of Arab power in Mauritania and not sharp breaks aimed at changes. Ould Taya expressed real continuity of power for twenty years. Once erased the SEM, he found another way to please the Haratine by giving them formal representation and maintaining his control over their leaders.

We must consider the demographic importance of the Haratines. It is estimated that they are about 40-45 per cent of the total population (Arabs 25-35 per cent and 20-30 per cent Black-Mauritanians, such as Wolof, Halpulaars, Soninke and Bambara). We have no official data as government did not declare the results of its census, maybe not to reveal that Arabs were a minority in the country and to weaken the requests for political space advanced by Haratine and Black oppositions.

## **BLACK REACTIONS, BLACK EXPULSIONS**

To assure the continuity of the Haratine support of the new regime, Ould Taya immediately appointed Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, El-Hor leader, as Minister of Rural Development, with the assignment of setting up land reform to improve the condition of the Haratines. 'This appointment marked a turning point. First of all, it opened up access to decision-making position to the Haratine

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<sup>28</sup> Urs Peter Ruf, 'Diguettes, barrages, bétail: les enjeux de l'émancipation des *hrâtin* et des 'âbid en Mauritanie centrale', in Mariella Villasante-De Beauvais, ed., *Groupes serviles au Sahara*, pp. 188-9.

<sup>29</sup> Roger Botte, *Esclavages et abolitions en terres d'Islam*, p. 356.

elite. (...) And finally, it signalled government recognition of El-Hor as a legitimate representative and spokesman of the Haratine Community'.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, it must be said that the process of Arabization carried on by the government achieved success. The Haratines felt themselves part of the Arab community. 'Arab but Black; Black but Arab' is a famous way to explain how the Haratine identity was expressed by its members.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, a drought in the middle 1980s weakened the Arab shepherds and farmers of the rural areas and their control over slaves. These often left their masters to reach the capital city, Nouakchott, built up by Ould Daddah after independence as a discontinuity sign with the colonial period.

This did not mean their effective freedom. If they were able to find work, they had to support their old masters. Even if these formally freed slaves were not obliged to do that, this justifies why scholars, especially anthropologists, speak of 'metaphorical slavery' or 'relationships of personal dependence' to indicate that it was no more *slavery* but something else.<sup>32</sup> Indeed we must consider that runaway or freed slaves left their families, in the largest meaning family takes in Afro-Arab societies: wives, sons, brothers, sisters, mother, father, etc. in the old master's hand, and that played an important factor in maintaining the pre-existent relationships of dependence more than creating new ones.

The drought also pushed some tribes toward the south of the country, in the more fertile lands of the river, exacerbating, together with Arabization and the El-Hor's proximity to the military regime, the Black-Mauritanians' requests for rights and access to the political space, by looking at their territory threatened by the new presence.

1983 saw the birth of the *Forces de Libération Africaines de Mauritanie* (FLAM), a Black-Mauritanian movement fighting for the rights of that community and against the policies of racism, marginalization and Arabization carried out by the military regime against their members and

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<sup>30</sup> Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, 'Bare-foot activists', p. 166.

<sup>31</sup> Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, 'Bare-foot activists', p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. Roger Botte, *Esclaves et abolitions en terres d'Islam*, p. 228, and Fabio Viti, 'Pérennité de l'esclavage? Travail et dépendance personnelle en Afrique de l'Ouest', in *Africa*, 44: 1-2, 2009, p. 63.

culture. In a few years it was able to obtain support from a large part of the Black-Mauritians, especially those engaged in the Army or in the public administration. Its position was illustrated in *Le Manifeste du Négro-Mauritanien opprimé*, which had large publicity in its appearance in 1986. More than fighting against slavery *per se*, it fought against the Arabs' oppression of the other Black and Haratine identities, by considering the last as a part of the bigger Black-Mauritanian community, although with its specific characteristics as well as those of Wolof, Soninke, Halpulaar. The Haratines were a single community but formed by Blacks, being their Arabization forced as well as that of the Black students in 1966, when Ould Daddah kicked off the process by introducing the obligation to use Arabic in the secondary school. The *Manifeste* reminds us of the 1966 students' protests against that measure to reaffirm, twenty years later, the policy of racist discrimination, forced Arabization and social marginalization carried out by the military regimes against the Black-Mauritanian communities.<sup>33</sup>

It is important to underline how FLAM refuted the Arabs' power by criticizing the excessive space these occupied in the political scene because they were a minority in a country mostly populated by Black communities. The consequential marginalization of Blacks in politics and of Black culture had no justification.

In this initial phase, denouncing slavery would have weakened the movement to find support from the Black-Mauritanian audience, where slavery existed, being at the same time difficult to break into the Haratines, whose requests were already expressed by El-Hor. So, FLAM policy seemed to go in the direction of complementarity to El-Hor's, but it had no success in finding sources of collaboration.<sup>34</sup> The process of Arabization had already permeated the Haratines, certainly their leaders, who found space in politics and ministries.

FLAM was boycotted by the regime, declared illegal and then expelled from the country, finding a temporary seat in Dakar, Senegal. Two-thirds of its leadership were arrested, as well as about 600 Black military personnel in 1987-88, accused of having organized a coup or being purged by the

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<sup>33</sup> *Manifeste* and information about FLAM available at <http://www.flamnet.info>, official website.

<sup>34</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'The Politics of slavery in Mauritania', the *Maghreb Review* 35: 3, 2010, pp. 274-5.

Army for their proximity with the FLAM. The purge attracted international attention, giving FLAM an external popularity that increased three years later.<sup>35</sup>

The presence of FLAM in Dakar and some clashes along the two countries' borders soon burned into a war with Senegal. Some Mauritanian shops in Dakar were burned and the Senegalese government was accused of violence on Mauritanian traders. Following clashes caused hundred of deaths.<sup>36</sup>

In 1989, Ould Taya expelled about 80,000 Black-Mauritians from the Senegal River Valley, 60,000 to Senegal and 20,000 to Mali, declaring they were unable to demonstrate their Mauritanian citizenship for reason of the lack of a national identity card. This massive expulsion touched international public opinion, and *racism* and *slavery* became words around which to describe Mauritanian events.

The reasons for the expulsions were mostly economic. The advancing desertification of the south-western Saharan borders dried up the lands of Arab shepherds and farmers. The goal was to allocate them and the Haratines in those territories exploited by the Blacks from the ancient past. This was done not by giving the properties of those territories to the new Haratine workers but deliberating laws which favoured the Arab leading class into acquiring those lands.

That became clear in a short time. After a long period of alliances with Arab countries, the Gulf War I and the defeat of the ally Saddam Hussein turned Mauritania into a Western country. The goal was also to attract international financiers such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The Mauritanian anti-slavery policies were also deliberated in that proposal.<sup>37</sup>

The IMF and WB funds were managed by the Arab leading class and applied to the acquisition of the property of the 'freed' territories of the Senegal River Valley. Special laws were deliberated, containing norms that gave access to the property only to leading Arabs. The Haratines had been

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<sup>35</sup> Gian Paolo Chiari, 'Conflitti etnici e integrazione politica in Mauritania', p. 540.

<sup>36</sup> Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, 'De Ould Daddah à Ould Taya. La longue marche de la Mauritanie', *Géopolitique Africaine* 12, 2003, pp. 186-7.

<sup>37</sup> Alice Bullard, 'From Colonization to Globalization. The Vicissitudes of Slavery in Mauritania', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 3: 179-180, 2005, pp. 753-4.

their non-military Army to control and take possession of these territories, by working for their old masters, to whom they were being thankful for the new work, and by opposing Black-Mauritanian claims to territories they had cultivated for centuries.<sup>38</sup>

International funds also created a barrage to dry new lands for cultivation, but even these, managed by tribes, were mostly assigned to the old Arab masters. The Haratines were usually excluded from the possibility of acquiring land. Just in a few areas did they obtain, and not always, some limited portions of land but this is to be considered, however, as success stories.<sup>39</sup>

As far as internal policies are concerned, the 1990s began with major problems for Ould Taya. He conceded multiparty municipal elections, which declared his power among the country and were contested by the other competitors, who denounced frauds and organised demonstrations protests.

Moreover, his old alliance with Saddam Hussein caused in 1991 the lost of the support by Saudi Arabia and by other older Eastern allies, and then the need for relationships with Western countries obliged Ould Taya to concede some kind of internal pluralism. Therefore, two months after the end of the Gulf War I, he announced a new constitution, a referendum for its approval and presidential elections.

In July 1991, 97,94 per cent of the Mauritanian voters approved the new constitution,<sup>40</sup> declaring the country a parliamentary democracy. Arabic became the official language, with no reference to French. Immediately, the ruling CMSN approved laws for parties and for press freedom and, in October, Ould Taya announced that presidential elections would take place in January 1992.

The impossibility to have religious, regional or ethnic based parties, which was banned by the Constitution, but the necessity to have a large party to compete Ould Taya, pushed Black-Mauritanians, Haratines and Arab opposition to the foundation of *Union des Forces Démocratiques* (UDF) of Mauritania, with co-leaders the old El-Hor founder Ould Boulkheir and Ahmed Ould

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<sup>38</sup> El Arby Ould Saleck, 'Les Haratin comme enjeu pour les partis politiques en Mauritanie', *Journal des africanistes* 70: 1-2, 2000, p. 258.

<sup>39</sup> Urs Peter Ruf, 'Diguettes, barrages, bétail.', pp. 172-3.

<sup>40</sup> Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, 'Des voix dans le désert. Sur les élections de « l'ère pluraliste »', *Politique Africaine* 55, 1994, pp. 31-33.



Daddah, the beydane brother of the first President of the country, in exile in Paris. The final candidate was Ould Daddah, chosen by Black-Mauritanian and Arab members, with great disappointment from El-Hor's who denounced the persistence of discrimination against their Haratine condition. The electoral defeat of Ould Daddah, the boycott of the successive legislative elections and the unsuccessful protests carried on by UDF pushed El-Hor to abandon the party in 1994.

Moreover, El-Hor were losing its Haratine audience in the capital, which moved to support the winner Ould Taya and his promises of work and emancipation.<sup>41</sup>

### **THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF THE FIGHT AGAINST SLAVERY**

The attention to the fight against slavery found space especially in the Western political scenario, where FLAM was active in giving publicity to its action. FLAM leadership spoke at a UN conference in 1994, participated in exhibitions in London and Stockholm in 1995, took actions in France and the US, and associated the persecution of Black-Mauritanians with that of slavery to hit a larger audience.

Popularity came especially from the publications of Amnesty International reports and, in the mid 1990s, of the journalistic works of Samuel Cotton, a USA Afro-American who dedicated his life to the fight against slavery. His *Silent Terror*,<sup>42</sup> a book showing how Black-Mauritanians were still exploited by their Arab masters, had huge success. The denouncement of the existence of contemporary slavery in Mauritania had a big impact on the North American public opinion, also due to the repeated reference to *apartheid* to indicate the Mauritanian slavery system. Therefore, slavery became simply that practiced by the Arabs and slavery existing in the Black communities disappeared.

Cotton's work is usually despised and derided by scholars for its no-scientific approach (e.g. McDougall, Nugent), forgetting perhaps that it was not addressed to academics but to a larger

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<sup>41</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'The Politics of slavery in Mauritania', p. 269.

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Cotton, *Silent Terror. A Journey into Contemporary African Slavery* (New York: Harlem River Press, 1998).

audience. It could also be supposed that even its ‘apartheid’ approach caused refusal by academics. It must be said that, before the Cotton’s book, in 1993 a work had already appeared by Garba Diallo, a scientific work even though he is not a university scholar, who asked ‘Mauritania: The Other Apartheid?’, and his answer was yes.<sup>43</sup> But even Diallo is still now mostly ignored or refused. Cotton also founded the Coalition Against Slavery in Mauritania And Sudan (CASMAS), a human rights group denouncing the exploitation of Arabs on Blacks. Other NGOs came to light in the US at that time: The Harateen Institute for Research and Development, the Mauritanian Network, the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Mauritania.

### **FROM MOVEMENTS TO NGOS IN MAURITANIA**

Domestic silence over slavery in Mauritania was broken by an El-Hor founder, who, in February 1995, polemically abandoned the movement to create SOS-Esclaves, an association to ‘*éradiquer la servitude traditionnelle dans l’espace mauritanien*’.<sup>44</sup>

Boubacar Messaoud was in fact an El-Hor member who had lost the Ministry of Rural Development for having contested the result of the municipal election of 1990. His partner in the foundation of the new association was Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, an ex-master of slaves who decided to devote himself to the anti-slavery cause. The foundation of SOS-Esclaves signed a significant turning point in the fight against slavery in Mauritania, which is usually ignored or undervalued by scholars:

- The anti-slavery discourse was for the first time formulated by an association with no political goals. SOS-Esclaves claimed the eradication of slavery *per se*, and that has never been up to the present day a means to obtain access to the political scene. Messaoud ended his political career with the foundation of the association, neither did Ould Ethman have any political role.

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<sup>43</sup> Garba Diallo, *Mauritania: The Other Apartheid?* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> Full information available at <http://www.sosesclaves.org>.

- The goal of SOS-Esclaves was to emancipate slaves, not to fight for the rights of the Haratines, as El-Hor did. Freed slaves already had their political parties and leaders. Its focus was on people who were still enslaved and, therefore, SOS-Esclaves can be considered the first real anti-slavery agent in Mauritania.
- Slavery turned to have non-racial connotations, as opposed to FLAM action. Then, Mauritanian slavery was racism and apartheid in the international campaign by FLAM, oppression, poverty and social discrimination in the domestic action of SOS-Esclaves.
- SOS-Esclaves was a local association but modelled on the international NGOs and, over time, it was able to export to the Western opinion its action, whose results are usually clearly described on its website.
- Finally, SOS-Esclaves broke the domestic silence on slavery in Mauritania, which found a larger echo only in electoral times, both by the ruling party as well as the opposition, simply to legitimate their anti-slavery positions and to reach the Haratine electoral audience.
- SOS-Esclaves action was constantly ground-based. Its members denounced single cases of children, women and men in slavery, fought for trials, furnished legal support, being arrested and beaten several time for their activities, but never stopping their action.

SOS-Esclaves foundation also revealed the internal differences in the El-Hor movement, first obscured by the figure of Ould Boulkheir. Politically, three different currents had already emerged after the Trial of Rosso: Ba'athist, Nasserist and democratic, the first two loyalist to the Arabs, the third inclined to an alliance with the Black-Mauritanians. These currents corresponded to three different way to be Haratines: sons of rich Haratines owning slaves, sons of simple Haratines, sons of slaves, and social conditions which characterized the different El-Hor's founders.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Roger Botte, *Esclavages et abolitions en terres d'Islam*, pp. 218-27.

So, Ould Boulkheir represented the mid class of the three, son of long time freed slaves. He reminds us as to how his family was the first of free Haratines in 1943, during French colonization.<sup>46</sup> Messaoud was a recent freed slave, and it could be supposed that, at a distance, he felt more deeply the problem of slavery than that of the wealthiest Haratines. Another aim was the one represented by Mohamed Yahya Ould Cire (or Cirée), who abandoned El-Hor, moved to France and created in 2001 the *Association des Haratines de Mauritanie en Europe* (AHME), to ‘sensibiliser l’opinion européenne, africaine et internationale sur cette question’ of slavery and of its abolition in Mauritania. He created a website where he published *Le cri de Hartani*, ‘The Hartani’s Cry’, a report, at first every three months then annual, still edited. It is interesting to note that Ould Cire intended ‘dénoncer les esclavagistes et la complicité de l’Etat mauritanien’ by publishing a series of lists which reported names, jobs and reasons of inclusion in those lists of people accused of supporting, in any way, slavery, and of lists of people who, on the contrary, fought against slavery and Mauritanian slavers.

Today he publishes sixteen lists, six of which are dedicated to Arab, Black-Mauritanian and Haratine slavers or supporters of slavery. It is interesting to note this different approach that could appear dilatory, even if Ould Cire furnishes ‘articles’ to justify his choices, but which, in some way, reminds us of some American organizations who denounce crimes, authors and supporters.<sup>47</sup>

Ould Boulkheir, on his own, founded the first Haratine party, *Action pour le changement* (AC), which had a marginal space in the political scene until 2002, when Ould Taya outlawed it. Other members joined the governmental *Parti républicain démocratique et social* (PRDS).<sup>48</sup>

However, it was a signal that El-Hor experience was no more satisfying all the members and founders, maybe also due to the contemporary success gathered by FLAM action in the international scene that, by emphasizing the relation Arab masters-Black slaves, went on to obscure the Haratines’ fight for rights. Indeed, the complaint of the persistence of slavery relegated into a

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<sup>46</sup> Interview to Ould Boulkheir by AHME, October 2003, available at <http://www.Haratine.com/interview2.htm>. More than the veracity of his story, it is interesting how he collocates his family among the Haratine community.

<sup>47</sup> Lists, information and sources available at <http://www.haratine.com>.

<sup>48</sup> El Arby Ould Saleck, ‘Les Haratin comme enjeu pour les partis politiques en Mauritanie’, p. 262.

secondary light the discrimination upon the larger class they belonged to, especially if the fight for the rights of the Haratines was led by the wealthiest men of the community.

## **THE POWER OF THE ORGANIZATIONS, THE ORGANIZATION OF THE POWER**

To demonstrate to the Western scene that anti-slavery policies had improved, Ould Taya tried to publicize its, formal, action abroad by creating the *Comité national pour l'éradication des séquelles de l'esclavage en Mauritanie*, which was published in 1995, together with a U.S.-Mauritanian friendship society', a report declaring already in its denomination that what existed in the country were just 'remains', against which Ould Taya was carrying on a strong battle.<sup>49</sup>

The intent was to weaken the FLAM and the NGOs actions on the same ground they operated, but also to give answers to the requests for reforms advanced by the United Nations and to the several reports diffused by Anti-Slavery International, reports which continued to be published in the following years, causing in 2003 a new governmental law punishing trade in slaves (Law No. 5/2003, 17 July 2003), 'defined as non-remunerated work, exploitation of vulnerability, kidnapping and abuse of authority'.<sup>50</sup>

In January 1999 Ould Taya showed his anger by arresting leader and lawyers of SOS-Esclaves and of *Association mauritanienne pour les droits de l'homme* (AMDH), an association created in 1991 to support the refugees expelled in 1989 and, during time, interested in the fight against slavery, especially due to its internalisation and to the rapprochement with international organizations as the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). Their guilty was to have publicized their

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<sup>49</sup> Comité national de lutte pour l'éradication des séquelles de l'esclavage en Mauritanie, US-Mauritanian Friendship Society (Washington, USA), *Rapport sur l'éradication des séquelles de l'esclavage en Mauritanie*, Nouakchott, 1995, the copy analysed is that available at the Afrika Studie Centrum of Leiden, NL.

<sup>50</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'The politics of slavery in Mauritania', p. 271.

activities during the Paris-Dakar Rally, also by the participation of Boubacar Messaoud to a reportage of the French television FR3.<sup>51</sup>

The weakness of Ould Taya opened the way to the military coup of Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, a colonel of the Army who declared to work for transition to democracy. Indeed, presidential elections were fixed for April 2007 and they saw, at first turn, Sidi Mohamed Ould Chekh Abdallahi and Ahmed Ould Daddah as competitors most voted. Always present, Ould Boulkheir (placed fourth with less than ten per cent of votes) asked for the centrality of the anti-slavery discourse, and Abdallahi linked it with the problem of the refugees, declaring that both needed the end of discrimination and poverty. He was the winner with 53 per cent and became the first democratic President of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. In August, the first law punishing slavery *per se* (Law No. 48, 3 September 2007) was deliberated, possibly to compensate Ould Boulkheir's support, who 'was then elected as president of the National assembly'.<sup>52</sup>

Boubacar Messaoud and the General Secretary of SOS-Esclaves entered the governmental *Commission nationale des Droits de l'Homme* (CNDH), chaired by Mohamed Said Ould Hamody, son of the famous Haratine Hamody, an owner of slaves who made his fortune under French colonization.<sup>53</sup>

The democratic life of Mauritania lived a short life. In August 2008 there was a new military coup led by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, a General of the Army and Head of the Presidential Guard, first dismissed by Abdallahi, who was arrested together with the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. It must be said that Abdallahi had been criticized for having marginalized the Parliament, so the coup, perhaps backed also by the alternative 2007 candidate Ould Daddah, was immediately supported by El-Hor, or rather by the El-Hor members at that time, who targeted in an open letter the old 'hrātin who had for decades pretended to represent the hartāni community but had become

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<sup>51</sup> Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, 'Identité professionnelle et institutionnalisation politique. L'Ordre national des avocats de Mauritanie', in Patrick Quenti, ed., *Gouverner les sociétés africaines. Acteurs et institutions* (Paris: Khartala, 2005), p. 217.

<sup>52</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'The Politics of slavery in Mauritania', p. 274.

<sup>53</sup> His history has been analysed in several publications by E. Ann McDougall, historian at the University of Atlanta.

its enemy, inaccessible to its people and harmful to its needs'. Ould Boulkheir was not the only one to be criticized: The El-Hor members' purpose was to distance themselves from the 'dozen or so of their comrades' who had 'always shared the cake meant for all the Haratine', betraying their community.<sup>54</sup>

The Aziz coup was formally condemned by Western countries but no real action was taken against it, France finally deciding to support Aziz. The weak solidarity given to Abdallahi convinced him about his resignation and that Aziz could easily win the elections in 2009. Opposition and Western countries contested the voting, but once again with no strong reaction, dissident voices, such as Ould Boulkheir, remained mostly isolated.

### **ARAB WORLD THE OLD MODEL, ARAB SPRING THE NEW ONE?**

A new opposition to Aziz was to come from that Arab World that the Mauritanian leaders always looked towards. The Arab Spring largely burned the North African countries and, in 17 January 2011, a middle-aged businessman named Yacoub Ould Dahoud, by imitating the action of the Tunisian Bouazizi, burned himself in front of the Presidential Palace in Nouakchott. He died some days later. Protests growth and, in 25 February, about 1,500 young demonstrators took to the streets of Nouakchott demanding reforms by the government. One of these was the creation of a national observatory for the fight against slavery and 'No to slavery' was one of the slogans expressed by the young protesters.

Consolider l'unité nationale et ancrer une fraternité et une solidarité réelles entre les différentes composantes de notre population, à travers la lutte contre toute forme de racisme ou de marginalisation et l'éradication totale de l'esclavage et des ses séquelles, en introduisant une discrimination positive au bénéfice des groupes les plus démunis.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> E. Ann McDougall, 'The Politics of slavery in Mauritania', p. 277.

<sup>55</sup> Available at <http://www.facebook.com/m25fev?sk=info>.

This opposition group of young students, active since January, adopted the name *Mouvement du 25 Février*. In the months following that debut, protest evolved and diversified with further large demonstrations, most notably every 25<sup>th</sup> of the following months. The movement consolidated the protests and created its own website and a very active group on Facebook to publish its activities.<sup>56</sup> The young students of 25 February movement planned a 9 points list of reforms including education, health, women's rights, economy, fight against slavery and poverty, for the 'general interest of the country'. They said 'We don't belong to any one of the political parties, and we don't want to',<sup>57</sup> but affirmed the purpose to collaborate with parties, movements and civil society organizations to 'construire un État républicain et démocratique où le pouvoir appartient au peuple, sans tutelle de l'Armée'.<sup>58</sup> A movement *pro* national unity and not *versus*, then. But that was not the only voice emerging in the country.

A month later, a new movement, *Touche pas à ma nationalité* (TPMN), emerged in response to the national registration programme, which had become deeply unpopular among the Black population. The military regime deliberated hard standards for a census that blamed the ex-refugees of 1989 back again in Mauritania, especially young people born abroad during the long time which saw them denied Mauritanian citizenship. Protests and sit-ins by June 2011 took place in the streets of the country asking for equal rights.<sup>59</sup>

TPMN affirms that 'nous n'avons qu'une Mauritanie et nous tenons à ce qu'elle demeure, et que tout combat ne peut être qu'un combat national, la défense des droits des uns sauvegarde ceux des autres',<sup>60</sup> but national unity cannot exist in Mauritania until citizenship is denied to the ex-refugees.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See <http://m25fev.org> and <http://www.facebook.com/m25fev>, both daily updated.

<sup>57</sup> Available at [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-26/world/mauritania.protest\\_1\\_nouakchott-youth-coordination-young-protesters?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-26/world/mauritania.protest_1_nouakchott-youth-coordination-young-protesters?_s=PM:WORLD).

<sup>58</sup> Available at <http://www.facebook.com/m25fev?sk=info>.

<sup>59</sup> <http://haratine.blogspot.it/2011/06/sitin-du-mouvement-touche-pas-ma.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Available at the TPMN Facebook profile: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/touchepasmonpayslamauritanie>.

<sup>61</sup> Interview to Birane Abdoul Wane available at <http://www.haratine.blogspot.it/2012/05/entretien-avec-birane-abdoul-wane.html>.



Once again, the Mauritanian regime chose to fight these oppositions on their same field and by similar means, by supporting the creation of a movement, loyal to Aziz, of young Arabs, *Tawassoul*. Events in public spaces, interviews of its leadership, a rich website where to publish the policies of the regime, to show the support of a part of the young population and to criticize the protests of 25 February and TPMN movements were the means used by Tawassoul.<sup>62</sup>

But the protests against Aziz continued. On 9 February 2012 a young teacher burned himself in front of the Presidential palace and, two days later, protests took place in several Faculties of the University of Nouakchott. Students were arrested but found the support of SOS-Esclaves, which asked Aziz for their immediate liberation, declaring false his word denying the existence of slavery in Mauritania.<sup>63</sup>

But the most clamorous of the recent events had to come. Last 27 April, the President and members of IRA-Mauritanie (*Initiative pour la résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste en Mauritanie*) burned, in front of the biggest mosque of Nouakchott, some books of Mālikī school in which slavery is justified. Two days later, hundred of protesters took to the street asking for harsh penalties for IRA-Mauritanie and its president Biram Dah Ould Abeid was arrested together with other members. They justified their action by declaring it was a symbolic denouncement of slavery and by pointing out that those books were not holy but only juridical texts.<sup>64</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In 2011, Mauritania entered its first fifty years of independence, signed by constant Arab leadership, mostly military, characterized by the increasing Arabization of the country because of the continuous projection towards an Arab World seen as a reference. This multi-ethnic country is located between the Maghreb, Sahara and Black Africa, at the borders of the Arab World,

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.tawassoul.net>.

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.fr.alakhbar.info/2785-0-Le-President-de-SOS-Esclaves-loue-les-efforts-de-lEtat-dans-la-lutte-contre-lesclavage.html>.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.fr.alakhbar.info/3525-0-Nouadhibou-Manifestation-contre-IRA-Mauritanie.html>.

sometimes included in, at others not, even if it was the first country to be declared an 'Islamic Republic', to represent more as a prolongation of the Arab World than a territory of West Africa.

Some years after independence, West African relations were sacrificed to support the Arab League. In the name of a common religion and a similar process of development, the goal had been the construction of an Arab identity for the country, denying its partial Black connotations and 'Moorishing' the Haratine community of the formal freed slaves, demographically the biggest one in the country. The process of Arabization was to include Haratines in a bigger Arab community but separating them by economical and social boundaries impossible to break. Its goal was to maintain the traditional control over the formal freed slaves and to direct their electoral weight when elections took place.

The fight against slavery in the country was, in the beginning, carried on by movements such as El-Hor, which asked for rights for the Haratines, with leader who obtained access to political power but did not deeply improve the social standings of the poorest members of the community. The movement of FLAM denounced the discrimination perpetuated against the Black-Mauritanians of the country, by associating the denouncement of racism with that of exploitation.

Governmental policies of compensation had a degree of success with some El-Hor's leaders who gave the illusion to the Haratine audience that its emancipation was real, while others chose to carry on the fight against slavery by abandoning the experience as a movement and founding SOS-Esclaves association, inspiring to the modern Western NGOs to capture a bigger audience, including an international one. The international audience which had been reached before by FLAM and its policy to associate slavery with Black marginalization, so creating a new 'apartheid', impressed the Western audience. The military regime of Ould Taya worked to convince the new Western financial supporters that the slavery that was remaining was still being fought by the government, obtaining IMF and WB funds, which have been used by the Arab elite to reinforce its power and to continue in the Arabization of the country. Ould Taya created governmental

associations to promote his formal action against slavery, while maintaining Haratines still under dependence.

The fight against slavery had a new life with laws against slavery deliberated by the first democratic President of Mauritania, signing the first real strong intervention by government in that area, but, only a year later, the new coup by Aziz brought back the silence in the fight against slavery.

From the Arab World, which Mauritanian leadership usually aspired to include in the country, a new danger was to come, the Arab Spring. The request for democratic reforms touched Mauritania in February 2011, and protesters took to the streets of Nouakchott and other cities. Although Aziz has tried to stop them by arresting and refusing to accept the students' requests, their action, still today, carries on, by confiding in the experiences of their 'Arab brothers' of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria to legitimate their demands for freedom.

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