Living the Legacy of Slavery

Between Discourse and Reality

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E. Ann McDougall

Living the Legacy of Slavery

Between Discourse and Reality

Slavery in contemporary Mauritania, like slavery in its past, is very much a discourse. Or more precisely, “discourses”. To whatever extent a reality called “slavery” existed in Mauritania, it has long been obscured by various political agenda shaping the society in whose heart it lay. This is no less true at the beginning of the 21st century than it was a hundred years ago. What has changed and therefore made the unveiling of these agenda more complex are the voices of the slaves (*‘abid*, *‘abd* sing.) and freed slaves (*haratin*, *hartani* m., *hartaniyya* f. sing.) themselves. Far from providing unequivocal “truths”, they too are players in contemporary society; their voices are as political and as socially sensitive as the more traditional spokespersons—the government officials, political parties, external agencies and outside observers of varying dispositions. My focus here is meant neither to avoid engaging with the human aspects of the subject, nor to indulge in academic obscurantism. I seek to establish an understanding of why the discussion of “slavery” today in Mauritania is such a difficult one to have and why, to the extent that it takes place, it does so primarily outside the country. That said, “slavery” also delineates the intersection of several important developments in Mauritania and, ironically, provides us with one of those proverbial windows into societal development we are always seeking. In the last part of the paper, I draw on some recent research to try and illuminate why that is the case and what shapes the dominant strands of discourse today¹.

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1. Research in December 2004-January 2005 was funded by the University of Alberta, Humanities Fine Arts and Social Sciences Research Operating Grant. Previous Mauritanian fieldwork drawn on here was funded by: Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship (1983-1984); University of Alberta, HFASSR (as above), May-June 2000. Library work at the Anti-Slavery Society, London UK was undertaken in autumn of 2002 and summer 2004, thanks to travel grants from the University of Alberta, Support for the Advancement of Scholarship, in each of those years. I am grateful for all of this financial support.

Historical Context: The Colonial Process of Constructing Slavery

“Slaves”, “the slave trade”, “slavery”: each at various times has attracted the attention of outsiders to what is today Mauritania. Initially in the hands of medieval Arab scribes, from the 15th century onwards these topics became the prerogative of European observers. First they came as active participants in slaving, trading and creating the Atlantic institutions of slavery; then as vocal advocates for abolishing all of the above; finally they arrived as ambivalent occupiers of Africa itself where evolving European notions of abolition intersected uncomfortably with African domestic slave practices and institutions. The “Arab” connection in Mauritania (in terms of historical accounts, settlement and cultural orientation) also meant association with Islam and with Muslims. For Europeans, this association was superimposed on their understanding of the territory and its people through perceptions they held of “the orient”. Orientalism shaped abolitionism in particular ways: slavery and the desert slave trade, for example, were in the hands of stereotypically cruel, vicious Arabs and their “slavery” was an institution peculiar to Islam; it would therefore be particularly difficult to deracinate it from regions like Mauritania. Europeans understood slavery in the Sahara as it was filtered through their own complicated relations with the Muslim Orient, as well as through their domestic battles over abolition. This intellectual positioning continued to be reflected in key academic works on, as well as important colonial policy in, Mauritania, through the first half of the 20th century (McDougall 2002: 55-87).

During the colonial era, slavery in Mauritania was presented as “different” from slavery elsewhere in French territories. At the time of conquest, it was argued that recognition of the “morals, customs, property and religion” of the Muslim Mauritanian elite necessitated permitting it continued access to slaves—slavery was, in essence, a integral part of each “morality and custom”, “property” and of course “religion”. From another perspective, it was felt that precisely because slavery was so deeply rooted, slaves themselves were simply “not ready” to be wrenched from their social security, to do so would be to “sow social disorder”. Consequently, Mauritania was not yet “ripe enough for the exercise of full individualism” or for the “progressive and definitive freeing of the labouring masses”². Similar logic repeated itself over the next couple of decades, language itself slowly evolving, increasingly differentiating between trade in slaves (not permitted), domestic slavery as shaped by Islam (permitted) and the exigencies of labour needs, both colonial and local (also permitted). This was articulated in 1929 in the following way:

2. ARIM [Archives de la République islamique de Mauritanie], E1 61, “Esclavage”. Letter circulated to Mauritanian *commandants de cercle* (regarding Anti-Slavery decree 1905), March 1906.

"In all our colonies, we have formally condemned slavery. But in Muslim countries we have recognized *officially* [emphasis in original] an existing social state: that of the '*serviteurs*' which constitutes labour within the family and Muslim organization such that it is fixed by the religion and Muslim law. What we do not permit is the reduction to servitude by force those of a free condition [. . .]"³.

But this discussion was not a wholly internal one. By 1920, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the League of Nations were constituted; by the mid-1920s, they had both actively taken up the question of "slave-like" labour conditions and in 1926, the Anti-Slavery Convention was passed. Information gathered by the ILO helped to lead to the Forced Labour Convention of 1930. French colonial administrators sought creative language that could reshape the issue of forced labour into discussions of taxation, military service and infrastructures meant to "bring liberation" to Africans. Nowhere was this rhetorical gymnastics more innovative than in the Mauritanian context, where Islamic law and Muslim "custom" were incorporated into the discourse. To no avail; the conference of 1930 passed a convention on colonial forced labour that included all forms, including those employed in Mauritania. France did not ratify it until 1937 (Cooper 1996; United Nations 1931: 517-519)⁴.

Meanwhile, however, it showed its sensitivity to the international stage through a publicly conducted investigation into what were termed "vestiges of slavery". Documentation was requested from all Governor-Generals on the remnants of domestic slavery, of tribal or chiefly slavery, of pawning, of hidden trafficking in women and children and of all non-remunerated forms of labour⁵. What occurred during the 1920s and even more aggressively in the 1930s while France ostensibly supported legislation abolishing forced labour, was a careful re-definition of what constituted "free" labour. This process necessitated the use of what Fred Cooper (1996: 31) termed "the international language of free labour", one often at odds with the experiences of on-the-spot administrators. Mauritania may have lain outside the mainstream of the labour discourse deliberations—indeed its Maures were written off completely as people who would not work⁶, but it was nonetheless directly affected by them. The sensitivity to using terms like "*captifs*" and "*esclaves*" for example, was revealed in the gradual substitution of *serviteurs* and *serviteurs nés* being carefully defined so that they could

3. ARIM E1 18, "Esclavage", Capt. Reviers de Mauny, Cmdt. de Cercle de l'Adrar, circular, December 1929.

4. "La Convention relative à l'esclavage" was signed in Geneva in September 1926, ratified by the French Government December 1926.

5. ARIM E1 18 "Esclavage". Minister of the Colonies, Reynaud, to Governor Generals and Governors of the Colonies: "Le problème présent de l'esclavage", juin 1931.

6. That fact is underscored by Cooper's almost total lack of reference to the region. Mauritania is referenced only once, in a footnote, and then as an exception to a policy; Maures are mentioned only once in the context of noting who of the West African population would not work (COOPER 1996: 76, 40).

not be confused with “unfree labour”. Lengthy reports and circulars were issued to clearly establish the peculiarity of Mauritania’s Muslim society. All resonated strongly with the “language of international labour” created by the League of Nations and the ILO in the 1920s and 1930s (McDougall forthcoming [b])⁷.

The post-Second World War era saw yet another shift in discourse as discussion of Mauritanian slavery was inserted firmly in decolonization. “Work”, more precisely the creation of a “working class”, dominated debates over how to achieve urbanization, industrialization and growth without creating a detribalized continent whose social safety nets would collapse (and therefore cost money). In Mauritania this translated into consideration of a particular group, the *haratin*. Numerous reports spoke to the advantage of Islamic (*sharia*) law that advocated freeing slaves, especially male slaves, to create *freed* slaves. These *haratin*, it was noted, retained relations of semi-dependence with former masters but had incentive to “progress”, to work hard, to accumulate and to educate themselves and their children. One of the keys to this argument was that French “freeing” of slaves could not create *haratin*, only chaos: “[T]oo rapidly emancipated, [such freed servile people would be] incapable of using well a liberty freshly acquired, [and] without resources and without context, would constitute a miserable proletariat, detribalized, [and] uncontrollable”⁸. This discourse had little to do with Mauritania (“proletariat” was hardly a relevant term in this sparse herding/agricultural society) and everything to do participation in the debate on decolonization and modernization elsewhere in Africa.

“Slavery” was a recognized flash point, a point of vulnerability that could be exploited in different ways, often simultaneously, for different goals (McDougall 1989a: 285-310). This is what Mauritians came to realize as well. As early as 1943, a French administrator celebrated claims to have created a “working class” from Mauritania’s *haratin*: “A new social hierarchy, founded uniquely on wealth, is being established. Politically, it is difficult to predict the consequences of this evolution *which consecrates the importance of work and which destroys the ancient seigneurs* [my emphasis]”⁹. But what is clear in retrospect, from the *seigneurs’* perspective, is that the *hartani* institution, like slavery itself, fully “consecrated the importance of work”. French capitalist ideology was not necessary to articulate that. Nor did creating enough *haratin* to satisfy labour needs in any way undermine, let alone “destroy”, the social authority of masters. The French were explaining the process of using Mauritanian Muslim law and social custom to free slaves in order to participate in a particular international labour discourse; Mauritanian masters were using that same process

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7. An earlier version of “That man can work...” was presented at the African Studies Association meeting, Houston Texas, 2001 as “The making of a colonial working class in central Mauritania”.
 8. AS [Archives du Sénégal] 2K15 174 SOUDAN. Report, Governor General French Soudan to Governor General AOF, January 1950, pp. 3, 23.
 9. AATAR [Archives d’Atar], Rapport politique annual, “Notes”, 1943.

to protect their rights in labour. Evidence suggests that colonial policies of forcing expanded cultivation in suitable regions of the country may well have accelerated the process as early as the 1930s. It was notable that masters freed men to become *haratin* but resisted, openly, freeing women. Keeping women as slaves meant keeping the means to reproduce the labour force. Women's children belonged to their masters no matter who the father; even as the *hartani* "working class" grew, Mauritanian masters assured that access to its slave roots was protected (McDougall 1989b: 370-379). Contrary to the social revolution the French celebrated as being underway, Mauritanian masters saw themselves preserving their traditional authority and society. Ironically, for each, "slavery" and its manipulation was the key to their respective visions (McDougall forthcoming [b]).

The previous pages have been about "context", but they have also been about process: the process by which slavery came to occupy a sort of linguistic niche that in turn allowed for the intersection of several colonial discourses. A lengthier account could add other examples to these, ranging from internal French politics in the 1930s (McDougall 1989a: 285-310)¹⁰ to international competition for post-colonial influence emerging in the 1950s (McDougall forthcoming)¹¹. By the time Mauritania became independent in 1960 and iterated "equality for all" in its 1961 constitution (United Nations, Annex II 1984: 2)¹², what was understood by "slavery" was multifaceted and multi-layered. Although initially eliminating slavery had been a stated aim of colonialism, ultimately slavery itself became part of the process of defining and developing colonial rule (McDougall 1989b, forthcoming [b])¹³. Its implicit rejection by the newly independent state was also part of its claim to independence. The battle against slavery had been

10. "Un forfait colonial..." is the story of how a political exile in Mauritania, Louis Hunkanrin, used the issue of slavery to indict a particular French administrator and how in turn, the administrator assigned to investigate the accusations, used the case to further his own career.

11. "... *rachat* in French West Africa" recounts the story of the British anti-slavery society's foray into Morocco-Mauritania in the mid 1950s to publicize the degree to which the French had failed in their duty to eradicate slavery in Mauritania. The "evidence" was supplied by a certain Dahmane Beyrouk in Goulimine (Morocco), who castigated Mauritians in general but one in particular, "Ham-ody" of Atar. We will meet the latter, below, and the connections between Atar, Goulimine and "slavery" will become apparent.

12. Mauritania ratified the United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" in 1961 and in its constitution accordingly granted "all citizens equal status before the law". But in neither action was slavery, *per se*, specifically addressed. As a Mauritanian representative speaking to this issue many years later commented: "[...] this Constitution was not to have any tangible effect on the emancipation of slaves."

13. This analysis was also clearly articulated by the Mauritanian Representative responding to the UN in 1984: "[...] the colonial administration continued to support the practices of the slave-owning aristocracy, which formed its political and social base and its principal prop for the consolidation and maintenance of its power" (UNITED NATIONS, Annex II: 2).

a very public colonial motif; it was soon to be similarly appropriated for Mauritania's programmes of modernization and development. It remained central to the evolution of politics and continued to evoke the role of Islam—this time in the context of the “Islamic Republic” of Mauritania. What was new were the voices of slaves and former slaves in this process. While academics, human rights groups and journalists multiplied access to an international hearing of stories of slavery, domestic labour and political movements embodied growing numbers of “slaves” and created collective voices for both internal and external consumption. The latter was at once an extension of the process as we have come to understand it—more layers, more discourses, more participants—and something distinctively new. The “something new”, as we will see, was the emergence of conscious identities between and among slaves and *haratin*. Ultimately it was this struggle to determine identity that shaped the experience of contemporary slavery—at least, as best as we can understand it (McDougall, Brhane & Ruf 2003: 67-88).

Creating a Nation, Re-constructing Slavery

During most of Mauritania's first two decades of independence, a French-educated elite sought to create a nation where none existed. Issues of economic development, tribal co-operation and ethnic reconciliation occupied center stage¹⁴; slavery as such escaped the limelight, even among the *haratin* who comprised most of Mauritania's work force. The interests of the latter paralleled national politics and concerns common to newly independent African countries—more voice to assure better living conditions in the cities, more jobs, more access to resources. Although many workers were probably still slaves, formally speaking if not legally, it was not until the late 1970s, after two decades of drought and famine had pushed thousands from the desert-interior to the overcrowded capital of Nouakchott, and the war against the POLISARIO in the Western Sahara had over-drawn human and material resources, that slavery *per se* was articulated as a political issue. The *coup d'État* of 1978 marked this watershed at the national level; the establishment the same year of a political movement called El Hor (“free-man”) that fore-fronted *haratin* in its political platform, marked its intersection with local-level social issues. Slaves and *haratin*, long the objects of discussion and discourse, were finally becoming agents shaping both (McDougall, Brhane & Ruf 2003: 70-74)¹⁵.

14. “Tribal” here is used deliberately to refer to the political structure of desert and oasis clans who in no way thought of themselves as a coherent entity; “ethnic” refers mostly to the differences between several “black” groups in the south (Soninke, Wolof, Pulaar) and the “white” (*beidan*) tribes referred to, above.

15. It is also said that during the war, the POLISARIO's treatment of captured black soldiers exacerbated the situation. According to the partial transcript of the 1984 Mission from the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and

The political parties which emerged from the troubled 1970s also represented many Blacks from the agricultural river regions. Soninke, Wolof and, above all, Pulaar herders and cultivators were themselves traditionally slave-holders in hierarchical social orders not unlike their ethnic relatives on the Senegal side of the river. They came to share *hartani* dissatisfaction with the largely *beidan* ("white") government's exclusive control of power and resources. Moreover, they felt that whatever little influence they had in government was eroding dangerously in inverse proportion to the encroachment on their valuable land by impoverished desert-dwellers. Hopes, therefore, were high among Blacks that a new government would address these concerns. Their expectations played strongly into the dynamics of the early 1980s, which in turn gave direction to the "politics of slavery" during the last two decades of the 20th century (McDougall, Brhane & Ruf 2003: 71-75)¹⁶.

In July 1980, under a new president, Mohamed Kounaould Haidallah¹⁷, the government officially abolished slavery (United Nations 1984, Annex IV). This was followed by a decree in 1981 which specified how this would take place (United Nations 1984, Annex V). What is significant about this legal abolition is that it was argued completely in terms of Islam and coincided with the imposition of *sharia* law. Just as the colonial regime had once argued that Islam provided the context for ending slavery without social disorder, the national government invoked the religious reasoning that Islam had always intended to first convert non-believers (slaves), and then manumit them. The only slavery justified within Islam was slavery imposed as the result of *jihad*. And it was widely (although not unanimously)

Protection of Minorities, two independent informants (one anonymous, the other identified as the eminent sociologist Abdel Wedoudould Cheikh) reported the following: "[...] Mauritanian slaves became conscious of their condition as a result of the Polisario war. The leadership of the Polisario are, of course, on [*sic*] the Moors and as such are related to the upper class of Mauritania. When they took prisoners during the war the Polisario tended to shoot Blacks out of hand and this naturally made the slave class extremely reluctant to fight [...]. Moorish prisoners were treated relatively well. The result of this was that lack of enthusiasm amongst the Mauritanian troops contributed towards the Mauritanian decision to make peace with the Polisario and to recognize their claims while at the same time the slave class became conscious of the fact that they did not enjoy equal rights even in war when fighting for their country. Maître: [name omitted in original] reckons that it is from this time that the El Hor movement really began to take off." (UNITED NATIONS 1984, "Partial transcript", pp. 6, 35. On the Mission itself, see *Ibid.*, Annex VI.) My thanks to the staff of the Anti Slavery Library, especially Jeff Howarth, for their help in locating material and permitting me to photocopy extensively.

16. An article in *New African* (1979), "Racial Tensions Erupt", went so far as to predict that Mauritania was on the brink of war under theould Saleck regime.
17. Mustafa Ould Salek (10 July 1978-3 June 1979) took power in the *coup d'État*; he was replaced by Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Louly (3 June 1979-4 January 1980) who in turn was ousted by Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla (4 January 1980-12 December 1984). All regimes were military.

agreed among Mauritania's *ulama* (clerical scholarly community) that no slaves held in 1980 could be said to have been obtained in this way. Therefore, there was no justification for their continued enslavement. Moreover, Islam made provision for compensation to masters should the state free slaves—but only if they, the masters, could prove the legitimacy of their “property”. The same logic regarding origins made this largely a moot point (United Nations 1984, Annex IV and V)¹⁸.

Neither abolition nor this particular application of *sharia* was universally popular. Black southerners, although just as Muslim as their *beidan* neighbours, saw the move primarily as one to move closer to the Arab world and therefore potentially, further from their goals of acquiring more political voice. They were not wrong (McDougall, Brhane & Ruf 2003: 74-75)¹⁹. But most interesting was the international reaction: ironically, the introduction of *sharia* and the general contextualizing of government in “Islamic” rhetoric were read as an attempt to defend slavery. In a highly simplistic but very dramatic fashion, “abolition” was used in the international media to call attention to the anachronistic continuance of the reviled practice of slavery, apparently firmly supported by Islam. Turned around, Islam became the explanation for slavery. And its association with Mauritania's “white” government meant that it also represented racial discrimination. It was not a long leap of logic to link racial discrimination against southern “Blacks” with “slavery” and ultimately, with Islam²⁰.

18. “[...] the CMSN (government) has acquired the firm conviction that the overwhelming majority of our eminent ulema... have reservations with regard to the origins of slavery in Mauritania and the conditions in which it is practiced in our country. In these circumstances, our ulema consider that the State has the power to act in place of the masters for the purpose of emancipating slaves, just as it has the power to expropriate private property in the public interest (Annex IV).” But moot or not, steps were taken to ensure that such compensation could be identified and evaluated if necessary. The 1981 act spells out (Article 2) that “... this abolition shall give rise to compensation for persons entitled thereto.” And (Article 3) that “A National commission consisting of ulema, economists and administrators shall be established by decree for the purpose of studying the practical modalities of such compensation (Annex V).” According to interview information from the 1984 report, however “Since no slave owner in Mauritania could claim to have acquired these slaves according to these principles [*sharia* law], it is most unlikely that any compensation will be payable and although the relevant ordinance contain [*sic*] provision for [a] decree concerning compensation this decree has never, in fact, been issued precisely because nobody would be eligible [...] (United Nations, Partial transcript, p. 18).”

19. See also Mohammed Abdallahi, “After the Revolution”, *The Guardian* (UK), 26 March 1979.

20. This process was greatly facilitated by the Mercer report (MERCER 1981), first delivered to the London-based Anti-Slavery Society, 8 December 1980 (which circulated in typescript, six single-spaced pages) and subsequently published in various venues including “Slavery in Mauritania Today”, *Plural Societies* 12 (Autumn/Winter 1981), pp. 125-130; *Slavery in Mauritania Today*, Edinburgh, Human Rights Group, 1982. This work has remained extremely influential and continues to be reflected in the “evidence” often cited in contemporary publications. See the discussion of it in MCDUGALL, BRHANE & URF (2003: 74).

By association, to be white was to be free and oppressive, to be black was to be un-free and oppressed. Distinctions between *hartani* and slaves, similarities between white and black masters, disappeared from the international discourse. This simplified Mauritania was effectively sketched in a widely distributed 1983 BBC film on slavery²¹. Just as they had earlier reacted to colonial policy, local interests both responded to and exploited that image for their own purposes. Black southerners, collectively represented as of 1983 in an unofficial political movement (headquartered in neighbouring Senegal), the *Forces pour la libération des Africains mauritaniens* (FLAM), sought more unified action with El Hor. They astutely recognized that the slave issue articulated by El Hor and so emotively put to the world would resonate internationally, and that they could use this recognition to promote their own political goals. Moreover, the more *hara-tin* could be persuaded to identify themselves as “black”, the more their own demographic profile would be strengthened domestically. The government, on the other hand, responded to the notoriety of the film first by “regretting” that a complex legal and social situation was being so simplistically represented, then by inviting external observers to chronicle the progress being made against slavery (United Nations 1984: Annex II, Partial Transcript: 19)²². This 1984 “fact-finding mission” from the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities included Marc Bossuyt, of the Economic and Social Council, and Peter Davies, Director of the British Anti-Slavery Society²³. What was so

21. Anti-Slave, UK UN/29/Mauritanie. Letter, Peter Davies (Director, Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights) to Peter Hague (Amnesty International), 1 February 1984, refers to the fact that Mauritania is now “very well aware of the international attention being focused on it”.
22. “Certain circles, especially a particular section of the press, seized upon it [the abolition of slavery] and dressed it up at will: the Negro slave trade in the late twentieth century... what a sensation! And to cap it all, a traffic coupled with racial discrimination! [. . .] These same circles—past masters in the art of profiting from the good faith of international opinion and its readiness to support just causes—exploited to the full and with a complete absence of scruple, the aura of sensation thus given to the question. [. . .] We cannot in this regard but deplore the negative attitude of certain circles and in particular of a certain Western press which, in stead of serving this cause, has preferred to use it to serve itself. It is deplorable to see certain press institutions reduce their interest in this question to the material profit they can derive from it through big sensational headlines (Annex II).” More direct were comments of the Prime Minister to the Commission representatives: “A great deal of the Prime Minister’s statements were devoted to the BBC film and tendentious reportings in the foreign press. He claimed that much of the BBC film was not even taken in Mauritania and he cited rather nicely [*sic*] the shots taken of the Isle de Gorée which he did not, of course, claim to be taken in Mauritania. He was similarly fierce about some of the foreign press reports but it is curious that *the BBC film seems to have caused so much upset in the government* [my emphasis]” (Partial transcript, p. 19).
23. Originally, it was also to have included a member from Sudan who became ill (UNITED NATIONS 1984: Annex VI). In its composition, it was reminiscent of earlier attempts to ascertain the “situation of slavery” in the 1950s as colonialism

important about this particular invitation was the government's obvious aim to counter images of itself as a racist, slave-based society in the eyes of the west. Whereas its move towards becoming a more Islamic state had been intended to open the aid coffers of Middle Eastern countries, the abolition legislation was aimed primarily at western (European and American) agencies. By publicly confirming the illegality of slavery, Mauritania allied with the democratic regimes of the west; by inviting in external observers, it hoped to underscore that legal abolition could only go so far and that actual "freedom" for slaves depended upon economic development. The vestiges of slavery the mission would chronicle were not embarrassing for the government; on the contrary, they were leverage for much desired western aid and investment²⁴. Of course this did not prevent opponents of the regime from using those same findings to attempt to discredit the government and further substantiate arguments of discrimination against Blacks²⁵. Slavery became, in early 1980s, the key to arguments for both development and democracy, on the part of the government, and for the need to overthrow that regime, on the part of FLAM and its supporters. The politics of slavery cut both ways.

This was a critical moment for El Hor and the "voice" of slaves. Initially, the movement was only a dozen men; in the turbulence of the post-coup, post-war, era, it spread across the country through local, clandestine cells (El Hor Movement 1990: 7-10)²⁶. Its first major political action was the publicizing of and protest against the sale of a young slave woman in Atar (central Adrar region). Its activities resulted in the arrest, trial and, ultimately, release of its leaders. This gained momentum for the party, as well as contributing to the government's decision to proclaim abolition. It was explicitly a *hartani* movement, "*hartani*" being understood as the

was reaching an end: the UN commissioned a major report on the use of forced and slave labour, and the Anti-Slavery Society sent out agents to report on conditions in the colonies.

24. "This decision is to constitute the compatible framework for a global-emancipation programme which puts the problem in its real context, namely the struggle against underdevelopment in all its forms. [...] [I]ts [slavery's] eradication cannot be dissociated from the search for suitable solutions to the numerous economic and social problems facing the country. It so happens that these problems are now aggravated by a particularly unfavourable international economic situation, the persistent drought in the Sudano-Sahelian region and the limited character of national resources [...]. The Government of Mauritania therefore appeals to all countries, all organizations and all persons devoted to Justice to make their contribution to this noble task of emancipation (UNITED NATIONS 1984: Annex II)."
25. As articulated in articles like John Gretton, "Desert Slaves are Treated 'Like Dogs'", *The Observer*, 30 August 1981, or in articles published in the daily paper of neighbouring Senegal's capital Dakar, *Le Soleil*. According to El Hor, the "Negro-African opposition" was behind this attempt to present the problem of slaves and *haratin* as one of general oppression of Blacks. ("Communication submitted to the expert by persons claiming to represent the 'El Hor' Movement", Sub-Commission... 1984, Annex VII. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1984/23, p. 3).
26. Includes copy of 1978 founding Constitution as appendix.

extension of the slave; El Hor articulated the “slave” issue in terms of constituting the root of the *hartani* situation. It also articulated slavery as a religious issue: in the 1978 constitution, abolition was addressed *not* in the sections on “inequalities in the economy, society and political structure”, but in the one entitled “[...] inequalities *born of the religion* [my emphasis]”. El Hor affirmed that the movement was attached to Islam but that slavery was an anachronism “incompatible with all forms of viable democratic organization” (El Hor Movement 1990, Appendix: Article III-C). The government’s declaration of abolition two years later, itself firmly located in Islamic law, presented a dilemma. Could El Hor accept that its ostensible goal was being addressed by the government, albeit with an argument divergent from its own? More importantly, in that it was clearly a potentially divisive question, could it accept the political alliance with southern Blacks that was being proposed domestically and urged in the international media? International support might help El Hor in its broader social demands (consistent with development schemes, for example) but that alliance threatened the essence of the party wherein “slavery” was defined as a *social* not a *racial* problem. The party actually split during these years, ceasing to be a unified (and, therefore, “listened to”) voice domestically. However, its position was given new voice by the 1984 external observers, as a submission by one part of the party was included with the report itself. El Hor concurred, for all intents and purposes, with the government and its abolition programme. It underscored that it was not a “black” party and that Mauritania’s issues were not racial, as FLAM and others claimed (United Nations 1984, Annex VII: 3,4)²⁷. It became the voice of *haratin* who saw their future closely allied with the *beidan*, and most certainly *not* with the black former-slave-holding populations of the south²⁸. But given that most

27. “Slavery is not a racial problem. There are in Mauritania black-skinned slave-owning feudal potentates, just as there are white ones. Likewise, there are democrats and opponents of slavery both among the white Moors and among the Poulars, Wolofs and Soninkes. [...] The conservative elements among the Poulars, Wolofs and Soninkes are trying to sidetrack it [the emancipation movement] in order to use it in their struggles against the Arab-Berbers for the sharing of power.”

28. In 1982, it was observed that El Hor was being “tolerated” by the government and that some of its leaders had been appointed to “responsible posts”: a certain Bilal Werzeg was appointed to a diplomatic post in Europe, Ould Haimer was made deputy-head of national radio, and Hamoyd Boitgel was elected general secretary of the main workers’ union (see P. BALTA “Reform from the Bottom”, *The Guardian* [UK], 1982). In contrast to the communication included with the 1984 report of the UN Sub-Commission as Annex VII: “Claiming to Represent the ‘El Hor’ Movement” was the separate submission, notably not made part of the official report, by a group calling itself “Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in Mauritania”. This communication, dated “Nouakchott, 25 January 1984” was an angry response to the Mission itself, that essentially claimed the UN representatives had been taken in by the government and failed to acknowledge the slavery that continued to exist. It argued that Mauritania’s slavery was worse than Apartheid and Zionism, yet the United Nations had made no moves to sanction its membership and condemn it as it had South Africa and Israel.

of these *haratin* were *Hassaniyya*²⁹ speaking and culturally part of the desert not the riveraine society, they tended not to attract the former slave class of the Pulaar and other “Blacks”³⁰. So, in definitively rejecting “black” political association, they were asserting “white” identity. And consciously or not, they became part of the process of racializing slavery—even as they spoke out against it.

The association of “slave” with “black” exacerbated the exploitation of the Pulaar ethnic crisis that took a significant turn for the worse in the mid-1980s³¹ and culminated in the frontier war with Senegal in the spring of 1989. The proverbial straw that resulted in exchanges of fire across the river had to do with a dispute over where animals could graze; the actual issue that led to thousands of Mauritanian *haratin* being repatriated from Senegal to Mauritania, and an even larger number of so-called Senegalese being deported from Mauritania was a combined concern by the government that Senegal was backing the revolutionary aims of FLAM and a political desire to populate southern municipalities with pro-government voters. This particular little border war continued through 1991 in the form of continued deportations from Mauritania—increasingly of anyone who was black and might be supportive of anti-government policies. Property appropriations of those who were forced to leave gave the government both the means to “buy” political support and very real access to long-sought-after land (McDougall, Brhane & Ruf 2003: 75-77). In Senegal’s capital Dakar, the daily paper *Le Soleil* poured fuel on the already volatile situation with escalating coverage throughout April and May that increasingly vilified the Mauritanian government as undertaking no less than genocide against its “black

“How can the United Nations wait until 1984 to send a mission when Mauritania has been a member since 1960?” It called upon the Mission to “accept the weight of its historic responsibility” to human rights. The letter bears no names, and implies a clandestine delivery. Given that the “El Hor” history claims that both “divisions” of the party independently submitted communications to the Mission, it seems likely that this is what is being referred to; the contrast in political position and strategy could not be starker (Anti-Slavery UK, Letter filed in UN/29/Mauritanie).

29. This is the local variant of Arabic spoken almost exclusively in Mauritania. It grew from the mixture of Berber and Arabic influences that shaped the demographic profile of the region from its medieval origins. It is written in the Arabic script and used more in the cultural than the legal domain.
30. For example Peter Davies, director of the Anti-Slave Society International, recounted one of the leaders of El Hor as complaining that “no attempt had been made officially to support Haratin culture which was essentially that of the Moors and that radio programmes in Hassaniyya and Haratin cultural content should be allowed especially considering how large a proportion of the population they formed” (UNITED NATIONS 1984, Partial transcript, pp. 37-38).
31. This in the form of a manifesto signed by some thirty prominent intellectuals that accused the government of a executing a policy of Apartheid against black African ethnic groups. Two thirds of the signatories were subsequently arrested and tortured. The following year, several Pulaar in the army were accused of planning a *coup d’État* and this initiated a general “ethnic cleansing” of Blacks from the army (MCDOUGALL, BRHANE & RUF 2003: 75).

skinned" population³². The fact that *haratin* for the most part sided with government forces and participated in the violence against black riverain people, was overlooked. This now-familiar, emotive framework resonated readily in the international press and was more easily grasped than the complicated reality. But then, it always had been.

International interest in Mauritania's "slavery problem" had not disappeared in the years following the 1984 report; the same United Nations sub-commission conducted follow-up reports in 1985 (two) and 1987. The war intruded in 1989 but 1990 saw revived attention. A lengthy article in *Le Monde*³³ provided quite a sophisticated analysis of "Forgotten Slaves"—the only one I have found to date that noted, at least in passing, that slavery continued in an "attenuated form" among the southern Blacks. Nevertheless, it still asserted confidently that "it is primarily a Moorish issue (Paringaux 1990)". This followed the July 1990 report of the Anti-Slavery Society to the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, now in its 42nd session (United Nations 1990). This report (both the "formal" one and the Director's extended account that served as its base)³⁴ revealed an interesting shift in the politics of slavery and democracy: as Mauritania moved towards its first democratic elections at various levels (culminating in the first-ever presidential election in 1992), discussion of slaves and slavery was no longer tolerated and on-the-ground anti-slavery movements like El Hor were no longer acknowledged. The report references examples of banning a local research institute publication because it contained articles on slaves/slavery and of refusing to disclose the results of a recent census which would have shown the "free" population to have been the minority and the *haratin* the majority (United Nations 1990, Director's Report: 2,5,6). The democratic process was about to affirm the existing social hierarchy, shored up by *haratin* co-opted into the regime. The "black-slave" issue was no longer: radical Blacks had been ruthlessly dealt with through deportation and "slaves" who were not co-operative *haratin* were denied official existence.

But what of El Hor? It had openly chosen not to ally with black political interests, so why was it no longer permitted a voice? In effect, the

32. Throughout April and May, articles appeared every two to three days, usually with front-page coverage and provocative photographs of evacuations, property damage and families being torn apart. Gradually, interpretations shifted from "regrettable misunderstandings" to vilification, both of ould Taaya personally and of the government policy generally. By mid May, headlines screamed "Negro-Africans Victims of Beydan Terror", continuing on that "there is no doubt about the wish of the Baassiste government [referring to the purported links with Iraq] to empty the country of its citizens with black skin", *Le Soleil*, Dakar, 12 May 1989.

33. R.-P. PARINGAUX "Esclaves Oubliés", *Le Monde*, 22 October 1990.

34. Included with the Society's submission to the Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery (a member group of the sub-commission), is the director's 14-page report of his visit, meant to be read in conjunction with the submission.

fate of El Hor reveals how the process of democratization shaped the reality of slavery. The director of the Anti-Slavery Society attempted to meet with Messaoud ould Boulkheir, one of the original founders of El Hor and its most recent leader. He was unable to. As the organization officially no longer existed, he had no "official" reason to speak with ould Boulkheir; moreover ould Boulkheir was now director of a state housing authority—clearly having no relevance to the Society's interests in slavery. Apparently he was not the only El Hor member to have been successfully incorporated into government, another had become Minister of Information, and two others were involved with the government-sanctioned Labour Union. Another of its founders was a secretary general in the department of rural economy. Ironically, he had been put in charge of the controversial "compensation to masters" for freed slaves! And he was the vice-president of the Mauritanian Human Rights League, founded in 1986. To the extent that El Hor still had a voice and slavery still a profile, it was through this "league" (United Nations 1990)³⁵. But the league was largely inactive (many argued because it was in no real way independent of government) and the voice was muted at best. "Slavery", many would have argued, was a vestige of the past being addressed through the incorporation of *haratin* in government; it was therefore only one of several human rights issues needing attention. Indeed, the ongoing genocide of the black population certainly took priority in 1990 and the ensuing years. Slavery was a difficult topic to put on anyone's political agenda.

The 1990s were primarily about struggles for democratic voice, not for "freedom" *per se*. International interest remained, with repeated attempts being made at the beginning of the decade to undertake a serious, sociological study of the condition of former slaves (United Nations 1990)³⁶. Indications in general, supported by an ILO report, were that the economy was not growing sufficiently to permit slaves physically to leave their dependent positions with former masters. The fall-out of the war in the south had complicated the proposed land reform (now reported to be benefiting former masters and newly returned *haratin* not former slaves), and infrastructure planned to inform slaves of their rights and help them with the psychological transformation to independence had failed. Very few new schools had been established near ex-slave settlements and the *Structure d'éducation des masses*, a grass-roots level information network aimed at illiterate slaves,

35. "The 'El Hor' (Freedom) movement of ex-slaves [...] still exists. Some elements seem to form one of the factions in the Confederation of Labour Unions; there seem to be some clandestine groups who help ex-slaves coming to the towns. It was not possible to contact members of 'El Hor' and their apparent fear of the authorities lays open to doubt the intention of the Mauritanian Government to seriously grapple with the issue of slavery" (Director's Report: 3). What was clear was that the identifiable movement, tolerated by government, that was active in the early 1980s had ceased to function by 1990.

36. It was proposed that the study be undertaken by the *Ligue mauritanienne des droits de l'Homme*.

had quickly been exploited as a surveillance mechanism that also promoted government propaganda. In the guise of addressing the abolition of slavery, the government succeeded in putting into place a system of political oppression to which everyone, especially in outlying rural areas, was potentially subject (United Nations 1990)³⁷. Since that article was written, the significance of America to the slavery equation has if anything, increased³⁸. Today, anyone can download annual US Country reports or those of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial discrimination detailing human rights conditions in Mauritania³⁹; interviews (in English) with exiles like Ahmed ould Yessa (a self-declared former master, heading up the sos-Esclaves office in Paris), and former slaves like Boubacar Messaoud (Director, sos-Esclaves) and his wife Maalouma, herself an escaped slave with a dramatic story, are easily found⁴⁰. However, sos-Esclaves has on more than one occasion accused Americans of obfuscating clear instances of slavery with temperate language referring to “vestiges of” or “slave-like”, reflecting deference to current co-operative diplomatic relations with the Mauritanian government⁴¹. Both

37. On government attempts to stifle information and delay the UN sub-commission's visit, see Director's Report (p. 3) on SEM abuse, ended by new government 1992, and moribund *Ligue* and ILO reporting (Anti-Slavery, UK. Human Rights Report, 1992. UN/29/Mauritanie; appears to be American but full reference not included). Problems with SEM had been hinted at both in United Nations 1984, Partial transcript (concern attributed to Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh) and more specifically in Anti-Slavery UK UN/29/Mauritanie, Letter from the Director of the Anti-Slavery Society, Peter Davies to Marc Bossuyt, Human Rights Commission (Geneva), 17 February 1986.
38. Although the book in which the article appears is dated 2003, this was a considerably delayed publication; our contribution was completed for the originally envisaged date, 1998.
39. For example: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, (main website) http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/hrp_reports_mainhp.html; reports specifically on Mauritania are archived back to 1999. Committee of the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 65th session concludes; <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2004/rd985.html>; The Committee of the Elimination of Racial Discrimination considers report of Mauritania, http://www.tamazgha.fr/article.php3?id_article=941 (August 2004).
40. Internet searches on individual names turn up many results, among them interviews with: Boubacar ould Messaoud <http://www.xula.edu/herald/issues/20020131/living.html> Maalouma Messaoud <http://www.iabolish.com/act/abol/profile/maalouma.htm>, Abdel Nasser ould Yessa <http://www.iabolish.com/act/abol/profile/yessa.htm>
See also “SOS Slaves” homepage for news, interviews, stories of contemporary slaves <http://sos.iabolish.com/>.
41. See Annual Reports on sos-Esclaves webpage for 2001, 2003 [English], 2001, 2002-2003 [French]; and most recently J. Motlagh, “Protesters Blast Arab Rule in Mauritania”, UPI, 5 April 2005 (<http://washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/20050405-074353-6532r.htm>). Note the repeated distortion (falsification to be exact) in Motlagh's article: “Marginalized members of Mauritania's Fulani, Wolof, Bambara and Soninke tribes—known collectively as ‘Haratin’ or black moors...”. The representation of *haratin* and “black” in the international press continues to reflect the dichotomy so effectively created a quarter of a century ago.

the information, and sos-Esclaves' publicizing of it, has escalated government sensitivity in a volatile political climate. The current regime has adopted a pro-American stance, first by recognizing Israel (1999), most recently by cooperating with the United States in its "war on terror" in the Sahara. At the cost of domestic opposition which the government terms "Islamic fundamentalism", this stance is meant to ensure the support it needs (financial, military, moral) to stay in power against the challenges of vociferous democratic opposition (Jourde 2005; Diouf 2005⁴²). International publicity about purported cases of slavery undermines this political strategy and by extension "threatens" the state. Consequently, any discussion of slavery is prohibited by law under the "tarnishing the image of the state" legislation⁴³. Once again, "slavery" has become a pawn in domestic and international politics that have little, if anything, to do with oppression. Slaves and ex-slaves disappear in rhetoric that is ultimately about power. By 1995, government denials continued and requests for external "fact-finding missions" were ignored (United Nations 1995)⁴⁴. But internally, a new clandestine voice was heard.

sos-Esclaves was headed by another of El Hor's founders, Boubacarould Messaoud. It included *beidan* and black Africans, as well as educated and working-class *haratin*. Domestically, its campaign aimed at rural slaves and at seeking out and assisting escaped slaves; internationally, it targeted both the traditional European outlets (British and French) and new American ones. The name itself was carefully chosen to resonate on both sides of the Atlantic (McDougall, Brhane & Ruf 2003: 76-78)⁴⁵. Elsewhere, colleagues and I have traced the rise of mid-1990s interest in Mauritanian slavery in the United States, including its appropriation for causes having little to do with Mauritania (Ruf 2003: 78-82). We revealed how the slave issue—emotionally constructed with numerous accounts of individual slave stories—preyed upon anti-Islamic sentiments (resurrecting 19th-century images of slave trading "Arabs") while tapping into Americans' understanding of their own racist slave legacy. And we argued that the tactic of using the international community, especially the American community, as a "tool" sometimes compromised the integrity and effectiveness of the organization. Once in the public

42. Diouf, Nafti "Anti-terror campaign in Mauritania causes worry, uncertainty" International Crisis Group, 4 July 2005, <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/world/20050704-0900-mauritania-terrorfears.html>. Since this article was completed, those forces have successfully overthrown the regime of Maaouya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya in a bloodless coup d'État on 3 August 2005. The new "Military Committee for Justice and Democracy" is promising democratic elections within two years, with the promise that no one involved in the current Committee' (which does include senior people from the previous government) will run for office.

43. "Slavery Research 'Damages Mauritania's Image'", afrol news (staff writer), 22 March 2005: <http://www.afrol.com/articles/15970>.

44. Report (in French), Anti-Slavery International, to UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Working Group on Forms of Contemporary Slavery, 20th session, Geneva, 19-28 April 1995.

45. See their webpage at <http://www.sosesclaves.org/Pagecentrale.htm> [French]; <http://sos.iabolish.com/> [English].

domain, SOS-Esclaves could no longer control how the information it provided was used or just as often, abused.

While many of these points could be elaborated upon, taken in the context of the processes this paper has attempted to establish, I believe they adequately argue for the difficulty of seeking, let alone seeing, the “truth” about contemporary slavery in Mauritania. In this concluding section, I want to return to the argument that in the course of the political aftermath of abolition and the “racializing” of slavery, various slave identities were created; to the extent that we can see them, they represent the multi-faceted nature of today’s slavery.

In Search of “Slavery”: Contemporary Complexities, Mixed Identities

In the course of reflecting on this analysis, I have several times found myself returning to the observations of the director of Anti-slavery Society in 1990⁴⁶, wherein he concluded that “Part of the problem is semantic. Words such as slavery, freedom, obligations have different meanings to different people” (United Nations 1990, Director’s Report: 11). On the one hand, this sounds very much like the proverbial bureaucratic/academic “cop-out”. Are slavery and the slave experience really so easily explained away? After a full century of close-hand observations of Mauritania, is this all we can say? On the other hand, two recent theses whose research dates from the early- to mid-1990s focused, in different ways and with different aims, on identity among those Blacks of non-free origin and *haratin*. Meskerem Brhane (1997) looked at Nouakchott *haratin* with the goal of understanding their political behaviour; Urs Peter Ruf (1999) studied rural society in which the full range of “non-noble” population was identified largely as *sudan* in the process what the author called “the ending of slavery”. Both offered excellent insights, through interview work in particular, into what we are here calling “contemporary slavery”. Both argued for the ambiguity of terminology and, most importantly, the lack of fixed perceptions of identity. On the contrary, both studies emphasized the fluidity of people’s “slave” identity, the changes they themselves saw in their own personal narrative over time. Ruf also noted that location shaped how some of his interviewees who were geographically mobile, saw themselves. His work in particular underscored that even within Mauritania, there were significant differences regarding practices and stature (for example, with respect to slave concubines) depending on region and level of urbanity (*ibid.*: 56-92). Similarly, women and men, elders and younger family members, frequently

46. The Anti Slavery Society became “Anti-Slavery International” in 1990 (“The History of Anti-Slavery International”: <http://www.antislavery.org/homepage/antislavery/history.htm>).

constructed their identity differently, although ostensibly sharing the same family history and social origin. This came through very clearly in both sets of interviews (*ibid.*: 56-77; Brhane 1997: 101-211 *passim.*). This is particularly striking in view of the 1990 report, cited above, in which “slavery” was articulated as being “about semantics”. What the director of the Anti-Slavery Society saw and questioned were actually the realities of slavery. “Semantics” as a concept masked many understandings and interpretations that were pieces of identity construction, ongoing processes in which no attempt to fix terms like *‘abd*, *hartani* or *hartiniyya* could be successful. And the very wide range of those understandings and interpretations that he identified in 1990 was, as Brhane and Ruf illustrate so well, the product of a particular conjunction of social, economic and political development. Reality is undoubtedly playing itself out differently today. Unfortunately, the particular political climate in which it is doing so will not, at the moment, permit the kind of work Brhane and Ruf were able to undertake just over a decade ago. The degree to which “slavery” has become entrenched in the debate over democracy and the defense of “freedom”, used by both sides to discredit the other, means that prospects for future research and reporting on the topic are not good.

Perhaps another way to try and get at the complexities and the dynamic in place is to personalize this history with that of a family whose very essence is rooted in Mauritania’s particular “slave” experience. In many ways, the story of the “Hamody Family” maps much about Mauritanian history in general—not only its colonial development (which the family’s establishment spans) but also its social and economic links with Mali and Morocco. Hamody ould Mahmoud, wealthy merchant and property owner in the French colonial administrative center of Atar, is the patriarch whose name lives on to give the family its contemporary identity⁴⁷. But this history begins in the late 19th century, possibly as early as the 1870s, when three very young girls were captured somewhere in central Mali (it may have been the Macina region). Fatou and her younger sister, Aichatou, and their older cousin Minatou were sold to Saharan merchants and brought across the desert to the southern Moroccan market of Goulimine. There, their names “Saharanized”, Aichata was purchased by an Ait Moussa Aly man of the Beyrouk family, Minata by an Awlad Bou Sba man of the Ahel (“family”) Baghar, and Fatma similarly by someone of that same branch. All had children with their masters, though Minata’s daughter died young. According to custom, giving birth to a master’s child theoretically “frees” the slave; but what it meant in practice was that she would not subsequently be sold and would become “*hartaniyya*” upon her master’s death. It is

47. A brief case history of Hamody can be found in McDUGALL (1989b: 362-388). Most of the following is based on fieldwork carried out in Nouakchott and Atar, Islamic Republic of Mauritania during a three-week visit (December 2004-January 2005) with members of the Hamody family and their *hartani* descendants.

said that “the child is her paper”, that is her claim to freedom. In this case, it seems Aichata remained in Goulimine with the Beyrouk, presumably as *hartaniyya*. Her sister Fatma and cousin Minata each married an Awlad Bou Sba *hartani*, traveled for some time in the Sahara and finally came to settle in Shinqit, Mauritania. Each had a daughter with this husband. Fatma married again and it was with her second husband, Mahmoud ould Ahmed Maouloud, a *hartani* of Tafilelt origin, that she gave birth to Hamody in 1899⁴⁸. At some undetermined point after this Fatma and Minata and their children moved to nearby Atar. So Hamody was himself *hartani*, born of a recently freed slave woman of Malian origin. And when he married in 1929, his wife Selka (undoubtedly a *hartaniyya* herself) knew Fatma. Through Fatma’s initial connection with the Awlad Bou Sba, and that of one of her daughters who also married an Awlad Bou Sba *hartani*, Hamody established close connections with this successful trans-Saharan trading clan. And the connection through Fatma’s sister Aichata provided an ongoing “familial” link with the famous Moroccan Beyrouk family. The branch of the family that developed through Minata would also see reinforced ties with southern (Malian and Senegalese) interests—ultimately situating Hamody literally at the center of a colonial society in the making⁴⁹.

It would be easy to forget these fascinating, multi-cultural origins if one only read the French colonial archives. To the French, Hamody was a reliable supplier of meat to their army stationed in Atar, an extremely successful and wealthy merchant orchestrating a commercial network that reached from Goulimine, Morocco to Louga, Senegal, and a highly influential property holder who by the 1940s, was responsible for maintaining existing palm groves and rapidly expanding both tree and garden (inter-planted with date-palm trees) agriculture in and around Atar. So influential was he that in spite of his *hartani* status (which the French understood as meaning “inferior”), he had a close relationship to the Emir of the Adrar and was elected *chef* of the Awlad Bou Sba clan in Atar (McDougall 1989b: 379-382)⁵⁰.

Most significantly, however, given the focus of this paper, Hamody was also a slave owner. Some years ago I used Hamody as a “case study” for the meaning of slavery in the dying years of colonialism. I argued that

48. Interviews with Swaifya mint Hamody [daughter of Hamody], Atar, 1983-1984; Mohamed Mahmoud ould Hamody [son of Hamody], Nouakchott, 2004; Ahmed Salem ould Denne [great-grandson Minata, paternal side], Atar, 2005. It was Mohamed Mahmoud who, when asked if Fatma was “freed” when she had her son with her Awlad Bou Sba master, replied “no, her son is her paper”.

49. Interviews with Swaifya mint Hamody, Atar, 1984; Nouakchott, 2004.

50. Interviews with Mohamed Said ould Hamody, Nouakchott, 2000, and with Swaifya mint Hamody, Nouakchott, 2004. My sincere thanks to Mohamed Said for facilitating my 2004/2005 visit. It was he who contacted family members and gave “permission” for my interviewing; without his help, none of this information would have been made available to me and I might have missed this opportunity to tell a fascinating story.

his purchasing of slaves was not only an economic exigency—he used slaves to work in his palm groves and accompany his caravans—but a social statement: his own “freedom” was defined not by his “freed” status *per se* and certainly not by the status attributed to him by the French, but by his very conspicuous ability to enslave others (McDougall 1989b: 382, 383)⁵¹. While I still believe the last statement to be true, I think there were other facets of his behaviour that need to be considered and that in turn, have an impact on how we should understand slavery not only then, but now.

Recent interviews with Hamody’s immediate and extended family have suggested lines of inquiry for constructing Mauritanian society that I am exploring elsewhere⁵². Here, I touch on the issues that seem most telling with respect to the one question of “slavery”. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, as decolonization rhetoric and international competition for post-colonial influence shaped the public discourse of “the ending of slavery”, Hamody actively purchased men and women, adults and children. He did so under a number of conditions, with a variety of different agreements; but it is agreed that “he only bought slaves of quality”. This point was made both in interviews I conducted in 1983-1984 and the most recent ones, in 2004-2005 (McDougall 1989b: 382)⁵³. Most recently, this assertion was accompanied with the repeated claim that he only bought slaves when they were brought to him—either by masters who wished to divest themselves of their dependents or by slaves themselves, requesting that Hamody become their masters. Moreover, Hamody only bought these “offered” slaves of quality in order to free them⁵⁴. On the one hand, the “expansion” of information provided to me recently certainly seems to reflect a growing sensitivity to the idea of Hamody as a major slave holder in this new democratic era when slavery is not even a topic of legitimate discussion. And it did seem that the characterization of “Hamody the abolitionist” was much more clearly delineated than it had been when I first interviewed in Atar more than twenty years ago. But on the other hand, the actual life histories that descendants of these late-colonial slaves recount today seem, collectively, to support the picture that Hamody’s immediate family (his still-living children) recount. While they too may be taking on something of the “politically correct” colouring of the early 21st century, they do resonate with some important values.

51. I extrapolated from Hamody’s personal case to make this statement referring to *haratin* in general.

52. Using the recent interviews (December 2004-January 2005) plus fieldwork (interviews, archival work) conducted in 1983-1984 and 2000, I am currently preparing a manuscript on the legendary “Hamody” and his extended “family” (including *haratin*). Its working title is “Window onto a Colonial World: Hamody of Atar, Mauritania”.

53. Interviews: Isselmou oud Hamody, Bilal oud M’Barak, Mohamed Mahmoud oud Barak; Abeidya oud Matallah, 2004; Harra mint Mahmoud, Atar, 2005.

54. Interviews: Mohamed Mahmoud oud Hamody, Nouakchott, Bilal oud M’Barak, Isselmou oud Hamody, 2004; Harra mint Mahmoud, Atarn 2005.

Repeatedly, people recounted tales of having been purchased, then sooner or later freed to become *haratin*. This was predominant among tales of male slaves; it seems that females were less regularly freed⁵⁵. This pattern replicated the one that had emerged generally during the 1930s as a result of colonial agricultural policies. *Haratin* were generally set up with land to develop date-palm groves and married to female '*abid* and *haratin*; women worked domestically "within the house (McDougall 1989b: 374-376)". Personal histories revealed relatively large families (a half-dozen children was not unusual) and invariably, multiple marriages for both men and women. Children of non-freed women remained directly tied to Hamody but *all* children were part of the extended Hamody family through the mutual responsibilities and dependencies of the *hartani* relationship. The extension along the male line was closely tied to economic prosperity and influence: while both slaves and freed-slaves provided labour of equal value, only *haratin* were inscribed as tax-paying members of the community—in this case, as extensions of Hamody's family. They became Awlad Bou Sba, loyal to him not only in their familial but now their "tribal" obligations. This in turn, assisted Hamody in exercising his own political influence.

The impact of the extension along the female line is in some ways the more interesting, if also the more difficult, to discern. At this stage of my research, however, it is clear that whether as '*abid* or as *haratin* women comprised the network that kept families tied together, that moved assistance (much of the labour, as well as food and material goods) among families, and that through the practice of "giving the breast", defined milk-kin relations within the extended family and between this family and others⁵⁶. Women, through numerous and carefully arranged marriages, were the means by which Hamody's immediate and "extended" family penetrated other families, clans and social stratum. This serial marriage pattern (prevalent among Hamody's own thirteen children, as well as his *hartani* relations) had the potential to accelerate this process significantly⁵⁷. And in this very Muslim society, it must be remembered that women accumulated and controlled, and bequeathed and inherited their own property, including slaves. So as *haratin* the Hamody women had an economic voice in, and a "silent influence" on the fortunes of the family. By the time of his death in 1961, just as Mauritania had become independent from its own French colonial

55. That said, several stories involved women being freed later on, after having had children; for example, the story of Harra mint Mahmoud's mother and Isselmou's grandmother. Interviews: Isselmouould Hamody 2004; Harra mint Mahmoud, Atar, 2005.

56. Interviews: Miriam mint Hamody, 2000 and 2005; Selka mint Ismail, Harra mint Mahmoud, Atar, 2005. Timothy Cleavland (University of Georgia) has recently carried out an NEH-funded project on "19th-century milk-kinship in the Sahara" (2002). His results will be an invaluable contribution to expanding on these observations.

57. Point made indirectly through various histories; explicitly explained by Miriam mint Hamody (May 2000) and Saidould Hamody (November 2000).

master, Hamody had “mastered” a clan of his own. He had exploited Mauritanian social customs (especially slavery) in general and his own personal past (also rooted in slavery) in particular, to achieve a status parallel with that of his “noble” *beidan* neighbours.

It was said that Hamody had over 200 slaves at the time of his death; this probably referred to a combination of his immediate “slaves” and his *haratin* (McDougall 1989b: 382). While a good number of them seem to have remained in the date-palm groves during the 1960s, continuing to work on contracts with Hamody’s eldest son Mohamed Mahmoud and his widow Selka, most of their children, in turn, went to school and sought jobs in the new wage-employment sector from the 1970s onwards⁵⁸. This tendency was pushed significantly by the devastating drought of the late 1960s (especially 1969). Not only did it destroy a good part of the desert’s pastoral economy (in which oases like Atar played critical roles), it killed many of the date-palm trees as well⁵⁹. Family and clan connections became all the more necessary to assure continued access to dwindling resources; ironically, as those resources came to be increasingly located in state-directed companies like MIFERMA and public sector work in general, “access” sometimes flowed the other way—from slave and *hartani* workers back into the traditional economy and society where women, children and “nobles” still resided (McDougall, Brhane & Ruf 2003: 70-74). It is not clear from the evidence I have at the moment just exactly how most of Hamody’s slave and *hartani* family saw itself during these years of early nationalist fervour. Hamody himself supported the Union progressiste mauritanienne (UPM)—a party of traditional chiefs and “modern” functionaries created in 1947. His daughter Fatma was married to the UPM’s leading candidate for election to the French parliament, Sidi Mukhtar N’Diaye (who was successful in both 1950 and 1956). Atar itself was, from 1952, governed by a *Commune mixte*—a French Mayor and elected local representatives. Here, Hamody had the support of both the Emir and a leading Smacid notable, a man with whom he was a “milk-brother” through his mother Selka. But one of Hamody’s sons, Haiba, resisted the traditional path of his father and helped found a break-away youth party, *Nahda*. Radical though it may have seemed, *Nahda* still operated within the new political structure and ran candidates to compete in the various elections; other than a short period between 1960 and 1961 when *Nahda* was exiled to the eastern region of Tichit and its leadership was marginalized, it was an active political player. Haiba remained involved at various levels until about 1968, the year of violent worker and student strikes. He stayed away from politics for most of the 1970s, returning only after the *coup d’État* of 1978. During that time, Hamody’s other children were for the most part in school. His daughter Aghlana was an early member of the Ligue nationale des femmes

58. Interviews: Bilal ould M’barek, Abeidyaould Matallah, 2005.

59. Interview with Miriam mint Hamody, 2005.

between 1961 and 1964, and Mohamed Said flirted actively with student politics in the Union nationale des étudiants mauritaniens while studying in Paris from 1964 to 1966⁶⁰. Given that this was an era in which slave issues *per se* were not high on any political agenda, perhaps it is fair to surmise that the Hamody family simply struggled, like most others, to stay within the orbit of political power, as Hamody himself had clearly done. Or at least, to keep sufficiently quiet as to be well positioned when the political tide turned. This it did, dramatically, in 1978.

Without going into detail here, it is evident that Hamody's progeny had continued to build on the family networks such that Haiba was well positioned to be assigned by the new military government to enter into initial negotiations with the POLISARIO (operating between the Adrar, where it had many family roots, and southern Morocco with which it was struggling), as Mauritania sought to extricate itself from the disastrous Western Sahara war. His younger brother Mohamed Laghdaf served as the Regional Councilor for Nouakchott from 1982 to 1986. Mohamed Said, mid-way between them in age, had in the interim been moved into several positions with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (in Cairo, Rabat and Washington). In 1986 he became a Municipal Councilor in Atar, serving until 1990. He was then replaced by his half-brother, Isselmou until 1994. At that time, Haiba, having become re-immersed in national politics as campaign director for Maaouya Sidi' Ahmed Taya in the first ever "democratic" presidential elections of 1991-1992, and having presented himself (unsuccessfully) for election to the Senate in Nouakchott, returned to Atar in 1994 where he served as mayor until 1998. At that point, Isselmou returned to the position he had previously held as Councilor, where he continues today⁶¹.

There is little doubt that family politics place Hamody's direct descendants squarely in the camp that seeks to see *haratin* as extensions of *beidan* society rather than as a social group needing separate definition. Indeed, this particular family, thanks to the legacy of its founder, sees itself as *beidan-beidan* as it was understood in the confluence of commercial networks defining colonial Mauritania, and as it was re-imposed with the regime of Sid' Ahmed Taya—himself from the founding Smacid clan of Atar. Also, the ostensible opening up of society from the 1980s offered opportunity for the Hamody family to once again build on its *hartani* status. On the one hand, it could be offered to the government as part of the effort to change its international profile (this in turn opened up opportunities for family members in local politics—both levels of activity had potential "economic" spin-off benefits); on the other, it could be exploited by the family itself to reinforce links to its own slaves and *haratin*. If slaves

60. Interviews with Mohamed El Haibaould Hamody and Mohamed Saidould Hamody (together), Nouakchott, 2004. Mohamed Said later worked as a trained journalist in the early 1970s.

61. Interviews with Mohamed El Haibaould Hamody and Mohamed Saidould Hamody (together), Nouakchott, 2004.

and *haratin* of *beidan* families might feel the need to articulate a new-found freedom, the Hamody family was one, a shared social status. In fact, it epitomized exactly what *haratin* supporting El Hor had earlier espoused: an attachment to *beidan* society in terms of culture (*hassaniyya*) and custom—namely, access to economic resources through “traditional” relationships of obligation that is entirely colour and race free. But in a society proclaiming itself to be a democracy, where all men are brothers, that attachment must increasingly incorporate a political voice as well.

One might be tempted to interpret this process begun by Hamody as a relatively straightforward one of “incorporation and assimilation”, along the lines of the quintessentially “African slavery” model proposed almost thirty years ago by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (1977)⁶². In this case, we would be discussing a difference of detail, not substance, when we speak of slavery in Mauritania. But we need to resist that temptation. For in addition to retaining several among those slaves he would describe as being “of quality”, Hamody also took one of them, Medyem, as his concubine. He acquired her in 1947, when she would have been about nine, and a few years later she produced for him two sons: Mohamed in 1952 and Ahmed Salem (“Isselmou”) in 1954⁶³. This was not an acknowledged relationship until after his death, at which point the oldest boy came to live with Hamody’s son Haiba⁶⁴, while the youngest continued to live with his mother. Medyem had at some point in the interim been married to one of Hamody’s *hartani*; after Hamody’s death she re-married and left the household, leaving the boy to be supported and brought up by her mother—who in turn, had herself been recently freed⁶⁵. This is indeed the same Isselmou, half-brother to Haiba and Mohamed Said, who we met above serving in the prestigious position of Councilor of Atar. He is also the “Isselmouould Hamedy” who is listed in the 1990 Anti-slavery International report as an “official contact”, a “Businessman, [and] owner of palm trees, Atar”. While other “ex-slaves” are clearly marked among the Director’s contacts (deliberately, as he is trying to give a sense of *hartani* presence in official government capacities), Isselmou is notably not so designated (United Nations 1990, Director’s Report). The post-mortem recognition of Hamody’s children by Medyem “freed” both her and them to be *haratin*; Isselmou’s status was not (and is not) ambiguous. So what, if anything, should be concluded from this “oversight” in the 1990 report?

62. Introduction and conclusion; not all the case studies fully support the editors’ analysis.

63. Interviews: Mohamed Saidould Hamody, Nouakchott, 2000; Isselmouould Hamody, Atar, 2004.

64. Interview with Selka mint Ismail, 2005. Selka is Haiba’s former wife with whom Mohamed, Medeym’s oldest son, came to live when he was about nine.

65. Interview with Isselmouould Hamody, Atar, 2004.

I would like to put this in a slightly different context before attempting to answer this question. In 1982 the Hamody family convened to officially free its remaining slaves; according to Isselmou, that still included a sizable number⁶⁶. When I interviewed in Atar a year later, totally unaware that such an event had so recently taken place, I met a young man introduced to me as “*her* (Medyem’s) son”; I wanted to interview his mother and in spite of several postponements, repeatedly requested that he arrange it. My interest at the time was “Hamody the colonial entrepreneur”, not “Hamody the slave holder”. And my aim in interviewing Medyem was to find out more about Hamody, not more about slavery—or even, I am ashamed to say, about her or her son. Unfortunately, the interview when it did take place was a disaster: she clearly was uncomfortable with the situation, with me and with my assistant. In addition, she was physically not well. I ended the interview quickly, with many feelings of remorse for having been so persistent when clearly her son’s “delaying tactics” had been deliberate⁶⁷. Why I introduce this to the present context is the fact that in the process of speaking informally with people in the lengthy process of arranging to meet Medyem, both she and her son (who I believe must have been Isselmou)⁶⁸ were regularly referred to as “slave”. She was Hamody’s “slave wife”, he the “slave son”. Not knowing the story as I now do, I simply accepted that. Needless to say, it could not have been true, as she could not have been both his wife and a slave, therefore her son could not have been “slave”, legally speaking. And had she been a concubine, recognition of the fact and of the births would automatically have made them both *haratin*. However what is significant to my mind is the change in language and in discourse since 1983. At that time, people spoke openly of others as “slaves” and tended to blur distinctions around *haratin* such as the one I am emphasizing here—the more so in this case given the stature of the family established by Hamody and Selka as the “official” one as compared to the extremely modest conditions in which Medyem and her family lived. By 1990 the impact of a decade of abolition rhetoric, if not practice, as well as the violence of 1989 had shifted the discourse significantly. Slaves had become *haratin* and second- or third- generation *haratin* who had “made

66. Interview with Isselmou ould Hamody, 2004. But other interviews suggest that either it was not totally inclusive or there were a few women who simply chose to think of themselves as “slaves” well after this date.

67. This is not an unusual situation; it is often a difficult call to know when to keep pushing for an interview (or access to certain material) and when to simply respect that people may not really want to oblige you but are stopping short of being rude and dismissive by offering temporary “delays” instead of outright refusals.

68. At the time, no formal interview was conducted with him, and I seem only to have recorded his name as “her son”. He had kindly given my assistant and me a tour of one of Hamody’s many date-palm groves in Atar. While it is possible the young man in question was Mohamed, it is unlikely given the distance he had established from his mother while living with Haiba. Isselmou does not recollect such a meeting.

it" had begun to assimilate into the ranks of the "free", at least with respect to everything but marriage⁶⁹. This was reflected politically in the mayoral election in Nouakchott where Messaoud ould Boulkheir ran as a *hartani* candidate. While he was not successful, his candidacy revealed the evolution that had taken place: some *haratin* were willing to seek power openly based on their *hartani* ethnicity, some were even able to accept representation of "Blacks" in the wake of 1989; others, however, continued to advocate doing so through *beidan* patronage—their "family" ties (Brhane 1997: 284)⁷⁰. The relatively real power and influence of many *haratin* c.1990 threatened to obscure the total lack of both among the poorer members of the class who still lived in "slave-like" conditions, their legal status notwithstanding. At this time, Isselmou ould Hamody "business man, owner of palm trees" (and one could add "local Councilor") looked at in comparison to the rest of the family of working *haratin*, some of whom had been freed as recently as 1982, did not fit the social image of *hartani*. Thus, the fact that he was not so identified reflected genuine social perceptions of his status at that time.

More than ten years later, yet another subtle shift has taken place. The story of Hamody's secret is now openly told and it is told (for the most part) with pride⁷¹. Medyem is referred to by name⁷² and her own "family history" is recounted on occasion. That Mohamed, the elder son, was taken into the *grande maison* to live with Haiba and treated the same as his older half brothers, and that Isselmou was raised by a maternal grandmother who had also been freed by Hamody (independently of Medyem), seems to have become something of a symbol of pride for the Hamody family⁷³. While

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69. BRHANE (1997: 158-162) noted the impact of the war on people's constructions of narratives—those who had proudly traced family roots into Senegal, even to powerful or prestigious genealogies, quietly dropped them. By the early 1990s, marriages or at least relationships were beginning to occur between young *beidan* and *hartaniyya*. However, as we comment in MCDOUGALL, BRHANE & RUF (2003: 82), the true social revolution will have occurred when a *hartani* is an acceptable husband for a *beidaniyya*. A discussion of this issue with the current leader of the *Union des forces de progrès*, Mohamed Maouloud in January 2005, confirmed that the situation has not changed. It is still rare for a "free" woman to marry a "freed" man, even though the latter may be wealthy and powerful.
70. However, the breakdown between these groups did not neatly fit the generational profile noted above: some recently "freed" continued to stay with their family both socially and politically. Isselmou made this point with reference to Hamody slaves freed in 1982 (interview, 2004).
71. I would temper that observation by noting that Hamody's daughter Swaifya tended to tell the story from the point of view of her mother, Selka. That perspective was more one of pain than pride (interview with Swaify mint Hamody, 2004).
72. While this may have been merely coincidence, I thought it significant that both back in 1983 and even in my interview with Mohamed Said in 2000, Medyem was never mentioned by name, whereas this time, everyone who referred to her did so as "Medyem".
73. This in the sense that the *family* "did right" by the children according to Muslim law and custom, and thereby proved themselves moral (if not social) equals to a good *beidan* family.

it would be pushing this analysis too far (and making it inappropriately academic) to say that this is a conscious construction of the family narrative, I think it does reflect a natural process of “re-reading” the past in terms of the present social (and in this case, political) realities. Through its continuing experiences of “slavery”, the Hamody family today can indeed see in its own shadow an expression of the “real democracy and equality” Mauritanian rhetoric celebrates.

How broad and inclusive is this shadow? Does it truly include the family of slave and *haratin* descendants, some of whom I met? As controversial as I suspect this answer will be, I believe the response is “yes”. The various personal histories I heard in no way reinforced notions of “shared statuses” or “equality” but they did relate a certain pride of identity that depended on some form of relationship with Hamody or Hamody’s reputation. Some had benefited from a kind of pension Hamody established for those who sent their children to school⁷⁴, others remembered stories of their relatives or others being fed during difficult times by Hamody⁷⁵; many of the women spoke of continued relations in the form of interacting at family celebrations and of the ability to depend, one upon the other, for “anything they might need”⁷⁶. Milk-kin are still remembered, especially by women, and those special ties continue to shape permissible contemporary male-female interaction⁷⁷. One could argue that what I heard was a “discourse” of its own, a version of what family relations are imagined to be rather than what they are. But to the extent that this may be true, at least of the contemporary “vision”, does it make it any the less important as a discursive framework for identity? And there is no doubt that in Mauritanian society, it is collective, not individual identity, that provides access to jobs and influence, as well as to wives and husbands. Among *haratin* interviewed by Bhrane some years ago was one woman who clearly articulated that although she was a friend of Messaoud ould Boulkheir, when she introduced him to friends of hers who needed jobs, he had come up empty handed. If he could not deliver, she frankly explained, why should she vote for him? She (and many others) would “remain on the side of the *dowla* (state)” because it and its friends were the only ones in a position to “deliver” (Brhane 1997: 298). For *haratin* of the Hamody family, their *patron* is sufficiently well positioned to “deliver”, and the more prominence Hamody’s legacy achieves, the stronger the attachment to the family that

74. Interviews: Bilal ould M’barek, Abeidya ould Matallah, 2004; Harra mint Mahmoud, 2005.

75. Interviews: Selka mind N’afar, Abeidyaould Matalleh, Mohamed Mahmoud ould Barka, 2004.

76. Interviews: Selka mint N’afar; Selka mint Ismail, 2004; Mariam mint Hamody, 2005.

77. Interviews: Miriam mint Hamody, Harra mint Mahmoud, 2005. On milk-kinship more generally, see RUF (1999: 94-99). Like concubinage, however, the specifics of how milk-kinship is practiced seem to vary according to region.

will grow among those who can call themselves “members”. Perceived image is not all, but in Mauritania where it serves to buttress very real networks of social relations, it is critical. The irony here is that it is largely people’s images of slavery as something peculiarly Mauritanian that buttresses and defines this particular experience of belonging as “freedom”.

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ABSTRACT

This article acknowledges that “slavery in Mauritania” is both a social and a political issue, with resonance in historical as well as contemporary terms. By exploring the various discourses that have given shape to discussions of slavery over time, the author seeks to explain why contemporary slavery is such a difficult concept to address both within and outside of the country. And by drawing on the case history of a former-slave family, “Hamody of Atar”, she hopes to find a way to understand its complexities from the perspective of personal experience.

RÉSUMÉ

Les ayants droit de l'esclavage. Entre discours et réalité. — Cet article reconnaît que l'« esclavage en Mauritanie » est un phénomène à la fois social et politique qui a des résonnances autant historiques que contemporaines. En explorant les divers discours qui ont nourri le débat sur l'esclavage au fil du temps, l'auteure tente d'expliquer pourquoi l'esclavage contemporain est un concept si difficile à aborder, tant en Mauritanie qu'à l'étranger. En s'appuyant sur l'histoire d'une famille d'anciens esclaves, elle espère trouver un moyen de mieux saisir les complexités de ce phénomène par la perspective d'une expérience personnelle.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Mauritania, Abolition of slavery, discourse, El Hor, French colonialism, *haratin* (freed slave), slavery, SOS-Esclaves/Mauritanie, *abolition de l'esclavage*, *discours*, *El Hor*, *colonialisme français*, *haratin (esclave libéré)*, *esclavage*, *SOS-Esclaves*.