From Colonization to Globalization

The Vicissitudes of Slavery in Mauritania

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Alice Bullard

From Colonization to Globalization

The Vicissitudes of Slavery in Mauritania

The promise of ending slavery was a major facet of the European colonization of West Africa, yet this promise did not produce unambiguous success. The French colonial authorities banned slavery in Mauritania without, in fact, ending the practice. Historians who engage the topic of contemporary slavery should consider this colonial past, in which European moral superiority served as a pretext for imperial expansion¹. In an apparent rejection of the civilizing mission, the developmental paradigm that has reigned in the post-colonial era cast poverty, illiteracy and ignorance as the chief evils to be confronted and eradicated. In the developmental outlook slavery is extreme servitude, a feudal survival in the modern era, which can be most effectively confronted through broad-reaching economic programs. This present article adopts yet another perspective; it considers slavery primarily from the perspective of Mauritanian human rights groups active in the United States. By adopting the perspective of these non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and by examining the achievements and setbacks of their campaigns, this article articulates a third historical outlook on the problem of Mauritanian slavery. The adversaries of the Mauritanian NGOs include not just Mauritanian government officials, but also the World Bank and the diplomatic interests of the United States. This re-examination of slavery, then, allows us to consider how contemporary features of globalization change, challenge, and reinforce the power to subject individuals. Using the rhetoric of slavery and racial subjection, the NGOs have attempted

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1. The literature on slavery in Africa and specifically in French West Africa is vast. Prominent recent contributions with substantial bibliographies include Martin KLEIN (1998) and Urs Peter RUF (1999). Adam HOCHSCHILD's (1998) history of the Congo stands as the most harrowing account of the broad European failure to fulfill its humanitarian pronouncements; he remarks that the failures in the Congo were echoed across large swaths of colonial Africa.

to ignite a mass movement in the United States to combat the current Mauritanian government. Efforts to popularize the movement have led to surprising divisions in the expected interest groups; with the religious right assuming unexpected prominence. The role of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and United States international policies—only indirectly answerable to public calls to combat slavery—emerge in this essay as influential on Mauritanian economics and social stratification.

The NGOs' Narrative of Slavery

To human rights advocates, international support for the government of Mauritania entails the tacit support for racial discrimination and extreme servitude. For a society in transition, whether one names the oppressed as enslaved or impoverished is highly significant in the international arena. Since 1998 the Mauritanian state has effectively curtailed the use of the word "slavery" to describe any of its population. The World Bank, UNICEF, and other international development agencies followed suit. Funds can therefore flow into the state, and the United States can build relations with this Arab-identified and Israel-friendly state. If slavery were acknowledged and discussed, such cosy relations likely would be hindered. Financial support for the state, which flows at the rate of US\$1.5 billion annually, is driving social and economic transformations. Directly following the failed coup in June 2003, the IMF approved an US\$8.8 million "poverty reduction" loan to Mauritania (Bullard & Tandia 2003). The ability of the Mauritanian state to contract such huge amounts in loans from the international community allows the political leaders to accumulate power and wealth, further stratifying society.

From an academic perspective it is possible to object to criticizing such international support. Real knowledge of the poverty and illiteracy in Mauritania, combined with an appreciation for the complexity of social transformations involved in moving from a late feudal to a market society, can impede the acceptance of the NGO human rights rhetoric. However, human rights advocates insist that the fundamental problem in Mauritania is the absence of the rule of law and the absence of justice. Without these foundations of civil order, the human rights activists argue, the injection of money into the Mauritanian economy will only exacerbate social inequalities and age-old stratification. These conflicting points of view illuminate the difficulties of naming and fighting contemporary slavery.

The Mauritians who have adopted the language and outlook of human rights consider justice and the rule of law to be the prime issues. The Mauritanian NGOs active in the United States—including SOS-esclaves, the Mauritanian Network, the Mauritanian Human Rights Association (AMDH), the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Mauritania, and the Harateen Institute for Research and Development—describe a history of

slavery in Mauritania with a focus on legal systems and legal reform. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania established the Mauritanian state according to the model of the French Fifth Republic. This Western-style constitution exists in tension with the domestic judicial system, which operates on the basis of traditional shari'a law. In 1981 additional legislation explicitly outlawed the practice of slavery (this was the third time legislation banning slavery was promulgated in Mauritania). However, shari'a courts in villages and provinces have maintained the caste-like hierarchy of Mauritania.

The sos-esclaves report from 2002-2003 offers a systematic study of five regions in the south east of Mauritania, representing a population of over a million inhabitants. For all those interviewed in this systematic study, "ce mode d'exploitation et d'aliénation constitue [...] une réalité quotidienne, une situation familière, n'ayant rien d'étrange ni de scandaleux" (sos-esclaves 2004: 3). Victims who complained, sos-esclaves reports, "do not denounce the principle of their domination, but only the specific damages or injuries they suffered" (*ibid.*: 3). In 1998-1999, sos-esclaves (2000: 18-19) documented twelve instances of slaves buying their own freedom (sos-esclaves 2000: 18-19). In 1998 a local judge (*cadi*) officiated at the sale of forty slaves to relieve the debt of their owner. "The property of the slave is the property of his master", stipulates the traditional law, hence slave-caste Mauritaniens have routinely lost their inheritance, including money, goods, land and children, to their "former" masters. "Former" slaves with the temerity to demand pay for their work have been beaten by "masters"—as have their family and friends. Local police, even in the capital city of Nouakchott, have routinely refused to investigate complaints by "slaves" against "masters". Even when beatings result in death, masters have not been prosecuted, or the cases have been taken up with extreme reluctance.

The contradictions between the Mauritanian Constitution and the shari'a law serve larger purposes of the Mauritanian state. The Constitution faces outward and inward. It is an international document and a domestic document. It is a document that is both highly effective and almost without consequence. As the chosen framework for the state, the Constitution acknowledges Mauritania's brief period as a colony of the French and endows Mauritania with a recognizably Western character. This "Western" international face serves the government in its relations with the United States, with France, and with the World Bank and the IMF. The influx of cash into Mauritania via various development projects has been considerable. However, the constitutional rights guaranteed to Mauritaniens have not been furthered by this foreign aid. A petition signed by human rights activists in Mauritania in March 1996 stated clearly that "the modern law of Mauritania is intentionally ambiguous and destined primarily for an international audience. This modern law' cohabits with Islamic law, which is very detailed

and holds power in much of society”². The Constitution is the shell for the state, but shari’a forms the living tissue of the people. Rooted in history, religion, and tradition, shari’a rules over events large and small. The petitioners mince no words in asserting that “the cohabitation of Islamic law and ‘modern’ law blocks the eradication of slavery from Mauritania”³. The foreign aid, granted in part in recognition of Mauritania’s alleged respect for human rights and the rule of law, works to sustain this order. An alliance of all the major Mauritanian NGOs made this point with polite language in August of 2000, stating that “international commercial and economic aid that arrives in Mauritania through government channels will not profit the general population in the slightest and hence [the alliance] considers such aid, at the present time, inopportune”⁴.

Strategies within the United States

The strategy of Mauritanian human rights activists working in the United States has had two aims: to create a mass movement analogous to the 1980s and 1990s movement against apartheid in South Africa, and to influence US government policies as well as other agencies (such as the United Nations and the World Bank) toward Mauritania. When anti-slavery activists sponsored by a Quaker organization, the American Friends’ Service Committee, visited Atlanta, Georgia, in 1999, their presentation focused heavily on issues of race. In their parlance, “White Beydanés” in Mauritania held “Black slaves” and they pleaded with their largely African-American audience to petition the US government for sanctions against Mauritania⁵.

The basic narrative of slavery in Mauritania as advanced via this type of public appeal recounts how Nomadic Arabs and Berbers from the north

2. Petition on Slavery in Mauritania, 22 March 1996, signed by 118 Mauritians including lawyers, doctors, Senators Youssouph Ba and Koita Tidjane, and Ambassador Diawara Gagny. Document provided by sos-esclaves, Nouakchott, Mauritania.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Resolution on the State of Human Rights in Mauritania, 7 August 2000, signed by: Association mauritanienne des droits de l’homme (AMDH); sos-esclaves; GREDDes-Mauritanie; CRADPOCIT (Collectif des anciens détenus politiques civils torturés); Collectif des veuves; Collectif des rescapés militaires; Collectif des familles séparées par la déportation; Comité de solidarité avec les victimes de la répression en Mauritanie; CAP (Collectif Aide et Partage); Collectif des fonctionnaires et travailleurs victimes des événements de 1989; Collectif des femmes des anciens détenus politiques; Ligue africaine des droits de l’homme (section de Mauritanie). Document provided by sos-esclaves, Nouakchott, Mauritania.

5. This is reminiscent as well of the slavery project presented at the United Nations World Conference against Racism held in Durban, South Africa, August-September 2001, which I attended, where the question of intra-African enslavement was anathema. Racism between Blacks and Whites was the order of the day; more nuanced views were unwelcome in the discussion.

(called Beydanes) have preyed upon the agricultural Black Africans of the south for over 1,500 years. The enslavement of Black Africans over the centuries has produced a population of “Haratines”—a racially mixed group of people, although still largely Black African, who have lost all connection to their tribal ancestry. The only identity they have is that of slave to the Arabs. Culturally “Arab”, nonetheless, the Haratine are a “slave caste”—either currently enslaved or recently freed from slavery. In addition to the Beydane (the “White Arab” masters) and the Haratine, tribal Black Africans predominate in the rich alluvial lands near the Senegal River.

This history of enslavement is frequently blended into the much more contemporary political issue of “forced arabization” through which racial and caste hierarchies have been buttressed by state policies. Moctar Ould Daddah, independent Mauritania’s first president, pursued a campaign to ally Mauritania with the pan-Arab movement of the 1960s. By 1966, a small group of Black Africans rose in protest against this policy, publishing their “Manifesto of the 19”, and were repressed with bloody force. Beginning in 1967, Arabic became the chief language for education throughout the state. This policy coincided with the inculcation of an “Arab” identity in all Mauritaniens, including the tribal Africans. Black Africans, who had participated more readily in the colonial educational system than the Arabs, dominated the state bureaucracy at the time of independence. However, the Arabization campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s gradually purged them from government positions. On 10 July 1978, a military coup ousted Ould Daddah from the presidency. For some years the government passed rather quickly from the hands of one military commander to another, until 12 December 1984, when Colonel Ould Taya seized power. Ould Taya remains the president of Mauritania.

Under Ould Taya, forced Arabization grew in intensity and violence. Defenders of tribal African identity organized as the *Forces de libération africaines de Mauritanie* (FLAM). The government denounced members of FLAM as racist extremists, and began a campaign that smeared any Black African in a position of any degree of power as a threat to the unity of the nation. Efforts on the part of Black Africans to defend themselves against the racist policies of the state occasioned greater repressive measures and heightened rhetoric about the Black African threat to Arab Mauritania. In this way, Ould Taya’s government laid the foundation for the ethnic cleansing of 1989–1991, during which government propaganda effectively roused Haratine sentiment and violence against the Black Africans. Intent on becoming an Arab State, Mauritania purged its armed forces, especially the officer corps, of all Black Africans. This purge entailed over 500 murders (Sy 2000). Seventy thousand Black Africans from the south were expelled into Senegal. The educated elite were forced to adopt Arabic rather than French as their language of learning. The use of Arabic at the university level forced the reorientation of masses of students from France and the West to North Africa and the Middle East.

The intent in casting Mauritania's slavery and forced arabization as part-and-parcel of the same racial problem seems to be part of a strategic appeal to an American sensibility of race consciousness. Slavery, of course, has a special role in American history. The racial legacy of slavery, the guilt and sometimes denial, combine to make it a potentially cataclysmic topic in the national media. There is a grotesque allure to the very term, an allure that can be so overpowering that nuance and real understanding is lost in the media limelight.

Race has played a complicated role among the most prominent anti-slavery activists in the US, Samuel Cotton, Charles Jacobs and Muctar Teyeb. Cotton was African-American, Jacobs a Jewish American and Tayeb a Black Mauritanian slave who fled his homeland in 1978 and was granted asylum in the United States in 1996. Jacobs, who traces his political activism back to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, organized the American Anti-Slavery Group (AASG) in 1994, and featured among the first to publish the story of slavery in Sudan and Mauritania to the American public. It was largely through Jacobs' group that Cotton gained his first knowledge of the contemporary situation and of the history of slavery in Africa. Cotton was a student of social work at Columbia University and a part-time journalist for the New York paper, *The City Sun*, when he was asked by his editor to write on the story which Jacobs had broken. After extensive research into scholarly and political writings on the subject, in 1995 Cotton wrote a series of articles on contemporary slavery in Mauritania and the Sudan. Arab-Muslim merchants in New York City at first refused to sell these editions of the paper. Akbar Muhammad, the spokesman for The Nation of Islam—an African-American organization established by Elijah Mohammed—contended that Cotton had fallen victim to a Jewish plot against the Muslim world, and that Charles Jacobs was this plot's mastermind (Cotton 1998: 61-65). The controversies that surrounded Cotton's 1995 articles propelled him into deeper involvement with the Mauritanian and Sudanese communities in the United States. He gradually turned from journalism to political activism.

Cotton's vision of slavery in Mauritania was deeply inflected by his perspective as an African-American. Throughout his writings he described slavery as an issue of "White Arabs" or "White Beydane" enslaving "Black Africans" (*ibid.*: 51-58, 70-71). Indeed, for him the whole problem of slavery in Mauritania, the Sudan and throughout the Arab world is one of race. He wrote explicitly for the African-American community, and addressed this audience with special eloquence in the epilogue to his book:

"History rarely gives us a chance to confront a tormentor previously lost to time and place. Are there not others of my African-American brothers and sisters who have, like me, fantasized about traveling back in time to prevent the rape of our ancestral homeland, Mother Africa? Or of leading the charge of unbound African warriors, up from the hold of the slave ship Zion, to slay the enslavers on its deck

and emancipate its terrified cargo? Well, a window on time has reopened. Now what are we going to do about it?" (*ibid.*: 161).

Cotton's strong equation between conditions in Mauritania and the African-American experience rings true in an extremely important respect; the enslavement of Blacks and the deep racism against Blacks in the United States do share common dimensions. However, not many forceful advocates of the enslaved can be found. Even African Americans intent on rediscovering a connection with Africa are resistant to Cotton's message because it forces them to take off their rosy, nostalgic glasses and confront the colder reality.

Cotton's encounters with the Nation of Islam and other African-American Muslims revealed that his message of racial oppression in Africa was not welcome by many in the African-American community, "to my surprise, they displayed little concern or outrage about the destitution of their fellow black Muslims in Mauritania. Instead, they directed their anger at the black man who was bringing these conditions to their attention: me" (*ibid.*: 68).

Cotton's activism earned him on-going criticism and denunciations from African Americans who were practicing Muslims. These attacks continued to allege that the whole story of contemporary slavery was fabricated by Jews, that the *City Sun*'s editor was financed by Jews and especially paid to run the articles, and so on (*ibid.*: 66-67). In an effort to deny the Nation of Islam such an easy target for its anti-Semitism, Cotton decided to form his own anti-slavery organization, henceforth working separately from Jacobs's AASG. In March 1995 Cotton organized the Coalition Against Slavery in Mauritania and Sudan (CASMAS), and took on the role of executive director. After a four-weeks investigative trip, from late December 1995 to January 1996, during which he interviewed several slaves who had been aided by El Hor and SOS-esclaves, Cotton began writing his book, *Silent Terror*, while also organizing informational meetings and activism. CASMAS organized a national summit in October 1996 that created the Abolitionist Leadership Council. CASMAS also organized teach-ins, radio interviews and television news spots on contemporary slavery. Finally, CASMAS undertook a mission of direct medical aid and food subsidies for Mauritaniens and Sudanese. The October 1997 international summit organized by CASMAS in New York City aimed to provide newly freed Mauritaniens with a broad array of social services to help them establish a new life. However, after that meeting, which representatives from France, Mauritania and the US attended, CASMAS activities faded from the political stage. Cotton's book, *Silent Terror*, was published in 1998, but in December 2003, Cotton died after a long battle against a brain tumor.

Cotton's illness and death left Charles Jacobs once again in a highly influential position. Jacobs' career of human rights activism reveals broader political tensions in the anti-slavery movement, tensions that seem at least partially responsible for the failure of a mass movement to develop in the

US. The AASG promotes itself as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious organization; it hosts a website named “iabolish—The Anti-Slavery Portal”⁶ through which it seeks to organize volunteers in its campaigns. The AASG has long employed both a Mauritanian, Mohammed Athie, and a Sudanese, David Chand. Another Mauritanian, Moctar Teyeb, headed AASG’s efforts in the Sudan to buy individuals out of slavery at the price of US\$50 per slave. AASG partnered with the organization Christian Solidarity International in this effort to redeem Sudanese slaves via cash payments to their enslavers. When the *Washington Post* ran an article criticizing the buy-back campaign as a fraud in February 2002, Jacobs fought back with vigor in an online article in a prominent neo-conservative publication, *The National Review*. Jacobs emphasized that “the same Sudanese government that for years sheltered and supported Osama bin Laden, now arms and directs Arab militias” to raid Black Christian villages, mutilating, raping, and enslaving the inhabitants (Jacobs 2002).

The division that Jacobs makes here between militant Islam and Western and Judeo-Christian anti-slavery campaigning is echoed in “The David Project”. Jacobs established The David Project in the spring of 2002 to provide a counter-balance to the increasingly popular Palestinian student organizations on American college campuses. Jacobs’ desire is to draw attention to human rights violations in the Middle East and Arab world, in order to provide a broader context and counter-examples to the frequently cited Israeli abuses. Working with Avi Goldwasser, Jacobs co-produced a film, “Columbia Unbecoming”, which seeks to document how Jewish students are routinely intimidated by pro-Arab professors in Middle East studies courses at Columbia University in New York City. This has precipitated a broad campaign in conservative political circles to create a federal governmental oversight committee of Middle East studies programs. Such oversight would be unprecedented in American universities, and would vitiate the core principle of academic freedom by which scholars pursue their work.

Jacobs’ David Project overtly courts the American right. However, his insight on the spotlight continually on Israeli politics is echoed by the Mauritanian activist Bakary Tandia who longs for concrete action against Mauritania by Arab governments. Arab countries and Muslim nations, he argues, must recognize Mauritania as a multi-cultural society and that it is a human rights violation to destroy African cultures in the name of Arabization. He points out that the International Islamic Organization needs to develop a respect for African cultures if it wants to lead the Muslim community. The 1993 meeting of the International Islamic Organization issued an official condemnation of Israel’s deportation of 443 Palestinians. Tandia remains baffled that this same meeting, which took place in Dakar, ignored

6. See www.iabolish.com

the 1989 deportation of some 70,000 Muslims from Mauritania. The Mauritians, of course, were Black African⁷.

The politics of religion and identity in the Islamic and Arab world cannot escape the American political grid: a past deeply enmeshed in the enslavement of Africans, the appeal of Islam to African Americans at odds with the dominant Christian culture, and finally a powerful commitment to the defense of Israel combined with the recent turmoil of the "War on Terror". The problem with instigating a widespread American movement against slavery in Mauritania is that the core issues cut across and between dominant political interests. Anti-slavery activists working on the Sudan habitually play successfully on the theme of Christians enslaved by Muslims. The Mauritians who suffer extreme servitude, however, are Muslim. Middle East power politics plays a role as well: the pro-Israel lobby cannot complain too loudly against President Ould Taya's government which opened official diplomatic ties with Israel in October 1999. Meanwhile, African Americans—those whom Cotton thought should be most aroused by the slavery in Mauritania—have remained largely unresponsive.

Given the complexities of religion, race and international political agendas, there is a virtue to focusing on Mauritians as central actors in the struggle against their (former) government. Moctar Teyeb, who runs the Harateen Institute for Research and Development, has achieved minor celebrity status as an ex-slave and human rights activist. Although he has worked for Jacobs' AASG, he has also staked out independent terrain in the field of human rights. He was featured in a long article in the most prominent literary magazine in the United States, *The New Yorker*, and he now features frequently in meetings organized by the progressive political establishment centered around *The Nation* and *Tikkun* (Finnegan 2000). He is the central character in a documentary film in the works by Drew Fellman, Ari Nave and Aaron Zarrow, titled "The Slave Train". Less prominent, although very active in the movement, are Bakary Tandia of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Mauritania and Habsa Dia Sileymane of the Mauritanian Network. Sileymane worked closely with Cotton when he toured Mauritania in 1995-1996, and subsequently came to the US seeking political asylum. Tandia and Sileymane have worked their influence via the United Nations and demonstrations against the Mauritanian government in Washington D.C.⁸. Via Mauritanian asylees in the United States, El Hor and sos-esclaves maintain a presence in the American media and on college campuses.

7. Bakary Tandia's views were related in personal correspondence. This material is previously published in Alice BULLARD (2002: 15).

8. For Mauritanian NGO influence on the UN see the relatively mild rebuke to Mauritania in UN Press release dated 20 August 2004, "Committee on the elimination of racial discrimination concludes sixty-fifth session". For a detailed account of Mauritanian activist engagement with this UN committee, see Alice BULLARD (2002).

However, the strategy of using racial rhetoric to awaken the American public has not succeeded; while a certain level of interest and knowledge has been achieved, the mass movement envisioned by the NGOs has not materialized. Perhaps such a movement will coalesce, but the complexity of the domestic and international politics—as opposed to the simplified messages of the NGOs—are an impediment. For example, in a letter published on 22 January 2003, the President of El Hor, Messaoud Ould Boulkheir objected to the characterization of slavery in Mauritania as essentially a question of race. Addressing an unidentified American NGO which invited Boulkheir to attend an anti-slavery working group in South Africa, Boulkheir criticized their vision of slavery as too tied to the trans-Atlantic and Arab slave trade. In Mauritania, wrote Boulkheir, “l’esclavage existe dans toutes les communautés nationales qu’elles soient arabes ou non arabes (Pulars, Soninké et Wolofs)” (FLAM 2003). Boulkheir went even further, insisting that in the Black African communities “l’esclavage est plus ancré et irréversible que chez les Arabes” (*ibid.*). This corrective criticism, perhaps induced by government pressure, provoked a riposte by the Black-African FLAM association, which urged Boulkheir to have the courage to name those truly responsible in Mauritania.

Allegations of slavery evoke immediate indignation in most Westerners and can inspire people to action. Slavery clearly violates Human Rights principles. However, race, caste and gender determine who is a “slave” in Mauritania just as much as forcible performance of non-paid labor. Ancestral ties from several generations back might serve as sufficient grounds for a Beydane to claim ownership of a Haratine’s land even in the absence of any direct relationship between the two individuals. In this respect Mauritanian slavery is a different beast than was North American plantation slavery and this difference at least partially impedes the ability of activists to mobilize Western support in their campaign. The more one learns about Mauritanian slavery the less and less it looks like the slavery defeated in the American Civil War.

Mauritanian activists recognize the complexity of their slave system—above all they recognize the deep psychological and emotional bonds between masters and slaves. Their educational outreach to slaves aims at relaying the message that “you don’t have to be a slave. Slavery is against the law. Seize your freedom”. But slaves are taught that to disobey their master is to disobey Allah. Only through obeying their master in all things will they be blessed in the afterlife. Even Haratine who leave Mauritania to live in France or the United States often continue to serve their masters. They might send money back to their master or, if the master comes to the new country, the Haratine exploits all his resources to fill his or her demands. Some Haratine describe their relationship with their master as a family-tie; the master is their uncle or aunt. This sentiment is reinforced, by the biological ties between generations of masters and slaves. The abundant

specialist literature on African social systems, caste and servitude emerges here as essential for a deep understanding⁹.

One young woman slave, too frequently and maliciously beaten by her master, escaped to an El Hor safe house in Nouakchott. The activists worked with her intensively, aiming to instruct her on what freedom means. Freedom means that you will have to find a job and work with diligence so that you can buy food, pay for housing and clothes. Freedom means that you must cover your body and head like a good Muslim woman, rather than walking about indecently exposed. Freedom means you cannot talk to men unrelated to yourself and you must not be seen unescorted in public. El Hor sent the woman to live with a family eager to help her adjust to her new life. But they could not bear the shame she brought upon them by her behavior. Remonstrances and recriminations ensued; the slave refugee simply sought freedom and did not find it in Nouakchott. After a few months she returned to her master's family (Bales 2005).

Global Capital, US Foreign Policy, and the NGOs

The effectiveness of these multiple sites of human rights activism, amplified by similar activities outside the US, is demonstrated in the publication by Amnesty International of their 2002 report, "A Future Free from Slavery?" Clearly the anti-slavery movement has secured the attention of activist international human rights circles. Also in 2002, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights aired testimony from Anti-Slavery International that stated slavery and servitude persist in Mauritania, and noted with concern that Mauritania had no penal sanction for employing forced labor (Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery 2002). The Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination at the United Nations, in August of 2004, reported without ambiguity that slavery, female genital mutilation, and racial discrimination remain on-going problems in Mauritania (US State Department 2005: 8; United Nations 2004). The International Labor Organization, which oversees compliance with international labor standards for the United Nations, is scheduled to release a report on labor conditions in Mauritania in 2005 subsequent to a 2004 inquiry.

The Mauritanian government has proven itself adept at satisfying the international pressure exerted by official bodies such as the United Nations. In 1999 the Government created a new cabinet post, the Commissariat for Human Rights, Poverty Alleviation, and Integration, with the express mission of protecting the rights of ex-slaves and the impoverished. On 17 July

9. Scholars have described how "slavery" for a wife meant, in point of fact, not having a family of origin to whom she could return for protection from an abusive husband. In other respects the status of "wives" and "slave-wives" vis-à-vis "husband" was not necessarily entirely different. See the collection by ROBERTSON & KLEIN (1983).

2003, legislation against the trafficking in persons became effective¹⁰. Most recently, in July of 2004 the Mauritanian government enacted legislation directed to bringing its labor code into compliance with International Labor Organization standards. The new code penalizes the contracting of forced labor and the exploitation of forced labor as part of an organized criminal network. Despite the creation of a Human Rights agency and the enactment of these various laws, the actual actions against racism and exploitation have been minimal. Since 1998 Mauritanian courts have assiduously kept the language of slavery out of the judicial system, referring slavery disputes to informal resolution¹¹.

The responsiveness of the government in enacting legislation is mirrored in its adroit navigation of IMF and World Bank regulations for on-going international development aid. Mauritania successfully filed a "poverty reduction strategy" in 2002 that reduced its international debt by US\$1.1 billion, almost half its total debt¹². Complying with the "Highly Indebted Poor Countries" program of the IMF has allowed Mauritania to simultaneously reduce its annual payment on debt from US\$88 million in 1998 to US\$35 million in 2003, while also pursuing increased funding via development credits from the World Bank. In 2004-2005 Mauritania received US\$15 million for a higher education project, US\$45 million for rural development and poverty reduction, and US\$39 million for an integrated development project¹³.

Clearly the desire on the part of Mauritanian NGOs to stymie the flow of cash into the hands of the Mauritanian government has not succeeded. The 26 April 2004 World Bank announcement of a new US\$45-million credit for Mauritania to pursue a rural development project describes the use of local "village councils" to identify, own, and direct the development projects. "Village councils", however, is a term that raises the specter of prolonged struggles for Haratine and Black Africans to attain political presence in these councils¹⁴. The US\$39 million program approved in March 2005, focuses on agricultural projects centered in the Senegal River valley. The 1989 expulsion of some 70,000 Black Africans from this region has featured

10. See, however, the World Organization against Torture's (OMCT) 26 February 2004 report, which details the fate of a thirteen year-old girl, Betoulé, who was returned by authorities to her "masters". In the face of such events, the OMCT "remains gravely concerned by the ongoing existence of slavery in Mauritania", cited in the *Aman Daily News*, 26 February 2004.

11. SOS-esclaves details the handling of such cases in its yearly reports. Usually the slaves are stymied in their goals.

12. For a description of the poverty reduction strategy, see Arab Maghreb Union Country Analysis Brief, pp. 1-2, at www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/maghreb.html

13. See World Bank press releases numbered, 2005/49/AFR, 2004/332/AFR, 2005/338/AFR. Available in print, or via <http://www.worldbank.org>

14. "The World Bank Funds Mauritania's Community Based Rural Development Project", News Release No: 2004/332/AFR. Available in print or on the web at www.worldbank.org

large in the campaigns against the racism of the present government. According to United Nations estimates, some 60,000 of those expelled had returned by the late 1990s (US Country Report 2001), yet many continue to face difficulties obtaining official status in their homeland¹⁵. The agricultural lands occupied by those expelled are subject to on-going disputes, with restoration of property carried out only incompletely and according to the haphazard will of local officials¹⁶. Proof of land ownership is required for participation in the direct lending World Bank projects, so that those who gained from the expulsions, and those “former masters” who have seized agricultural lands, can now obtain financing for agro-business expansion. In this way the privileges of the Moors is once again secured. Nowhere in the World Bank documents on these loans is there any trace of the long-standing battles against slavery and expropriation.

Finally, a pending application for World Bank aid for resource management describes intentions to protect Mauritania’s Senegal River basin and desert oases from desertification. While no dollar amount is listed on the project description, a rather candid admission of this project’s potential impact on Black African farmers is included,

“Involuntary Resettlement may be triggered because land management master plans may suggest involuntary resettlement. Land acquired for public and other project activities may cause individuals or community groups to lose assets, or access to assets, or proceeds of economic activities. To mitigate resettlement risks that are specific to this project, a complementary Resettlement Policy Framework (RPF) will be prepared, cleared, disclosed and added to the RPF of the base project. For other risks the RPF of the base project will apply” (World Bank 2005)¹⁷.

United States Foreign Policy and Mauritanian Society

The anti-slavery and pro-rule of law movement should—on the face of it—appeal to US interests. But this is to mistake rhetoric for real politick. Mauritania has successfully billed itself as an Arab state, and as such its willingness to sustain diplomatic relations with Israel is of paramount importance in US foreign policy. This was already true during the administration of President Clinton, which approved Mauritania for special trade status despite documentation of on-going slavery (Bullard & Waite 2000).

15. See the US Country Report, 2001, p. 2, for discussion of the numbers and ethnicities of those who had returned. See the US Country Report 2004, pp. 5 and 7, for a bland account of the difficulties of those who have returned after the 1989 expulsion.
16. The US Country Report 2004 states that in fact the poverty alleviation policy that was supposed to distribute land to the impoverished has not been implemented. Indeed, the report documents ex-slaves continuing to work for masters in order to maintain access to ancestral lands. See, US STATE DEPARTMENT (2004: 12).
17. Project Information Document (PID) Concept Stage Report No. AB1353, Community-Based Rural Development/Community-Based Watershed Management Project. Project ID (IDA) P081368 Global Supplemental ID P087670.

The “War on Terror” has only increased the importance of Mauritania to US strategic interests. Opponents of the Mauritanian state are now easily qualified as terrorists, as demonstrated in the repression following the attempted coup of June 2003 (Bullard & Tandia 2003)¹⁸. Moreover, the “war on terror” has provoked a new willingness on the part of US operatives to use torture via the policy of rendition and the doctrine of “enemy combatants”. In such an atmosphere, acknowledging human rights claims is increasingly difficult.

Even if these events had not intervened, from a foreign policy perspective, the US has weighty problems with the Arab world, adding high-level allegations of racism and slavery to the mix would only make their already difficult project of wooing the Arabs impossible. One point of leverage the Sudan has that Mauritania lacks is that the southern Sudanese are Christian. This creates an opportunity for the religious right to pursue activism that is not viewed with disfavor. The breadth of appeal and power within current governmental circles of the Christian right cannot be overestimated.

Despite these formidable interests, the United States State Department since 2001 has increasingly accounted for the steady stream of evidence produced by anti-slavery activists in the Human Rights Country Report on Mauritania. This is a remarkable development, as the importance of Mauritania as a US diplomatic ally in the Arab world since 1998 has kept the acknowledgment of slavery out of the human rights reports. The rewriting of the human rights report on Mauritania bears distinct traces of Christian evangelical interests, as demonstrated by the long passages on religious freedom and on the Mauritanian law “prohibiting the publication of material that discredits Islam or threatens national security” (US State Department 2005: 6-7). The report indicates that Christian materials may not be printed or sold in Mauritania, but they may be held by individuals for private use, and that such Christian books and pamphlets were available within the small Christian community. Whatever the motor force behind the renewed interest in human rights, the current report takes NGO documentation of on-going slavery much more seriously than did the reports from 1998-2000. It was in the 1998 report (published in 1999) that the State Department ceased discussion of slavery, and henceforth discussed vestiges of slavery in Mauritania¹⁹. This widely resented language of vestiges is still echoed in the 2001 report, but fades out in subsequent years. The most recent report is somewhat inconsistent and generally downplays the on-going role of slavery

18. Ashley BARR (2003), at the Carter Center for International Human Rights, is working on a comparative study on Human Rights defenders in the post-9/11 era that describes the vilification of human rights advocates as terrorists as a global phenomenon.

19. For a discussion of the problematic nature of “vestiges of slavery”, See BULLARD & WAITE (2000: 9-13).

in Mauritania. Following long-established language, it insists that the Mauritanian government is not complicit in establishing a system of slavery. It claims that current cases are restricted to isolated and remote areas in the south and southeastern sector of the country, but it also documents the seemingly logical contradiction of widespread “voluntary servitude” and the existence of unpaid domestic labor in the cities (US State Department 2004: 12-13). Underlying these inconsistencies is an incoherent or inadequate concept of slavery. How can “voluntary servitude” exist? Is compulsory, unpaid labor slavery? If not, why not? Combined with the absence of an understanding of slavery in its modern forms, the report is sprinkled with recently emerged human rights language, such as the concern for “trafficking in persons” and for female genital mutilation, or “FGM”²⁰. These varieties and means of the subjection of individuals escape any unified analytic category.

Concluding Reflections: Slavery, the Rights of Women and World Bank Policies

Women constitute the largest slave population in Mauritania. Female slaves are impregnated by their masters in order that they produce more slaves. The slave woman cannot claim legal custody of her children—even a child fathered by her legal husband by law is the property of her “master”. Slave women who long to escape must decide between a life of freedom or a life with their children. Aichanna escaped slavery in December 1995; she was forced to leave her five children with their master, Mohamed Ould Moissa in the city of Lemteyin. Jebada suffered torture by her master so severe that her hands permanently atrophied. M'Barka Mint Bilal also left a child behind her with her master²¹.

Women suffer the brunt of slavery in Mauritania because the master claims ownership of any child born to a slave-woman. “My master owns my belly” is how Aichanna expresses this bondage. Shari’a courts routinely uphold the claims of Beydane on Haratine children. This is easily accomplished because a female Haratine lacks judicial standing to bring a complaint. She must find a male relative willing to risk his well-being to bring the suit for her. If a suit is brought against a Beydane, the Haratine face the additional problem that their testimony is not admitted in court and their pleas for justice fall on deaf ears. In early fall of 1999 Madame Fatimetou Mint Taleb Ould Jarra, a Haratine mother of Taher Ould Sidna, enlisted

20. Indeed, the section on trafficking is newly enlarged in the 2004 report; see US Country Report 2004, pp. 8-9.

21. Testimony of Hapsa N'Diaye referring to her conversations with Aichanna Mint Abeid Boilil, Jebada Mint Maoulous and M'Barka Mint Bilal. See BULLARD & WAITE (2000, Appendix F, N'Diaye Deposition).

her brother to bring a suit against Sir Yarba Ould Ely Beiba, the ancestral master of Taher Ould Sidna's father. Throughout Taher's childhood, Beiba sought to force him into domestic work, "using the cynical argument that he was a relative". Mme Jarra defended her son, arguing with Beiba that Taher was free and not obligated to work. In August of 1999 Beiba abducted Taher and he was never seen in his village again. Mme Jarra made repeated complaints to the police and prosecutors, but no action against Beiba was taken. In October of 1999 the police reported that Taher had died of neural malaria. His body was not returned. Moreover, he had no history of suffering from malaria. Only in January of 2000 did Mme Jarra finally gain an audience with a magistrate. He did not dispute that Beiba had abducted Taher, neither did he offer further information. Finally in February of 2000 the Minister of Justice summoned Mme Beiba and her brother to receive the results of an inquiry that documented the alleged death of her son. No action against Beiba was taken.

This type of situation could be cast as a "woman's rights" issue. Indeed, sustained analysis of gender and sexuality within the power-complex of Mauritanian society is needed. The situations might also be understood in terms of the growing interest in the rights of children. But neither of these discourses have the historical roots and wide appeal of anti-slavery activism. Women's rights are not secured in many parts of the world and children's rights have only begun to be acknowledged. Slavery, meanwhile, includes the matrix of the relations described here. However, as demonstrated in the US Country Report, when "slavery" is not acknowledged, other rights claims can be employed.

In addition to the problem of identifying "slavery" vs other forms of subjection, the NGOs face the fundamental problem of tying well-documented rights infractions to international development policy. As demonstrated in this essay, the World Bank projects for Mauritania take no account of the political battles over slavery and racism. To this date the Mauritanian government has met international pressure with reform legislation that has been largely unimplemented. While direct lending infuses the countryside with ready cash, the micro-battles for Black and Haratine empowerment vis-à-vis the Beydane will prove decisive for the profile of the emerging nation.

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ABSTRACT

Mauritanian Human Rights activists are fighting to achieve social justice through the rule of law. These activists argue that development aid for Mauritania only further enriches the elite, and reinforces their power over disenfranchised slaves, former slaves, and Black Mauritians. Mauritanian activists in the United States seek to generate a broad social movement that protests World Bank and other large-scale investments in their country. This essay explores the successes and failures of the Mauritians' efforts to ignite mass protests in the United States. It evaluates the competing goals of various interest groups, weighs the US. diplomatic interests, and documents the continuing flow of World Bank credits into the Mauritania. The search for powerful allies of the dispossessed and enslaved at the time of this writing remains unfinished business.

RÉSUMÉ

De la colonisation à la mondialisation. Les vicissitudes de l'esclavage en Mauritanie. — Les activistes des droits de l'homme en Mauritanie luttent pour une justice sociale issue de l'État de droit. Ils soulignent que l'aide au développement destinée à la Mauritanie ne fait qu'enrichir davantage l'élite et renforce le pouvoir de celle-ci sur les esclaves déchus de tous droits, sur les anciens esclaves et sur les Noirs mauritaniens. Les activistes mauritaniens aux États-Unis tentent de faire naître un large mouvement social dirigé contre la Banque Mondiale et d'autres investissements de grande envergure dans leur pays d'origine. Cet article explore les succès et les échecs des efforts entrepris par les Mauritaniens pour provoquer des protestations de masse aux États-Unis. Il compare les objectifs concurrents des divers groupes d'intérêts, évalue les intérêts diplomatiques des États-Unis et nous informe sur le flot constant de crédits de la Banque Mondiale vers la Mauritanie. La recherche d'alliés puissants dédiés à la cause des personnes dépossédées et réduites en esclavage demeure à ce jour une entreprise inachevée.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Mauritania, United States, colonization, globalization, Islamic Law, non-governmental organizations, slavery/Mauritanie, États-Unis, colonisation, mondialisation, loi islamique, organisations non gouvernementales, esclavage.